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My Way or the Highway and A Correspondence: Visual Representations of the City

Larkin J. Sheldon
Scripps College

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Larkin Sheldon

MS 190 Senior Seminar

12/9/14

My Way or the Highway

I will create a 3-5 minute documentary examining the transportation systems in the greater Los Angeles area. I will compare and contrast public and private transportation systems to look at each system's relationship with project time and money spent. I will address the benefits and the drawbacks of each system. I began this project in hopes to investigate the reasons for which Los Angeles transportation has been pinned with a poor reputation; I expected to uncover a lack of initiative and funds from the city. However, I learned from a panel discussion in September 2014 on the status of transportation in Los Angeles, Los Angeles does have a functional, expanding public transportation system. In this discussion which included Metro CEO Art Leahy, director of UCLA's Department of Transportation Studies, Brian Taylor, Executive director of Fixing Angelenos Stuck in Traffic, Hilary Norton, and host KCRW traffic reporter, Karon Cermak, "Traffic isn't a California problem, it's a global problem." In Los Angeles, "The problem is not a lack of public transportation, the problem is that people are unaware of their options." This modified my opinion of public transportation, and made me realize, I am one of the "unaware". I hope to create a piece that compares and contrasts the experiences of traveling on public transportation and riding in a personal vehicle. I want to create an opportunity for the viewer to examine and contemplate his or her own transportation choices.

I evoke the theories and categorizations of Michael Renov and Bill Nichols. In *Theorization of Documentary* posited "Four Fundamental Tendencies of Documentary" which include: 1. To record, reveal, or preserve, 2. To persuade or promote, 3. To analyze or

interrogate, and 4. To express. Addressing the development of the “City Symphony” films of the 1920’s (which Renov puts in the category “to express”) Renov describes, “The artfulness of the work as a function of its purely photographic properties was now allied with the possibilities of editing to create explosive effects—cerebral as well as visceral,” (Renov 33). Since this description has held strong with me throughout the production process, I plan for my project to fall into Renov’s fourth “fundamental tendency of documentary”: to express. In my video, I hope to accomplish this notion of fulfilling a cerebral and visceral hunger. It is important to me that the viewer is able to connect to the subject of transportation on a logical and emotional level. Renov explains the interaction of the visual/emotional/logical saying, “The aesthetic function can never be wholly divorced from the didactic one insofar as the aim remains ‘pleasurable learning.’” (Renov 35) I aim to engage the viewer logically and emotionally in order to achieve this cerebral as well as visceral effect.

From the inception of this project I have been inspired by Nichols’ “modes” of documentary presented in his 2001 *Introduction to Documentary*. Out of the six modes (expository, observational, reflexive, participatory, poetic, and performative) I related most closely with the poetic and observational modes. I also believe this combination falls nicely under the expressive category of Renov’s ‘Tendencies’. Nichols explains that while the poetic mode, “emphasizes visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages, and formal organization,” (Nichols chapter 1) and reflects personal experimental filmmaking, the observational mode, “emphasizes a direct engagement with the everyday life of subjects as observed by an unobtrusive camera,” (Nichols chapter 1). The process of filming in the observational mode will stimulate logic and what is already known, and the process of editing in

the poetic mode will tap into the emotional, sentimental, and deeper thoughts within the context of the viewer's own mind.

I plan to survey the greater Los Angeles area and collect audio and footage based on my adventures traveling via public and private transportation. The final product will consist of observational footage crafted in a poetic expression reflecting the conclusions I make after the experience of traveling and filming in Los Angeles via public transportation and private vehicle.

My choice to portray my footage in a poetic voice is due to the complexity of the subject matter. Transportation in a city affects each one of its citizens directly and indirectly. The effects of transportation and specifically the systems of Los Angeles evoke a plethora of social, environmental, and economic issues. Each individual interacts and moves throughout the city in his or her own way, making everyone's day-to-day life and relationship with transportation unique. My hope is by presenting my findings through a poetic lens without direct address, the viewer will personalize what they experience. Through the experience of this video, I hope to compel the audience to place their own dialogue within the piece requiring the viewer to reflect on their own relationship with transportation in or outside of Los Angeles.

It is important for me to remain as undetected as possible in order to keep the footage from an observational perspective. While it is impossible to keep my voice out of the filming process based on the locations I travel to and the subjects I choose to focus upon, I want the raw footage to be authentic Los Angeles, as unaffected by the presence of a camera as possible. The footage will be taken from the perspective of a visitor of the city, and the initial reaction of taking in Los Angeles. While the filming process will be observational, I do still find it important to incorporate voices of the city. I plan to record transportation related sounds, such as the starting of an engine, the wheels turning on a bus, public transportation announcements, as well

as conversations with public transportation users, and anyone else I may encounter with an opinion on the state of transportation in the greater Los Angeles area.

