

# OLE NOPEA! MULTILINGUAL WRITING, GOOGLE TRANSLATE, AND THE POLAROID

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*The Polaroid Project* Exhibition, McCord Museum, Montreal, 2019.  
Photo by the author.

“This is not a place where people live on 88th and Third, as in Manhattan,” Tim Weiner writes in “Mexico City Journal: A City Hears Poetry in the Naming of Streets” (Weiner). In Mexico’s capital, Weiner explains, “One can stand on the corner of Tolstoy and Dante, Dickens and Molière, Verdi and Wagner, Socrates and Homer, Shakespeare and Darwin, imagining the conversations” (Weiner). Akin to Diego Rivera’s magical-realist art, Mexico City’s map is crisscrossed with streets named after diverse cultural and historical figures, as well as equally diverse geographical locations. Here, walkers can cross distant countries and continents in no time at all, as, for example, at the intersection of Calle Tokio and Calle Praga (Tokyo and Prague streets) in the Zona Rosa area. Similarly, Calle Dublin is found in close proximity to Paseo de la Reforma and Calle Tokio. Frida Kahlo’s landmark Blue House, her former residence, now a house-museum, is located at the intersection of Londres (London) and Ignacio Allende in Coyoacán.

332 Mexico City’s fast-paced street map corresponds perfectly to the slogan “Ole Nopea!”—“Be fast” in Finnish—in this essay’s title. The seventh of ten “golden rules” of Lomo photography, this particular rule instructs photographers: “Just don’t waste any time with settings, adjustments, setting things up, thinking about it, faffing around and procrastinating. First impressions have a quality all of their own” (*What the Hell Is Lomo?*). The “Ole Nopea” mandate also defines a set of fast-paced multilingual texts addressed in this essay. Like Eisenstein’s “collision montage,” Joseph Brodsky’s *Мексиканский романсеро* (*Mexican Romancero*) captures Mexico’s highs and lows in rapid succession. His poetry shifts freely from Russian to Spanish, transcribed in Cyrillic. *Photosynthesis* by Vera Polozkova and Olga Pavolga jumps from Russian to untranslated English within a span of just one line. In addition, *Photosynthesis* mixes words and images, as does Ayumu Takahashi’s experimental travelogue *Love and Free*, which chronicles the author’s breathless journey around the world. A tangible record of places and people, Polaroid photography—also highlighted in the title—takes virtually no time to process. Its on-the-spot delivery makes the Polaroid a close sibling of the much-debated *Google Translate* tool that offers instant results. My set of photographs of The Polaroid Project exhibit (2019) in Montreal provides an essential component for this inquiry into “Ole Nopea”-driven texts and images.

In *Walking in the City*, Michel de Certeau points out that “[n]umbered streets and street numbers (112th St., or rue 9 Saint-Charles) orient the magnetic field of trajectories just as they can haunt dreams” (104). He cites the following example:

A friend who lives in the city of *Sèvres* drifts, when he is in Paris, toward the rue des Saints-Pères and the rue de *Sèvres*, even though he is going to see his mother in another part of town: these names articulate a sentence that his steps compose without his knowing it. (104)

De Certeau writes that this also applies to city spaces beyond Paris: “*Saints-Pères*, *Corentin Celton*, *Red Square* [...] these names make themselves available to the diverse meanings given them by passers-by” (104). He further argues that their “rich



*The Polaroid Project* Exhibition, McCord Museum, Montreal, 2019.  
Photo by the author.

indetermination” gives street names “by means of semantic rarefaction, the function of articulating a second poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning” (105).

Sergei Eisenstein, the celebrated director of the classic film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), appears to agree. Discussing his experience of navigating New York City, he states that he “found it very difficult to remember the *images* of New York’s [numbered] streets, and, consequently, to recognize the streets themselves” (“Word and Image” 15). In his opinion, “streets with names at once bring up an image of a given street” (15). Eisenstein had a much easier time in Mexico. In the 1930s, while working on his film *¡Que Viva México!*, he obsessively captured Yucatan’s “dawns and sunsets” and its “succulent fruit with unheard-of-names” (Eisenstein, “My Encounter” 413). A fierce advocate of the “collision montage,” he also documented the darker side of Mexico’s opulent landscape, for instance the “sharp spines of cactus” used as a weapon during the civil war (“My Encounter” 419). Those same spines, Eisenstein points out, “still pierce the worshippers,” who bind “cacti trunks into a cross,” and then crawl “for hours up the pyramids to glorify the Catholic Madonnas” (“My Encounter” 419).

