

From Far and Wide: The Icon of the World's Largest Coin on the Secular Pilgrimage of the Canadian Road Trip

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Despite the fact that neither the tradition of the monument or the obsession with the gigantic are new or specifically Canadian phenomena, these ideals are something that Canadians have adopted as representations of regional and national identity. This is especially true when considering roadside attractions and novelty architecture; the experience of a road trip is intrinsic to many Canadians' understandings and relationships to the landscape, and the objects and icons that confront them in this experience contribute to their understanding of national identity or 'Canadianness.' In terms of novelty architecture and roadside attractions as a form of monument, Canada boasts hundreds of the 'world's largest' in various shapes and figurations. The sublime experience elicited in perceiving one of these giant structures becomes a tangible focal point from a distance, yet disconcerting when it is perceived in proximity. These monuments thus become added elements to our sublime response to the landscape up close and representations of society's dominance over said landscape from the perspective of the road. Through an analysis of one of Canada's specific 'world's largest,' that is, the world's largest artificial coin known colloquially as the Big Nickel in Sudbury, Ontario, the identity-forming experience of the Canadian road trip becomes evident as a representation of the more abstract issues of consumerism, national identity and self awareness as related to the landscape (fig. 1). Along the secular pilgrimage that is the Canadian road trip, sites such as the Big Nickel do not act as destinations but as sojourns on a greater journey, which represent through their structures a communal space of national identity-creation.

The Big Nickel in Sudbury was erected in 1964 as a commemorative marker of the 200th anniversary of the discovery of nickel and an acknowledgement of the contributions of the adjacent Vale mines. These mines are credited with producing the element important in aiding the war effort and increasing Canadian economy following the war.¹ Unlike many similar

Opposite: Fig. 1. The Big Nickel at Science North, 2002, digital photograph. Photo reproduced with permission from Phil Harvey.

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“A giant hockey stick. A big nickel. A historic covered bridge. A history-changing oil well. People pass by these attractions all the time on their travels throughout Canada. Sometimes, tourists trek for days to just to catch a glimpse. Some attractions are monumental, others merely quirky. They are all the stuff of local legend.”¹



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memorial structures, the Big Nickel was not commissioned by the government, but was rather the brainchild of local fireman Ted Szilva who also coordinated the fundraising for its creation. The idea was originally rejected by the Centennial Commission and Szilva had to erect the coin three feet outside the city limits because the Sudbury municipal government would not give him a building permit for the project.² Szilva recruited sign-maker Bruno Cavallo to help him bring his idea to fruition, resulting in the world's largest artificial coin in direct proximity to the actual nickel mines for which the area is known. As an exact replica of the 1951 Canadian nickel, this novelty structure acts as a literal marker of consumerism and nationalism. Its H-frame interior structure indicates its height as proportionate to a four-story building. However, it was not always the only giant coin in the area, as up until 1981 there stood an entire park of coins designed by Szilva called the Canadian Centennial Numismatic Park. It also contained a wampum memorial, acknowledging the form of currency used by First Nations prior to and during the early years of colonization. With the vision of expanding the project to include an educational mining science centre and museum, Szilva was faced again with bureaucratic barriers because the provincial government would not fund a privately developed project. In 1980, Szilva sold his project to the Regional Municipality of Sudbury who removed all but the Big Nickel from the site. Nonetheless, the city extended Szilva's vision by creating what are now the Science North and Dynamic Earth Science Complexes (fig. 2).³

Fig. 2. The Big Nickel with Science North/Dynamic Earth complex, digital photograph, circa early 2000s. File photo courtesy Northern Life Newspaper.



The site of the monument is intentionally close to the historic mines that continue to produce thirty percent of the world's nickel annually (seventy-five percent in 1965) and also sits at the fork of two minor highways, in proximity to the TransCanada Highway.⁴ The Big Nickel's pedestrian inaccessibility and scale, comparable to highway billboards, relate directly to the car culture that emerged in the post-war years. The emergence of billboards extended advertising to include roadside motels and gas station signs, as the road became more and more a site of the everyday. Because the automobile became more accessible to the middle class, people's trajectories began expanding outside of cities for both living and leisure. The road-trip developed similarly to the escapist use of the railroad in early twentieth century North America, yet with an added element of individuality, autonomy and affordability not afforded by trains. In this regard, it was fitting that Szilva would choose a sign-maker as his collaborator, someone who no doubt would have a clear grasp of the features that should be largest to attract people from great distances. Assessed as signage, Venturi and Scott-Brown's theories established in *Learning From Las Vegas* clarify the Big Nickel as an entire structure of decoration, rather than a structure with applied decoration.⁵ With "pleasure-zone architecture," structures are expected to express a narrative with the power to "engulf people in an imaginary role," designed purely for the spectatorial gaze.⁶ The flatness of the coin is similarly reminiscent of a billboard, which is a valid form of expression for the same reasons Clement Greenberg validated Modernist paintings: as a reflection of social, cultural (and in this case economic) circumstances of its given time.⁷

The icon of the coin is also crucial to the association with national identity as it represents Canadian currency in its entirety as a tangible symbol recognizable by Canadians of all backgrounds. The erection of monuments across the country can be seen as markers of ownership over the land and a commemoration of recent history, discrediting the problematic past of settler dominance over First Nations and imposing a sense of justification in moving forward. In other words, we are taught that this land is ours, yet it is impossible to ever fully know the entirety of the vastness of Canada. Canadians try to assert a grasp of the landscape through the cross-country road trip, most commonly taken as a rite of passage either in youth with family or at the crux of adulthood with other maturing companions. Both excursions can be equated to secular pilgrimages where a façade of freedom is fostered in the sublime experience of traveling across the landscape with the inability to grasp the entirety of one's surroundings in one view. Alternately, the ritual experience of repeating the same routes