I approach the making of this documentary as an extended visitor. While I have lived here for the past three years, I still feel unable to call Los Angeles (and the surrounding area) my home. Why do I still feel like I am on an endless vacation? Is this an issue that is personal to me, or does it apply to others? Is this a feeling unique to Los Angeles, or is it unique to the person? How one gets around and sees the city is one of the most significant determining factors of a residency in a location. It can deeply influence one's quality of life.

As a passionate traveler, I have a significant appreciation for transportation and the functions it serves for residents and visitors. As a frequent traveler of European cities, I depend upon public transportation to get me to and from the airport/train station and around the city. My experience getting from one place to another in a city deeply influences my overall opinion of the city. Everything from price, travel time, space, and aesthetic direct my experience. The half a year I spent abroad in Prague, Czech Republic was very effective in displaying the significance of transportation to the culture of the city. Prague has had an established public transportation system since 1875 (operated by horse until 1891) that continues to be the framework of the city's three-part transportation system including bus, tram, and metro transportation ("Important Dates from the History of the Prague Public Transport Company"). This was my first time living in a city with a public transportation system so ingrained in the culture. Unlike other cities I have lived in (in and outside Seattle/Claremont) I did not feel restricted by location or my lack of personal vehicle. During the daytime at least it was more convenient to take public transportation because the system was established before cars were recognized as a valid transportation option in the city. This marked contrasts with the city of Los Angeles which, "was

constructed in the era of mass automobile ownership,” (Yglesias) with a formation of a public transportation system coming much later. This led to the development of Los Angeles to facilitate car culture, inevitably putting environmentally and economically friendly public transportation on the back burner.

The process of this project began with researching the pre-existing organizations in the Los Angeles area that confront the current issues of transportation. Some of these organizations include the Los Angeles Department of Transportation, LA Bus Riders Union, Alternative Travel Project, Transit Coalition, and the Los Angeles County Bicycle Union. The mission of these groups range from gathering commuters, encouraging environmentally friendly habits regarding transportation, and bringing awareness to citizens of options for traveling outside of the personal motorized vehicle. Ultimately their purpose is to gather support around public transportation. These standing organizations are proof of the dissatisfaction with the current methods of transportation the city has to offer. They reflect the efforts of the citizens of the city to look for practices to prevent transportation problems in a growing city.

The rapid growth of the city is not only a recent concern however. *City Plan: A Portion of the General Plan of the City of Los Angeles* published in 1976 by the Department of City Planning, noted that the citizens, “strongly desire the preservation of the City’s traditional single-family life style,” and that, “large numbers of citizens have indicated that they view growth as a major threat to the City’s amenities,” (Department of City Planning 1). Between 1960 and 2010, the population of the Los Angeles Metropolitan has almost doubled going from 6,742,696 to 12,828,837 (California State Data Center). In addition, journalist Matthew Yglesias explains that the restricting geography (national forests, ocean, mountains) determines a high-density metropolitan area and that the, “arterial freeways that form the backbone of the city’s

transportation and infrastructure,” are the primary causes of the infamous traffic jams associated with southern California.

While Los Angeles is not known for its history of public transportation, it does not mean its existence is fictitious. In 1873, The Main Street Railroad Company began to lay down railroad tracks to facilitate horse and mule propelled transportation for the public. As the rail system continued to grow and turn electric across companies, the serious drought of 1924 crippled the power supply limiting trolley service and causing a switch to busses run by gasoline. The rise of the personal automobile in the 1930’s, 40’s and 50’s in turn reduced the number of bus riders and facilitated the growth and development of the still standing car-centric culture. Not until 1964 when the California state legislation created of the Southern California Rapid Transit District (SCRTD) was there a significant push towards major accessible public transportation plans. After previous attempts by the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority (LAMTA) failed, SCRTD secured federal funding to implement a “backbone rapid transit system: the Metro Rail subway project,” (Metro.net).

While the funding was finally secured to build a rapid transit system, it was not until twenty-four years later Los Angeles saw the opening of the Metro Blue line. In the *City of Quartz: Excavating the future in Los Angeles* a book examining the powerful forces that shaped contemporary Los Angeles, author Mike Davis, attributes the delay to, “bad transport planning and even worse project management,” during the era that Tom Bradley served as mayor of Los Angeles between 1973 and 1993 (Davis xi). Davis claims, “The big ticket projects of this era turned out to be costly fiascos: a Wilshire subway that didn’t actually go down Wilshire Boulevard; a light rail to the airport that didn’t actually go to LAX; and an Alameda corridor that was designed to take truck-hauled containers off the Long Beach Freeway, but has failed to do

so,” (Davis xi). Los Angeles’ unique history has inspired me to create my own Los Angeles city symphony, but specifically through the lens of transportation, due to its role in the development of the city.