Joseph Brodsky’s 1975 *Мексиканский романсеро* (*Mexican Romancero*) opens with a similar “collision montage” that contrasts Mexico’s abundant vegetation and

its harsh sun that smiles “лукаво, А приглядишь—жестоко” (mischievously, / but look closely—brutally”):

Кактус, пальма, агава.  
Солнце встает с Востока,  
Улыбаясь лукаво,  
А приглядишь—жестоко.

Испепеленные скалы,  
почва в мертвой коросте.  
Череп в его оскале!  
И в лучах его—кости! (Brodsky lines 1-8)

Cactus, palm, agave.  
The sun rises from the East,  
smiling mischievously,  
but look closely—brutally.

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Incinerate rock,  
the soil in the dead scab.  
Skull in his grin!  
And in the light of it—bones! (Brodsky lines 1-8; *Google Translate*)

Mexico City’s urban landscape also reveals sharp juxtapositions, for example, of the Coca-Cola ads and the landmark Monumento a la Independencia, or El Ángel (Angel of Independence) statue. This is consistent with Eisenstein, who argues that “Chance brings a sharper, more powerful resolution” than any “preliminary outline” (Eisenstein et al. 172). Unlike a linear progression in film, Eisenstein points out, “a compilation of unrelated images,” as found in the “collision montage,” produces a much stronger effect: it “agitates or shocks the viewer” (172). The following set of fast-paced, “Ole Nopea”-style stanzas from Brodsky’s *Мексиканский романсеро* (*Mexican Romancero*) supports this argument:

Вечерний Мехико-Сити.  
Пляска веселых литер  
кока-колы. В зените  
реет ангел-хранитель.

Здесь это связано с риском  
быть подстреленным сходу,  
сделаться обелиском  
и представлять Свободу. (Brodsky lines 49-56)

Evening Mexico City.  
Dance of the Merry Letters  
Coca Cola. At the zenith  
flies guardian angel.

Here it comes with risk.  
 get shot straight away  
 become an obelisk  
 and represent Freedom. (Brodsky lines 49-56; *Google Translate*)

Brodsky's depiction of the prominent Avenida Reforma (Reforma Avenue) and its surrounding area where a "mass of bronze statues" gives shelter to female beggars, further documents Mexico City's incongruities. The staccato-like pace continues to dominate the narrative: "Улицы, лица, фары [Streets, faces, headlights]":

Вечерний Мехико-Сити.  
 Лень и слепая сила  
 в нем смешаны, как в сосуде.  
 И жизнь течет, как текила.

Улицы, лица, фары.  
 Каждый второй—усатый.  
 На Авениде Реформы—  
 масса бронзовых статуй.

Подле каждой, на кромке  
 тротуара, с рукою  
 протянутой—по мексиканке  
 с грудным младенцем. (Brodsky lines 17-28)

Evening Mexico City.  
 Laziness and blind force  
 they are mixed in it, as in a vessel.  
 And life flows like tequila.

Streets, faces, headlights.  
 Every second is moustachioed.  
 On Avenida Reforma—  
 mass of bronze statues.

Beside each, on the edge  
 pavement, with a hand  
 stretched—a Mexican  
 with an infant. (Brodsky lines 17-28; *Google Translate*)

In the concluding stanzas, Brodsky's protagonist finds himself at a tavern, where he feels ignored: "Официантка забыла о вас и вашем омлете/ Заболтавшись с брюнетом (The waitress forgot about you and your omelet, [trading stories with a dark-haired customer].)" A foreign national, Brodsky's protagonist is an outsider in Mexico's capital, its inclusive map with streets and avenues named after diverse international locations notwithstanding:

Веселый Мехико-Сити.  
 Жизнь течет, как текила.

Вы в харчевне сидите.  
 Официантка забыла  
 о вас и вашем омлете,  
 Заболтавшись с брюнетом.  
 [...]
   
