

The Deer in the Headlights

Murray Dineen

Volume 27, numéro 2, 2007

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1013109ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1013109ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

ISSN

1911-0146 (imprimé)

1918-512X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Dineen, M. (2007). The Deer in the Headlights. *Intersections*, 27(2), 3–7.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1013109ar>

EDITORIAL: THE DEER IN THE HEADLIGHTS

The tenth anniversary of the *Bordercrossings* conference has come and gone largely unremarked. With the slightly presumptuous title *Bordercrossings: Future Directions in Music Studies*, the conference was put together by John Shepherd, Jocelyne Guilbault, and me in Ottawa in March 1995 with the aid principally of SSHRC, the University of Ottawa, and Carleton University. The proceedings were issued in this journal¹ and in *repercussions*², and they bear examination from time to time.

The conference was not so much an anticipation of the future of music studies as it was an attempt to introduce certain interdisciplinary perspectives into the discipline, new perspectives borrowed largely from literary criticism, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, this with the aim avowed or tacit of expanding the narrow confines of musical study at the time. Although not exclusively so, the tone of the event was primarily youthful, radical, and even proselytizing, sometimes annoyingly.

With characteristic naivety, some of us thought the conference would be the wedge that broke open the door: our intransigent colleagues would see the necessity of opening up the discipline, and before long Adorno to Žižek would stand alongside Augustine to Zarlino, the two trajectories being equal in validity. Perhaps the *Bordercrossings* anniversary was overlooked in acknowledgment that no, the field didn't embrace us with open arms. Quite the contrary, the reaction was an often dramatic rejection driven by unfamiliarity and fear, and in some quarters open ridicule rather than acceptance greeted our prognosis of an interdisciplinary future. As one former colleague of mine put it gingerly: "Derrida is wrong. He's a liar." Open conflict broke out eventually, flaring up under diverse circumstances and some remarkable auspices (for example the gay Schubert controversy in *19th-Century Music*).

In our day the conflict has settled down into a cold war fought in committee rooms and faculty lounges, through tenure appointments, curricula, the structure of degree programmes, and periodic institutional evaluations.³ There are seldom real flames anymore, more often a push and a responding shove. Frankly

¹ Volume 18, no. 1.

² The question of publication gave rise to certain divisions among participants, this arising from clumsy handling on the part of the organizers. A second part of the proceedings were issued much later in *bordercrossings* 7–8 (Spring-Fall 1999–2000), well after the conference organizers were frustrated in their attempt to find a press to publish a hardcover volume of "selected" conference essays. Served us right.

³ Throughout North American academia almost *in toto* the controversy was known as the *culture wars*. Of all the publications devoted to the conflict, one of the most illuminating is a collection of essays taken from the magazine *Linguafranca*, published as *Quick Studies: The Best of Lingua Franca*, edited by A. Star (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), wherein neither side is absolved of its absurdities.

the standoff is getting on the nerves of both sides. New faculty wonder what all the fuss is about.

All of this is to explain the circumstances I found myself in as newly appointed English-language editor of *Intersections* in June of this past year—me, the devoted fan of interdisciplinarity, Adorno scholar, in the midst of planning an undergraduate seminar on music and Marxism. I am speaking of the essay by John Beckwith found elsewhere in this volume, a hot piece of artillery work launched in the otherwise chilly war I spoke of above. Unwittingly or otherwise, John lobbed his missive at me and my type. Listening to it first in the guise of his plenary address to the annual meeting of CUMS/SMUC last June at the Université de Montréal, I must confess succumbing to a sinking feeling—wasn't this the culture wars all over again? When John accused John Shepherd of imposing faddish trends of thought on music, the resident controversies of those wars (provoked by the usual suspects: canon and text) came flooding back to me, memories of conflicts fought in my own department (and reports of conflicts fought in departments across the land, if my conversations with colleagues hold true) and indeed fought at CUMS/SMUC conferences themselves. With a certain irony, his address became the first editing project of my tenure as editor. The sinking feeling hit bottom when John delivered the revised address in record time to my email box.