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and activities contributes to a collective and national identity tied to the terrain.⁸ Monuments as roadside attractions are points of focus where the gigantism of the landscape is visually digestible from the perspective of the automobile, which exists as the perceiving subject rather than the human within.⁹ Monuments themselves are so large, proximity shifts this comprehension back to the experience of sublime and they are read on the same level as the earth and sky that surround them.¹⁰ Ironic and uncanny in the case of the Big Nickel is the inversion of a miniature and controllable object into something gigantic and physically overwhelming. The experience of standing beneath an enormous coin offers a dimension of strangeness in the feeling of dominance projected by an object traditionally dominated.¹¹

Abandoning the perceiving subject of the automobile and its highway sensibility to stand beneath a giant structure-as-landmark and embrace the photo opportunity presents the anticlimax of an inaccessible milestone. Perceiving it in the distance from the highway, there is a desire to attain the landmark, to grasp it, yet upon arrival the illusion of relatable scale is lifted and a barrier is faced when the observer tries to surmount something larger than themselves. As an aesthetic experience of the sublime, which is characterized by astonishment and surprise, “the grandeur of scenery results in a sudden expansion of the soul and the emotions.”¹² This can be a positive or negative experience for the observer, whose realization of their size in the universe may either be sobering or frightening, or a mixture of the two. Aside from its scale, the Big Nickel cannot be held, embraced, or consumed, especially not with the added height of the pedestals on which it stands (not even the lowest facet can be reached by the average adult), and although outwardly excited, visitors are often left with an underlying feeling of dissatisfaction and deflation as they return to their car. From this perspective, the stops along the secular pilgrimage of the road trip leave the ‘devotee’ wanting more, even if they do not recognize that this is the catalyst for their craving. This lack of satisfaction may even be intended in the height of the new pedestals; although it was doubtfully Szilva’s goal. The capitalist perspective of the government-funded agency that gained possession of the site may have encouraged the observer, who is also the consumer, to search for other means of filling their appetite, namely in the gift shop.

Sites such as the Big Nickel cannot be discussed in any one structural category such as novelty architecture, sculpture, land art, monument, sign, landmark or roadside attraction, but instead in the abject grey area between all of these categories. Some elements of postmodern theories of signage

can be applied to this structure, yet architectural theory fills some of the gaps where these writings fall short and vice-versa. As a country whose identity has always been determined by its difference from those around it and those it came from, the national identity-creation made possible by highway culture and the cross-country road trip is both a repercussion of the connection between nation and landscape important in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and as a means of attaining commonality with people of vastly different backgrounds across an equally vast territory. Deemed “possibly Canada’s most famous national monument” by Weird Al Yankovic, the Big Nickel continues to attract attention from tourists but very little from academics (who are unjustly pitted for the sake of this comparison).¹³ This is likely due to its evasion of category, where neither theorists nor historians of architecture nor sculpture realize the coin’s ability to fit into their realm, because of a history tied to the construct of high art and low kitsch. Created for novelty mass-consumption, it eludes recognition from scholars who do not necessarily stop to consider the phenomenological reading of the monument within the Canadian landscape, accepting it merely as a photo opportunity and kitsch elaboration or an unassuming object such as a five-cent coin. Much more than an inanity, the subtle properties of structures such as the Big Nickel are significant to personal and national identification on cross-country Canadian road trips, the secular pilgrimages that act as a subconscious unifying attempt for Canadians on each coast and everywhere in between.

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Endnotes

- 1 “Sudbury’s Big Nickel,” Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, last modified October 1, 2012, <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/categories/lifestyle/travel/supersized-sights-of-canada/builder-of-the-big-nickel.html>.
- 2 Sarah Chisnell, “Big Nickel Celebrates 45 Years,” *The Sudbury Star*, July 19, 2009, accessed October 5, 2014, <http://www.thesudburystar.com/2009/07/18/big-nickel-celebrates-45-years>.
- 3 Ted Szilva, Ted Szilva: *The Medallion Crazy*, interviewed by Jeff Fournier, *Science North/Dynamic Earth*, September 2, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kUXNGa9nRY;> “Sudbury’s Big Nickel.”
- 4 Ted Szilva, “Originator of the Big Nickel recalls how the project began,” *Sudbury Star* archive, date unknown.

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- 5 "Sudbury's Big Nickel." Steve Libby, "Giant Coins Honor Kennedy, Churchill," *The Daily Independent*, November 3, 1965.
- 6 Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi and Steven Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 89.
- 7 John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: SAGE, 1990), 122.
- 8 Scott Brown, Venturi and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 53.
- 9 Aron Vinegar and Michael J. Golec, eds., *Relearning from Las Vegas* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 142; Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," in *Art in Theory: 1900-2000*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2003): 562.
- 10 Kate Nesbitt, "The Sublime and Modern Architecture: Unmasking (An Aesthetic of) Abstraction," *New Literary History* 26:1 (Winter 1995): 96.
- 11 Vinegar and Golec, *Relearning from Las Vegas*, 131.
- 12 Nesbitt, "The Sublime and Modern Architecture," 95; Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (USA: Duke University Press, 2007), 71.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 70.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 74-75.
- 15 "Weird AI Road Report #15: The Big Nickel in Sudbury," *MuchMusic Road Report*, March 1995, accessed December 3, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ch-eHnWtEZw>.

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