 В нищей стране никто вам вслед не смотрит  
 с любовью. (Brodsky lines 81-96)

Cheerful Mexico City.  
 life goes on like tequila.  
 You're sitting in the tavern.  
 The waitress forgot  
 about you and your omelet,  
 swing with a brunette  
 [...]

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In a poor country no one to you [In a poor country no one will]  
 does not look after with love [look at you with love as you walk away].  
 (Brodsky lines 81-96; *Google Translate*; last lines my translation)

Sting's 1987 hit song "Englishman in New York"—also an example of the "collision montage" ("I don't drink coffee, I take tea, my dear / I like my toast done on the side")—echoes Brodsky's sentiment (Sting). The song's catchy chorus reads: "Oh, I'm an alien, I'm a legal alien / I'm an Englishman in New York" (Sting). Tiken Jah Fakoly's "Africain à Paris" (2007)—a remake of Sting's song—adds a new dimension to this dialogue across different historical periods and distant geography:

Oh oh! Un peu en exil  
 Etranger dans votre ville  
 Je suis Africain à Paris (Tiken Jah Fakoly lines 9-11)

Oh oh! A bit in exile  
 Stranger in your city  
 I am African in Paris (Tiken Jah Fakoly lines 9-11; *Google Translate*)

Co-created by poet Vera Polozkova and photographer Olga Pavolga, *Фотосинтез* (*Photosynthesis*), first published in 2009, also takes the reader on a journey around the world. In her poem "От Кишинева и до Сент-Луиса" (From Chisinau to St. Louis), Polozkova makes the entire globe her private domain. As in Brodsky and Sting, there is a juxtaposition between Polozkova's protagonist and "шар земной" (world globe). However, the poem also identifies a possible solution to this potentially combative relationship:

От Кишинева и до Сент-Луиса  
 Издевается шар земной:  
 Я ненавижу, когда целуются,  
 Если целуются не со мной. (Polozkova and Pavolga 102)



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Café Bistro, McCord Museum, Montreal, 2019. Photo by the author.

From Chisinau to St. Louis

The globe mocks:

I hate it when they kiss,

If they don't kiss me. (Polozkova and Pavolga 102; *Google Translate*)

Another notable reference to a foreign setting is found, for example, in the poem “Миссис Корстон” (Missis Korston). Remembering her late husband, Mrs. Korston recalls the good times they shared. Composed as a memoir, this poem also includes passages representative of other diverse genres, such as a portrait and a travelogue, as evidenced in the following excerpt:

Он умел принимать ее всю как есть: вот такую, разную

Иногда усталую, бесполезную,

Иногда нелепую, несуразную,

Бестолковую, нелюбезную,

Безотказную, нежелезную;

Если ты смеешься,—он говорил,—я праздную,

Если ты горюешь—я соболезную.

Они ездили в Хэмпшир, любили виски и пти шабли.

А потом его нарядили и погребли. (Polozkova and Pavolga 40)

He knew how to accept it all as it is: like this, different

Sometimes tired, useless,

Sometimes ridiculous, awkward,  
 Clueless, unkind,  
 Trouble-free, non-iron;  
 If you laugh, he said, I celebrate  
 If you are grieving, I am sorry.  
 They went to Hampshire, they liked whiskey and petit chablis.  
 And then he was dressed up and buried. (Polozkova and Pavolga 40; *Google Translate*)

While some of her poems employ Cyrillic to transcribe English, Polozkova frequently leaves English titles and/or parts of the text untranslated. Examples of poems with English titles include “Backspace,” “Never more,” and “So childish.” The poem “Тридцать слов” (Thirty Words) provides an example of Polozkova mixing Russian and untranslated English. Akin to Eisenstein’s “collision montage,” this poem even combines references to Greek mythology with contemporary life:

338 Для Орфеев—приманки с мертвыми Эвридиками:  
 Сами ломаются в клетку. Правило птицелова.

Так любое «иди ко мне» слышишь как «И дико мне».  
 А нейтральное «it’s a lover»—  
 Как «it’s all over». (Polozkova and Pavolga 96)

For Orpheus—bait with dead Eurydice:  
 They themselves break into a cage. The birder’s rule.

