

Larkin Sheldon

Final Reflections on Capstone Project

MS 192

5/6/15

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

My Capstone Project initially started almost two years ago while studying abroad in Prague in the Czech Republic. The experience of coming to a foreign country and living in the city on my own bewildered me. I became curious and fascinated with city life. What truly amazed me the most was how easy it was to get around and see the city without a car. Growing up in Seattle and going to college in Southern California accustomed me to life with a private vehicle because public transportation could either not take me where I wanted to go or did not do so in a timely manner. In contrast, the public transportation system in Prague was easy, cheap, accessible, and timely. I immediately began filming the Czech transportation systems with the hope of creating a capstone project comparing urban transportation systems. Unfortunately I lost my footage—but I did not lose my inspiration! For my fall Capstone Project I chose to examine the infamous Los Angeles transportation system and create an observational and poetic documentary reflecting the experience of an “extended visitor” (what I consider myself to be as a non-local student in Southern California). In this first part of my Capstone Project, I aimed to highlight the experience of moving throughout the city using both public and private transportation. My main goal for the viewer was to make them put themselves within the experiences evoked in the film and consider

the multitude of transportation options available to them whether it be in Los Angeles or their own city.

During the fall semester I relied heavily on documentary theory and considered all six of Bill Nichols' documentary "modes" in which would most honestly represent the city. As I aimed to engage the viewer logically and emotionally in order to achieve a cerebral while visceral effect, I decided to create my piece with observational footage and a poetic editing style. After I spent my first semester examining the single yet complex aspect of transportation in the city, I began to consider more generally the different strategies for representing the city on screen.

After finishing my first semester project, I was recommended the book *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino in which Kublai Khan sends out Marco Polo to see his empire and return to describe each city he visits. The book is divided into chapters that consist of the descriptions of cities from Marco Polo. Each chapter begins with a conversation between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo discussing the nature of their relationship and reflecting upon what the collection of his descriptions mean. Not only is the descriptive language in the book beautiful and inspiring, but the overarching message is holds even more power, and in turn inspired the theme of my spring project. Within all of his descriptions, Marco Polo is describing different aspects of only one city: his hometown of Venice. Ultimately Marco Polo is unable to share with Kublai Khan descriptions of his empire because Polo's view of the city would not be the same as Khan's based off their individual experiences and how each views the world.

While I was thematically inspired by this idea of the subjectivity of cities and the challenge in representing them, I also wanted to evoke the creativity and texture in his writing. Calvino requires more of the reader, “reflecting on a new kind of level in which reader participation is ‘more and more a critical participations, a collaboration,’” Calvino utilizes, “a model of narrative that [is] ‘enjoyable and significant on many intersecting planes’: a narrative in other words that offered a ‘multireadability’ of reality” (Ricci 171-172). This “multireadability of reality” is what I aim to achieve in both my fall and spring video projects.

My fall project was focused on creating a feeling without words, combining music with visuals to gain a reaction. For my spring project, I wanted to incorporate the element of description and conversation presented in *Invisible Cities* and push myself to utilize spoken word narration. As I am not as comfortable with my ability to express myself through words as I am with expressing myself through visuals, I enlisted the help of talented writer and fellow Scripps senior, Caroline Miller. She also contributed her view of Los Angeles as well as her interpretation of the city based off her many travels and hometown of Providence, Rhode Island. As I wanted to compare the city I grew up outside of (Seattle) and the city I currently reside near (Los Angeles), we came up with the concept of a conversation between the two cities.

Right now is a pivotal time in the history of Seattle. Seattle has been sustaining a steady increase of attention in the past 30 years due to industrial giants such as Microsoft, Starbucks, and Amazon calling Seattle home. With Amazon reconstructing areas of the city and startups gaining popularity, people are flocking

to the city of Seattle for employment, a wealth of natural resources, and mild weather. This population increase has triggered a rise in the cost of living, an expansion of reliable public transportation, and even more construction. As Los Angeles faced a large expansion and population increase during and following World War II as a result of war production jobs in the area, and has continued to sustain global popularity, Los Angeles is an adequate city for Seattle to learn from in how to manage a period of major development. But how do cities communicate? What would they say to each other? Hence, the letter correspondence between Los Angeles and Seattle as if they were personified, structured by four talking points: industry, transportation, nature, and lifestyle.

Visually I wanted to stick with the idea of the subjectivity of cities. After being directed to Marco Brambilla's "Anthropocene" and Whizeewhig's depiction of San Francisco, I was inspired by the idea of creating an impossible city. Brambilla creates a beautifully colorful exploration of Central Park dispersed with mirrored images of the industrial structures of the city. In Whizeewhig's piece, he showcases city life in San Francisco while casually incorporating alterations to different elements of the city—such as designs within traffic lights and spinning parking structures. Both these pieces blur the lines between reality and imagination. While many images are character to a specific city, many of the images are indistinguishable and could be images from any city. All cities have the details and vibes that make them unique, but city life is a universal lifestyle that almost all have experienced at one point. With footage from both Seattle and Los Angeles, I began to create an impossible city.

Similar to these examples, I wanted to present both images that gave away the identity of the city, and images that could remain anonymous and belong to either city. While some images I present contain elements that are specific to one of the cities (such as ferry boats in Seattle and palm trees in Los Angeles) many are images that could represent both cities. I also created composite images that contained images from both cities to create an image of this new imaginary city. Through these composite images and the arrangement of images through movement, color, and shapes rather than location, I aim to disorient the viewer in order to make them contemplate what characterizes a city and how their own experience factors into that.

The relationship between the audio and the visual maintains this idea of disorientation by omitting a direct correlation between what is said and what is seen. However, the audio and visual are not completely disconnected as they individually present a perspective through either words or images and then fit together to communicate the message of the project.

Ultimately this message coincides with my goal for the project, and of course follows the techniques of Calvino and requires viewer participation. As said by Calvino:

A book, I believe, is something with a beginning and an end (even if it is not a novel in the strict sense of the word); it is a space into which the reader must enter, roam around, maybe even lose direction, but at a certain point will find a way out, or even several

ways out, or just the possibility of opening up a road to come out.

(McLaughlin 103)

While I am telling the specific story of the interaction between Seattle and Los Angeles, I welcome the viewer to mingle around in its content and encourage them to come to their own conclusions. I also aim to draw attention to the difference between learning factual knowledge (someone telling you about a city) and learning experiences (understanding a city from first hand interaction). Ultimately no matter which city specifically, everybody's idea of "the city" is unique and subjective to each individual. Through this project, I have created an audio/visual experience that reflects the subjectivity of an individual's interaction with a city by prompting the viewer to either ponder their interaction with Seattle/Los Angeles or apply the experience of the video to their own city of choice.

Works Cited

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