During the 1920’s in the early stages of film history and technology, the city symphony was a popular genre that was essential to the development of documentary cinema. With the relatively new technology of capturing moving images, many filmmakers were intrigued by the city and its appearance on screen. In *Urban Cinematics: Understanding Urban Phenomena through the Moving Image*, authors Francois Penz and Andong Lu explained the popularity of the city symphony as, “film and photographic images emphasized and characterized the urban landscape for its technical and civilized progress, thus celebrating the vigour, complexity and new form of the future metropolis with its resulting technological innovations and evolutions...” (Penz and Lu 25) They explain that filmmakers utilized this correlation between modern development in cities and advancements in photographic and cinematic technologies to engage the audience.

One of the earlier versions of a city symphony film was the ten-minute film poem *Manhatta* by Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand made in 1921. The film maintains a story arc beginning with the ferry arriving into the city and ending with the sunset on the skyscrapers, but mostly relies on the use of montage to propel the film. Each shot encompasses little or no movement to resemble the look of a moving photograph. *Manhatta* showcases the transition from photography to cinematography that was occurring in the early 1920’s.

By 1927 Walter Ruttmann had released *Berlin: City of a Great Symphony*, which has proven to be an essential film to the city symphony movement. This hour plus film expands on the idea of showcasing life in Berlin by taking the viewer through a day in the life. The film also

utilizes montage and the layering of images to go beyond solely an observational, photographic examination of a city to make discrete conclusions such as comparing a popular lunch spot to a well-oiled machine and noting the animalistic characteristics humans possess.

Regen (*Rain* in English) is a Dutch short documentary by Joris Ivens and Mannus Franken in 1929 looking at the city of Amsterdam through its relationship to rain and how it impacts the city and its citizens. Also made in 1929, *Man with a Movie Camera* by Dziga Vertov makes an examination of the city through a specific lens as well as the relationship of man and machine, specifically the movie camera. Vertov uses editing techniques to draw attention to the process of filmmaking and the ability to manipulate footage. While there are many other examples of city symphony films, I chose these because each has elements essential to the structure of my own city symphony including *Berlin's* day in the life and cyclical structure, *Regen's* framing of the city of Amsterdam through its relationship to rain, and *Man with a Movie Camera's* acknowledgement of a filmmaker's specific and subjective perspective and impact on a film.

While there were no popular city symphonies created about Los Angeles during the 1920's, there have still been other filmic accounts of the city that resemble a city symphony. In 1972, BBC Films presented *Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles* in which British writer and architectural critic Reyner Banham takes the viewer around the city via personal vehicle. Banham is a self-proclaimed Los Angeles enthusiast who learned to drive just so he could read the city from the perspective he thought was most original to the city. As the viewer hops into the car with Banham, we are immediately greeted by the audible in-car guide system, directing the viewer through the city. Banham acknowledges the common held skepticism around the city.

He goes on to give words of encouragement about the city, in order to convince the viewer to see the city as he does.

While I specifically left out the use of verbal direct address in my video in an effort to avoid an explicit argument favoring either public or private transportation, I still made a conscious effort to showcase the realities and negative effects car culture facilitates. Banham, along with his words of support, uses this fancy in-car technology and aerial views of the intricate weaving of highways and freeways to glorify the strong car culture in Los Angeles.

Another film resembling a city symphony about Los Angeles is *Los Angeles Plays Itself* by Thom Andersen. Andersen created this video essay with the intention of showing how Los Angeles is presented in movies through a compilation of clips of actual representations of Los Angeles in movies. Similar to Andersen I aim to present a depiction of Los Angeles through a single aspect of the city (transportation) rather than an all-encompassing representation. This leads to my discussion of the production process and the choices I made as a result of its development.

For me, this project was a personal challenge on multiple levels. First of all, I wanted to work on a topic that was a reflection of my life these past four years, especially within the context of living in a new space. Each element from location, to subject, to ideology, I selected carefully in order to achieve this reflection. The greater Los Angeles area has been my primary location for these past few years, and to be honest I am not sure when I will be back. I wanted to create a piece that forced me to get away from the environment of a college campus as a way to situate my life within a larger social and communal context. Through this exercise I hoped to gain an understanding of a life in Southern California.

I chose the subject of transportation as the vehicle in which to drive this reflection of my college career—no pun intended—for multiple reasons. Primarily, it reflects my passion for adventure and travel. I would not be the person who I am today without my opportunities to travel to other nations and experience other cultures. Traveling is how I understand the world. By physically transporting myself into a place and customs, I learn about myself. I initially came up with the idea of doing my capstone project examining public transportation systems of a city during my time in Prague in the Czech Republic. Living there, I came to appreciate their public transportation systems, and it had me wondering why I had not had the same reaction while living in the States. Although a daunting topic, especially within the context of the notoriously troubled transportation system of Los Angeles, I believed I could do it, as long as I made it relevant to my already standing knowledge of the city and my perspective as a non-native.