So any “come to me” you hear as “And it’s wild to me.”  
 And the neutral “it’s a lover”—  
 Like “it’s all over.” (Polozkova and Pavolga 96; *Google Translate*)

Roman Jakobson argues that “poetry by definition is untranslatable,” and that it can be interpreted only with the use of one of three types of “creative transposition”: “intra-lingual,” “inter-lingual,” or “inter-semiotic” (434). Combining poetry and images, *Фотосинтез* (*Photosynthesis*) falls into Jakobson’s “inter-semiotic” translation—a transposition “from one system of signs into another (from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting)” (434). Similarly, Pavolga’s photographs provide only an indirect, and at times, entirely unrelated take on Polozkova’s poems. For example, who is the grey-haired man in Pavolga’s photo paired with the poem “Миссис Корстон” (Missis Korston)? Is it the late Mr. Korston, or is this a random image of an older man?

With its three untranslated stanzas in French, Leonard Cohen’s recording of “The Partisan” from his album *Songs from a Room*, released in 1969, similarly requires the reader to fill in the blanks (Cohen). A tribute to the French Resistance in World War II, Cohen’s bilingual track is also representative of his hometown of Montreal, a city divided both linguistically (French and English) and geographically: the East of the city is French, while the West is largely English. Montreal’s street names are mostly bilingual. One curious instance is Dorchester Boulevard, part of which was renamed

René Lévesque Boulevard in 1987. Ironically, the René Lévesque stretch is the location of the landmark Queen Elizabeth Hotel, part of the global high-end Fairmont hotel chain. The Queen Elizabeth was where, in 1969, John Lennon and Yoko Ono staged their six-day Bed-In event in protest against the Vietnam War. During this Bed-In, they wrote and recorded their powerful anthem “Give Peace a Chance” (Dunlevy).



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*The Polaroid Project* Exhibition with a view of Guy Bourdin's *Charles Jourdan*, 1978, McCord Museum, Montreal, 2019. Photo by the author.

John Lennon served as an inspiration for Ayumu Takahashi's experimental travelogue *Love and Free: Words and Photos Collected from the Streets around the World*, first published in 2001. Loosely translated from Japanese, *Love and Free* combines poetic entries and original photographs gathered by the author on his nearly two-year-long journey from Australia to South and North America via Southeast Asia, Eurasia, Europe, and Africa. In the book's "Forward," Takahashi writes: "From November 1998, through July 2000, for approximately one year and eight months, just married, my wife and I walked the streets of thirty-some countries of the world, travelling in any direction our hearts desired" (Takahashi). He further explains why the timing was perfect for taking this momentous journey: "I had just resigned from a company I started and managed for three years. My wife, Sayaka, who worked as an 'OL' (office lady) in Ginza, Tokyo, had just resigned from her job to marry me, and

the timing was perfect to take a long vacation. It was ‘Now or Never!’” (Takahashi).

Commenting on the pair’s “Ole Nopea”-style, spur-of-the-moment itinerary, Takahashi writes: “We didn’t particularly plan out ‘where’, ‘how’, or ‘for how long’, ‘Let’s start in Australia. And the rest, we’ll play it by ear. And hey, we’ll just come back when we run out of money.’ That was all we decided, and we were off” (Takahashi). In his entry on “Khaosan Road,” the “crossroad for the world’s backpackers” in Bangkok, Takahashi quotes Mr. Knop, his acquaintance from one of many local travel agencies: “You don’t need a guidebook. You don’t need a plan either. An Asian trip is just to come to Khaosan Road and then decide where you want to go” (Takahashi). Takahashi encourages his reader to abandon guidebooks and planning ahead as well. This might explain his book’s lack of page numbers. With its unnumbered pages, *Love and Free* allows its readers to enter and exit the text at any point they choose.

Takahashi gained further wisdom from a proprietor of a “trinket shop” he met on the road. Recorded in the entry “One World,” this anonymous man’s philosophy,

**340** Takahashi points out, was not unlike that of John Lennon:

John Lennon expressed a love, “One World”, through music.

A man I met on the road expressed a love through a small shop that sold trinkets from around the world. The shop’s sign carved with the words “One World” was really plain, but was overflowing with the warmth of something hand-made.

John Lennon and this man, I love them both the same.