Going through the essay, however, I experienced a small turnaround. Initially I thought: wasn't it unspoken practice that the cold war was to be carried out by often unscrupulous means in backroom meetings called hastily to exclude the participation of fractious colleagues? If so, then what was this essay with its loudly outspoken tone doing in my hands—a certain breach of decorum no doubt. Just what was this old codger trying to pull off at my expense here! And then I realized just what John sent me: the essay is an honest, heartfelt expression of frustration, produced by someone with a long record of service to Canadian music scholarship, someone not forced to play along with the mind-numbing cold-war departmental games, and indeed someone not pressed down into apathy by the dragged out nature of the conflict. John has brought his position out into the open: his concerns are clearly expressed, and so too the emotions accompanying these concerns are not suppressed but set forth there just as clearly. If he takes the occasional shot at my former accomplice in *Bordercrossings* and chastises a certain well known Canadian composer, so be it. This is a conflict, after all, cold or hot. And for these reasons, I am happy to lend my editorial participation to his project, even if I find myself—deer in the headlights—all too prominent in his thought.

But just how does one end a cold war? Wait until the other side collapses, along lines of the former Russian Soviet and the Eastern Bloc? This presumes the impending bankruptcy of the other side, but given the intellectual capital on both sides of the divide in music, the ruin of one or the other seems unlikely. This is surely the current state of affairs, however. The old musicology, discerning the “new musicology” as a passing fad, has dug into its bunkers, and, while guarding its flanks, waits impatiently for the fad to pass, its followers to see the error of their ways and revert to the one true path. The new musicology,

discerning the old musicology as increasingly irrelevant, waits similarly for the other side to fade. The result is standoff, cold war, a game of frayed nerves and wasted energies.

It would be more appropriate to regulate the conflict: create demilitarized zones, embark upon cultural exchanges, respect the integrity of the other side, and appeal to the advice of impartial bodies when mutual respect is no longer possible. In other words, resolve this cold war in music by following the path of the peacemakers who have gone coolly about the business of easing the tensions of the real cold war.

Thinking of the negotiations between cold-war nuclear nations, then, here are some suggestions for how to go about accomplishing a peace:

1. Create forums in which these affairs can be aired. Unlike our dedicated counterparts in the U.S.A. and the U.K., CUMS/SMUC and *Intersections* have a remarkable (indeed enviable) flexibility, one that arises from our mandate to address *all* aspects of the study of music in Canada. That flexibility allows us to define the study of music in a host of ways, some of these mutually antagonistic in principal but not in practice, since tolerance is our saving grace. (I'll take tolerance as, in a word, my Canadian characteristic.)

One of the many reasons why I go to annual CUMS/SMUC conferences is this flexibility, a light-handed ease with which the study of music is defined and demonstrated. (And one of the reasons why I find AMS and SMT discouraging is a lack of that very flexibility.) No doubt, flexibility is our bane: far too many of our colleagues look at the breadth of the conference programme or the table of contents and decide there aren't enough sessions or articles of particular interest to them to bother attending or reading. But it is also our boon, for flexibility allows us to introduce disciplinary concerns such as the cold war into our conference and journal proceedings (whereas disciplinary concerns often fall off the conference programme at AMS and SMT, and wind up sequestered in evening sessions after the putative real business has been conducted). Not CUMS/SMUC: disciplinary sessions are often the liveliest (Charles Morrison on undergraduate curricula at the Learned's in P.E.I. in 1992; the session on the place of popular music in the university at Congress at York in 1995), and they are accorded an equal place alongside the inevitable research-paper sessions. Perhaps it's time to acknowledge that our colleagues in Britain and the U.S.A. put together specialized, research-oriented conferences better than we can on account of the sheer mass of scholarship they can draw upon, but then to recognize that we are better—because of the disparate nature of music scholarship in Canada—at accommodating perspectives of the greatest diversity—both disciplinary and interdisciplinary. That is, after all, the purpose of meeting at Congress under the aegis of the Canadian Federation of the Humanities and Social Science—to draw Canadian learned associations together in one place in the spirit of flexible exchange.