Because I am presenting the subject from my point of view as an extended visitor, I decided to approach the filming and the editing in two different ways. My philosophy for the filming process was to film from an observational point of view—to go into the city with a planned destination, and film my experience without manipulated or staged shots. Besides my choice of framing, I attempted to remain un-involved in the filming process in order to let the scene unfold as it would if I was traveling without camera equipment. As a result, my footage comes in a variety of forms (still, shaky, focused, unfocused) as a self-reflexive gesture to remind the viewer that this is indeed a documentary attempting to record actual events. This is a constructed film, from the perspective of someone who is not a native, but an extended visitor. It is *literally* not the clearest view, but it is a lightly constructed view from somebody actually going through the motions. There are no shortcuts or tricks. Because I wanted it to be a natural process, I did not run into any major obstacles. The biggest challenges were A) carrying the

equipment and obtaining usable footage for the viewer to comprehend, and B) sorting through the large amount of footage. Both of these challenges were expected.

As is usual for me, the editing process was the longest and most rigorous. It is always a challenge as a filmmaker to ensure that the audience understands the ensemble of images as you wish it to understand, especially in a piece without speech or written word to direct the viewer. This is one of the main factors I took into account through the pre and postproduction process. While it is impossible to explain the thought behind the piece to everyone who watches it, I tried to make the narrative a matter-of-fact story (going in and out of the city via car and public transportation) with subtle hints using editing techniques to reflect my own conclusions on the experiences of making this journey via public and private transportation. A few techniques I used consistently throughout the piece are speed manipulation and split screens. The split screens are used to emphasize the overwhelming number of vehicles, people, and advertisements one encounters on an adventure in and out of the city. I used speed manipulation as a tool to describe visually the feeling of traveling via public or private transportation. I used slow motion to simulate unexpected delays such as traffic accidents or mechanical issues and reverse motion to convey the idea of being stuck in traffic and the feeling of not getting any closer to your destination. I chose to make these inferences subtle enough to create space for the viewer to apply their own thoughts and personal experiences using public and private transportation. While this piece would not be where it is without the extremely helpful comments from my classmates and professors during in-class critiques, it was rewarding to have their support in my idea and vision throughout the creative process.

The final piece of my film is the incorporation of sound. This aspect of the film has definitely been the most nerve-racking. As my main source of inspiration is the City Symphony

movement, my goal was to create a modern city symphony of Los Angeles focused around the differing experiences of using public and private transportation. In turn, I imagined a modern symphonic piece, composed of multiple instruments to guide and evoke distinct emotions from the viewer in correlation with specific images. After much trial and error I ultimately turned to the Vimeo music store to select previously composed music to accompany the music and on-location sounds I had already managed to record and assemble. The soundtrack to my video includes a variety of music genres as I find it hard to represent a city (especially Los Angeles) through one style of music. I composed or selected each song based on their tempo or musical qualities as a reflection of my conclusions or even a narrative to accompany my visuals. Originally, I wanted to assign each section or mode of transportation their own music style, but ultimately implemented more variety and crossover as a better and smoother accompaniment to my aesthetics.

The video starts in the car and the music moves from one style to the next as an acknowledgment to the radio and how throughout history it has been a contributing factor to car culture. The Metrolink section traveling into the city is accompanied by a relaxing yet upbeat waltz or march to maintain the idea of continuous movement, while maintaining the sense of repetition and monotony. While the Metrolink will get you into the city, you still have to be conscious and respectful to your fellow passengers in a public space compared to the freedom associated with riding in a private vehicle. The next transition of music goes into a melancholy clip from a symphony to symbolize the impending doom that is traffic. Running into traffic on the Los Angeles freeways is inevitable; but this still does not mean that anyone welcomes traffic with open arms. As we go underground to the Metro tunnels, a livelier beat picks up to reflect the timely and continuous flow of the Metro. The continued development of the metro system I

believe to be the saving grace of the Los Angeles transportation system, so I paired it with a more upbeat and optimistic tune. As we go back above ground, we have arrived in downtown Los Angeles where we find a mix of cars, pedestrians, bikes, buses, and above ground trams. All these forms of movement and transportation bind together to form the rhythm of the city so I chose something funky with a strong beat and sense of rhythm. I return to Union Station and the Metrolink and it is time to return back to Claremont. The return home can either be the quickest or the longest part of the journey—either going by in the blink of an eye—or dragging on at a slow, sluggish dreamlike pace.

Overall, I do not try to promote one mode of transportation over the other. Instead I promote the idea that there are options when deciding how to get from one place to the next. I hope that my examination that scrapes the surface of the different public transportation services sparks an interest in the viewer to consider doing their own research to find the options relative to their needs.

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