There are no rules to expressing love. (Takahashi)

Takahashi further addresses the relationship between the ordinary and the celebrated in his entry “In Liverpool” that describes his excursion to John Lennon’s hometown. Notwithstanding its celebrated street names immortalized in the Beatles’ songs, Takahashi perceives Liverpool as “a quiet country town” resembling a suburb in Japan. This unexpected affinity gives Takahashi inspiration and hope:

[...]. I walked the streets where John Lennon grew up  
Menlove Avenue, Strawberry Field, Penny Lane,  
Mathew Street, Cavern Club ...

a few hours by bus from London  
a quiet country town lined with houses  
in Japan, maybe...equivalent to Chiba’s suburbs?

John, to me, one of the “Top 3 people I exceptionally  
admire but don’t want to lose to”  
grew up not in the slums, not in a refugee camp,

not in a mansion of royalty  
but in such an ordinary, middle class type neighborhood  
I could really relate, and it gave me hope. (Takahashi)

Summarizing his approach to life, as well as his writing and taking photographs, Takahashi writes in his entry on “playground” (lowercase in original):

I've always been really good at thinking up new ways  
to play in new playgrounds  
My style hasn't changed at all  
The tools have changed with age  
my playground just kept expanding

“Hey, what do you wanna play?”  
There aren't any words that could stimulate  
my creativity more than this question does. (Takahashi)

Takahashi's playful sensibility created some challenges for Michelle Doster, his book's translator. Doster points out that *Love and Free* “was created from what began as notes and journals the author recorded while traveling,” and that there “may be parts difficult to understand from an English viewpoint” (Takahashi). She felt it was important “to faithfully convey the author's Japanese viewpoint, [...] the strengths of the writing style and rhythm of the Japanese language” (Takahashi). For the same reason, “the grammatical errors, such as tenses and pronouns are deliberately translated to convey the Japanese original as is, in hopes that the reader will sense the reality of the writing” (Takahashi). Doster adds that “for those words that cannot be directly translated into English or can only be expressed in Japanese, footnotes were not added to preserve the general tone and feeling of this work” (Takahashi).

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*The Polaroid Project* Exhibition, McCord Museum, Montreal, 2019.  
Photo by the author.

I took similar “shortcuts” in my 2021 trilingual publication “Je Suis en Transit: Adventures in *Google Translate*” (Siemens). Dedicated to a bilingual (French and English) friend born in France, “Je Suis en Transit” combines photography, diary entries, records of conversations, and excerpts from emails, as well as quotations from celebrated authors. Having consulted my French-speaking friends, some of them experts in translation, I ultimately resolved to stay with my initial *Google* translation of the passages in French. This introduced some issues, such as *Google*’s use of masculine endings for feminine adjectives. However, this “mistranslation” offered some advantages as well. It provided anonymity for my chief protagonist, and it also supplied the narrative with an unintended but welcome impression of a secret love affair. Love stories with a twist never go out of style.

With its on-the-spot delivery as its chief characteristic, *Google Translate* has gathered a multitude of both friends and foes. Aiming to provide a balanced take on this controversial tool, Tim Adams opens his article, “Can *Google* Break the Computer Language Barrier?” with a reference to *Google*’s translation of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*:

Were you to run perhaps the most famous line in literature, the opening sentence of *Anna Karenina*, through *Google Translate* from Russian to English, this is what you would get: “All happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” The translation, which approximates to the best “human” version of the sentence, looks like a triumph for what used to be called artificial intelligence and now is called, less ambitiously, machine learning (Adams).

However, Adams continues: “Run the subsequent lines of *Anna Karenina* through the system, though, and the picture, along with the grammar, is not quite so clear. It’s just about explicable, if we know the original, but barely readable” (Adams). Adams explains that

[the] reason for this discrepancy lies in one of the nuances of *Google*’s system that allows interested users to improve translated texts where they can. Somebody has obviously got to the first line of Tolstoy’s masterpiece and put it right. What follows is more representative of what the system is capable of. (Adams)