This journal could do more to accommodate the disciplinary concerns that led to cold war, and I am pleased, as I have noted, to present John's plenary session address as a first instalment. I hereby extend an invitation to readers to reply to his essay, albeit with the same candour.

2. Get help. This cold war needs some objective expert help—objective in the sense of arm's length and impartial. The positions taken on the part of some colleagues have become too emotional (*mea culpa*) and the atmosphere in our workplaces too tense to allow for internal resolution. We need professional help—not to resolve the conflict, but rather to restore a modicum of decorum to the debate. Having asked my department and my faculty to bring in expert outside help (a professionally trained facilitator, for example) for a decade now without success, I realize that this is new, this idea of bringing in someone from outside the family. But the issues are too complex, the standoff too cold, for us to resolve them internally.

A good Dean, if they had time, would do. Or a well respected emeritus from another department might work in a pinch. But there are professionals dedicated to just this need, and they fulfill a role—certainly here in fractious Ottawa—in both government and business. If the tensions in some departments are as high as report would have it, some among us are in need of professional dispute resolution.

3. Create demilitarized zones. There are some areas where discussion need not, indeed should not take place, not until the emotional temperature of the whole has settled a degree or two. No doubt there are issues that need immediate resolution over which cold war will break out—hiring, course offerings, allocation of budgetary resources, the nature of the conference programme. But these areas of conflict can be circumscribed so as not to spill over into areas less pressing. Why, for example, allow the changing of a course name to become a spat about the nature of the baccalaureate? (And here again the services of an impartial third party would be more than welcome.) In essence, don't go there, if you don't have to.

4. Cultivate transparency, equity, and a sense of fairness. We all know that resources and energies are expended differently in our workplace, from the devoted colleague who beavers away in committees and in meeting their day-to-day professional obligations, to the lazy colleague who by cultivating ineptitude excuses themselves from all but the minimum of work necessary to prevent impeachment. Add into that inequity the tensions of the cold war, and you might as well go nuclear.

Be transparent. If decisions are made, then the reasons for making them should be clear to all participants involved (and made clear to the lazy colleague in as responsible a fashion as patience will allow). And the decision itself should be equitable: if Professor X's intro course on popular music brings needed large numbers of bums-in-seats to swell department enrolments, it would be inequitable to deny Professor X a graduate seminar in popular music simply because Professor Y believes the course would lack intellectual rigour. But it would be equally unfair to deny Professor Z a graduate seminar in the paleography of a specialized Aquitanian repertoire simply because their core course, Medieval and Renaissance Forms and Styles, is not spilling over into the corridors. Equity involves more than just numbers; certainly it entails the understanding that we teach best what we are devoted to, be it composition of what John calls "un-

popular music” or be it the study of Marxist perspectives in criticism as applied to music.

5. Above all treat the expertise and interests of colleagues as their primary asset, this in the spirit of equity and tolerance just alluded to. My interdisciplinary leanings that slouch toward cultural criticism aside, I would be more content to work in a department of happily watermarking positivists than try to drag them over into Lacan and Feyerabend where they felt out of touch. It's nice to have colleagues to share your research interests with, but in the end it's nicer to have happy colleagues just to say hello to and to help you with the day-to-day routine. A good working department (the one led by Paul Kling at the University of Victoria in the 1980s comes to mind) thrives on tolerance if not necessarily on complete mutual comprehension.

And so (at the risk of repeating myself) in the interests of achieving a reconciliation in this chilly war, I'm more than happy to have served as editor on John's piece. This is not to say that I agree with what he has written, for indeed I do not. I will leave replies, however, to you the reader, to be printed in a subsequent issue: send them to the editor care of my email, <pdineen@uottawa.ca>. But in closing I welcome his honest appraisal of the situation and extend my thanks on the behalf of us all for the long record of his abiding concern for musical studies in Canada in general and for this journal in particular.

MURRAY DINEEN