Adams further quotes Nicholas Ostler, chairman of the Foundation for Endangered Languages, who argues that “translation engines such as *Google*’s will eventually liberate the world from the necessity of learning dominant languages, such as English, and will reinforce linguistic diversity” (Adams). In response to this optimistic scenario, Adams wonders whether *Google*’s growing popularity might instead “make people more lazy about acquiring languages” (Adams). My own experience with *Google Translate* has been largely positive. Occasional mistranslations notwithstanding, *Google*’s instant delivery works particularly well for capturing the experience of the “Ole Nopea!”-style, fast-paced travel. *Google Translate* also provided an ideal counterpart to my snapshot photography included in *Je Suis en Transit*. As described by the prominent early avant-garde artist Alexander Rodchenko, the snapshot

discards the “traditional centered point of view derived from painting”; instead, it chronicles the chaotic modern life with its “rushing automobiles and scurrying pedestrians” (Rodchenko and Lavrentiev 209). Captured on the go, while crossing a street, or rushing to catch a flight at an airport, my photographs, found in “Je Suis en Transit” and elsewhere, often employ those “inappropriate” angles advocated by the irreverent avant-garde artists.



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*The Polaroid Project Exhibition, McCord Museum, Montreal, 2019.*

Photo by the author.

The slogan “Ole Nopea!” applies equally well to the Polaroid camera that prints photographs on the spot. As described by Mary Warner Marien, “The Polaroid camera not only takes pictures; by means of an onboard chemical packet, it develops them for you as well”—right before your eyes” (Marien). She further explains:

The Polaroid camera was a modern take on the old idea of the direct positive image. When using the mass-market version of the camera, one took a picture and ejected it from the camera body. As it came out, a packet of chemicals broke open and spread across the exposed paper, beginning the development process. Although it was called an “instant” camera, the user had to wait several minutes for the process to complete itself. [...]. At this point, encouraged by onlookers, the user began the familiar “Polaroid Wave,” fanning the image to dry it so that it could be safely handled. (Marien 174)

First introduced in 1948, the Polaroid continues to thrive: “Despite the prevalence of digital photography, the ability of a camera to produce more or less instant onboard prints gives the Polaroid an unrivalled edge” (Marien 174). The McCord Museum’s 2019 exhibition *The Polaroid Project: At the Intersection of Art and Technology* provided ample evidence of this. This large-scale show profiled work by the celebrated international artists from Andy Warhol to David Hockney, as well as Montreal’s own prominent artists, such as Louise Abbott, Benoit Aquin, and Charles Gagnon. In addition, the McCord Museum encouraged Montrealers of all ages “to contribute to the ‘Polaroid Project’ by donating their photos to the participatory, evolving work of art displayed in the last exhibition room” (*Montreal in Polaroid*). Furthermore, the museum promoted several other initiatives associated with this “open” call for the participatory component:

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In addition to this open invitation and to pursue its education and community engagement mission, the Museum has asked 11 community organizations to join in the project. As part of the Conseil des Arts de Montréal’s démART-Mtl program, multidisciplinary artist Narcisse E. Esfahani has given over 20 workshops on Polaroid photography at these organizations and will be extending this outreach activity to children attending the McCord Museum’s annual day camp. So far, 193 participants have experimented with Polaroid and added close to 200 photos to the exhibition’s collective work of art. (*Montreal in Polaroid*)

In contrast to the rest of the show, where the photos were hung on the walls, the photos in “the last room” were displayed on ropes attached to a set of vertical towers resembling drying racks, possibly as an allusion to the Polaroid’s unique development process. This more improvisational, collision montage-like installation also contrasted with the McCord’s prominent, sturdy building designed between 1904 and 1906 by the architect Percy E. Nobbs. Originally constructed to accommodate McGill University’s student club, Nobbs “obviously felt it appropriate to draw on England’s contribution to Canada’s architectural heritage. The form of his building was thus based on the palazzo tradition popularized by Charles Barry in his famous London clubs dating from the early Victorian period” (Wagg).

Its architecture alluding to “the early Victorian period” notwithstanding, the McCord Museum offers an inclusive repertoire of exhibits appealing to a broad range of spectators. In addition to the indoor shows, the museum also stages regular outdoor shows on the nearby McGill College Avenue. *The Polaroid Project* exhibit coincided with the open-air show *Montreal at Work*, which featured photographs of the “workplaces of Montrealers from 1900 to the 1940s” (*Montreal at Work*). This outdoor exhibit invited viewers “into the daily lives of Montrealers in the first half of the twentieth century, as they toiled in factories, workshops, hospitals and offices” (*Montreal at Work*). The photographs also chronicled “the old-fashioned charm of the architecture, furniture, tools and clothing of the time” (*Montreal at Work*).

*The Polaroid Project* exhibition was a perfect fit for the McCord’s inclusive mandate. Situated at the intersection of high, middlebrow, and low cultures, Polaroid

photography continues to attract professional artists as well as amateur photographers of all age groups. Much of its appeal resides in the Polaroid's instant, or near instant, processing—a unique feature favoured by everyone, starting with Polaroid creator Edwin Land's daughter:

It sounds like an entrepreneurial fantasy. While on vacation, Edwin Land's daughter complained that she had to wait weeks to see their holiday snapshots. By way of response, the brilliant and energetic Land conceived a camera that would develop its own pictures soon after exposure. In 1948, his invention was successfully marketed as a Christmas novelty. Fifteen thriving years later, in 1963, its distinctive black-and-white sepia-tingled images were replaced by color ones. (Marien)

While processing images on the spot, the Polaroid also provides a tangible record of the photographed subject or event. The Polaroid's tangibility makes it an ideal instrument of memory. David Hockney, whose work was featured at the McCord exhibit, has capitalized on this unique trait in his striking Polaroid collages, including his haunting "My Mother Bolton Abbey, Yorkshire, Nov. 82" (1982). Neither digital images nor even analogue photography can match the Polaroid's tangibility. Its many advantages notwithstanding, cinema too takes a second seat to the Polaroid. An instructive example of this can be seen in Andrey Tarkovsky's film *Mirror* (1975). Having completed this film, shot on location at his childhood home near Moscow, Tarkovsky finally felt at peace: "Childhood memories, which for years had given me no peace," he writes, "suddenly vanished, as if they had melted away, and at long last I stopped dreaming about the house where I had lived so many years before" (qtd. in Siemens, "Stirred Memories"). Nevertheless, he subsequently returned to this subject to produce a book of Polaroids—a still, yet more, tangible record of his lost home. In his book *America*, Jean Baudrillard sums up the Polaroid's unique blend of the magical and the real: "It is a dream. It is the optical materialization of a magical process. The polaroid is a sort of ecstatic membrane that has come away from the real object" (37).

In his pioneering volume *The Medium Is the Massage*, Marshall McLuhan describes the major changes that took place in the 1960s: "Our time is a time for crossing barriers, for erasing old categories—for probing around. When two seemingly disparate elements are imaginatively poised, put in apposition in new and unique ways, startling discoveries often result" (McLuhan et al. 10). He further argues that "Survival is not possible if one approaches his [*sic*] environment, the social drama, with a fixed, unchangeable point of view—the witless repetitive response to the unperceived" (10). Echoing McLuhan several decades later, Ayumu Takahashi confesses that any slow progression makes him feel restless, as he writes in his entry on "Siberian Railroad":



*The Polaroid Project* Exhibition, McCord Museum, Montreal, 2019.  
Photo by the author.

As I lay in the 65cm width of the Siberian Railroad's  
sleeping carriage,  
my eyes slide along the warm, pastoral scenery that  
continues endlessly for 2 or 3 days.

[...]

five minutes of this scenery from the window is more than enough.

[...]

Bored completely out of my mind to the point I've  
run through the train so many times,  
I almost want to time myself. (Takahashi)

Representative of his breathless travelogue *Love and Free*, Takahashi's "Siberian Railroad" makes a fitting finale to this article on the "Ole Nopea" sensibility as today's prevailing mode of expression. Commenting on "Je Suis en Transit: Adventures in *Google Translate*," Merna Rachid, a recent translation studies graduate, points to my use of language switching, and how this code switching "elicits a sense of urgency and emotion" (Rachid and Siemens). She further comments on "the juxtaposition of Russian text next to the French and English in Roman alphabet; it looks cool and most people like seeing that break in the text for a visual shift!" (Rachid and Siemens).

Composed as a wild collage, McLuhan's book *The Medium Is the Massage* mixes text and photography, as well as comic strips, advertisements, quotes by scientists and musicians, and much more. In this hierarchy-free "collision montage," John Cage shares space with James Joyce and Socrates. McLuhan quotes Cage: "Everyone is in the best seat" (McLuhan et al. 119)—a statement no less relevant and urgent today as it was in the 1960s.

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