



On the Night Bus

Sophie Hamacher

In 2015, while in residency at Union Docs, a centre for documentary arts in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, I collaborated with Sarah Stein Kerr and Tessa Rex on the lyrical short film [Night Bus](#), which captures the experience of New York City workers traveling by bus throughout the night.

We began working on the film in February, in what felt like the darkest and coldest time of the year. Without knowing much about the Metropolitan Transportation Authority transit lines, we began our journey at the Williamsburg bus plaza. As a central locus, this became a meeting place of different trajectories, a starting point for understanding the nocturnal public flowing from Jamaica, Queens to Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, and the place where we began and ended our circuit. We were interested in exploring the space as what one in German calls a [Stelle](#)—at once an intersection, a spatial nodal point, and a public space through which travelers pass. Soon, however, our attention turned from the spaces we traversed to the characters passing through them.

Eight bus lines begin and end at the plaza. We spent weeks on all of them, filming at all hours of the night, alongside commuters returning home from a long shift, as others boarded the bus just beginning their journey. We wanted to address the questions: Who commutes between dusk and dawn? Who sleeps in the 24-hour economy?

In April 2015, the [Washington Post](#) published an article with the title “The Richer You Are, the Better You Sleep,” following a report published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in which they found that the relationship between income and

sleep is intricately linked.¹ Many low-income Americans hold two or three jobs just to pay the bills, and as a result sleep very little and often spend a lot of time commuting.

Between May and November of 2008, the MTA collected surveys to shed light on the demographics of New York’s transit riders. By examining the income of city residents who ride buses and subways, they discovered that the median household income for subway-only riders was not much different than the NYC median household income. However, the median household income for bus-only riders was considerably lower.² In 2013, the [New Yorker](#) created an interactive infographic about inequality and the subway, using data from the U.S. Census Bureau to chart shifts in median income along various subway lines, but no such infographic for the busing system exists.³ In our excursions to the edges of the city, this income distribution became more discernible as we approached the outer reaches of each route. While stops interlinking various transportation modes were busier, even during the late hours of the night, more remote stops were less connected and the neighbourhood residences reflected poverty. The farther out we went, and the less connected we were to forms of transportation other than buses, the more impoverished the neighbourhoods became.

While filming, we began to see differences and similarities between distinctive bus lines. The demographics also changed according to the time of night: if we rode in the early evening, right after sunset, or if we waited to ride in the middle of the night, or woke up before the crack of dawn. We soon dropped our initial idea of choosing one bus line to document. Instead the experience of the ride itself was paramount, and the people

on the bus became our focus.

In his book 24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep, Jonathan Crary argues that under neoliberalism, sleep is increasingly reserved for those who can afford it. In a 24-hour economy, there is a constant available wealth of goods and a constant pressure to consume, making sleep, for the underprivileged, a form of political resistance. In a world dominated by the demand for constant progress, in which workers are forced to sleep less and work more to get by, sleep and the night are decoupled. A new study from the American Academy of Sleep Medicine shows that “paid work time is the primary waking activity exchanged for sleep.”⁴ According to Crary, even these hard-earned hours of rest have become targets for regulation and systematic elimination.

The film invests the concepts in Crary’s book with the immediacy of sensation: reflections slipping across dark windows, coins pouring in the till, moaning air brakes, squealing hinges, and the low hum of motors as apparitions emerge from the inky blackness of the city. Appearing only as hazy reflections through weathered windows, the characters reflect, in voices heavy with fatigue, on the work behind or ahead of them.

For Crary, sleep is not passive, and nighttime can be an active space of resistance precisely because it is relief from the day and its demands. Since the space of such resistance is largely private, our film approaches it only obliquely. In the characters it surveys, it discovers an active exhaustion, but not a resignation. As Ernest Montgomery and Christine Baumgarthuber conclude in their review of 24/7: “An economy intent on exhausting people has already exhausted everything else.”⁵ Night Bus attempts to convey this by showing the impressions made by the night upon the waking body.

The film captures sleep-deprived and over-worked characters passing through New York every night, pulling in the flavours of neighbourhoods throughout Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens by situating the bus within the larger context of the city. Yet, even

though the views from the window seem close, they are ultimately unattainable. Night Bus is like being on the bus, riding, drifting, halting, and meandering through places rather than really being a part of them. Like drifting in and out of sleep, the film drifts in and out of focus, leaving the viewer dislocated and unhinged, lost in a nebulous urban landscape.

All shots of the characters in the film are taken through the windows of the bus, utilizing reflections to show what is both in front of and behind the glass at the same time. We always see the night and the city in multiple perspectives, contemplating between reflection and experience, reality and illusion, universality and particularity. The four characters in the film whose voices are heard are either night-shift workers or people just leaving work. Their voices reflect their train of thought: expressions of exhaustion enveloped by the reflected images of the city at night, layered and distorted in parts and direct in others, cohesive, poetic and raw—the subconscious of the sleep-deprived worker. There is also the additional voice of the bus driver, heard at the beginning of the film, indicating the schedule and route of one of the bus lines, providing a bit of context in the dense fabric of image and sound. We try to emphasize the characters and their surroundings, while never really looking directly at them. Instead, we are constantly aware of seeing them through something else, whether it be a window, a camera lens, or the projection screen.

In the film, we use two anecdotes from Crary’s book: one about a Russian/European space company building satellites in order to light up large areas to make round-the-clock work possible, the other about the U.S. Defense Department’s experiments with migrating sparrows, through which it hoped to produce soldiers who do not require sleep. These anecdotes are read by one narrator who later is shown in a blur leaving the bus after announcing: “This is my stop!” Here, as the narrator leaves the bus (and thereby the stage), one expects that the story will also come to an end, but instead, the camera pulls

focus and catches yet another character in the window’s reflection, reading from a book: 24/7.

Sleeplessness is caused by trying to stay awake at night in order to work, while the circadian clock is signaling the brain to sleep. Even if the body attunes itself to another sleep cycle, it cannot do so sustainably within an ever-changing work schedule, which most night-shift workers face. In an article titled “Shift Work Disorder and the Normalization of Exhaustion,” El Gaviero Rojo explains that the officially recognized sleep disorder can be treated with a new drug called Nuvigil: “With a medical name and an FDA approval, shift-work disorder represents a legitimization of self-medication for work-related exhaustion. The body resists its incorporation into capitalist production through its own exhaustion, it’s own fragile nature. And this is precisely where the medical industry intervenes, and where Nuvigil marks a striking continuation and intensification of a very old capitalist project to discipline the human body.”⁶

Night Bus offers a glimpse into the life of night-shift labour through dark, dreamlike depictions disrupted and penetrated by florescent-light formations. Changes in sleep-wake patterns denote changes in light-dark exposure. Interpreting light to mean daytime, the circadian rhythms will therefore be increasingly effected by the light pollution in the city. As Lockley and Foster note in Sleep: A Very Short Introduction, since the invention of electricity made possible 24-hour-a-day services, we have “been invited to shop, buy petrol, watch TV, drink in the pub, or surf the web around the clock, whether we asked for it or not. The key to all this activity is the ability to light the night.”⁷

The film is focused on the time between dusk and dawn, both as an artistic constraint and visual guiding point. One of the most basic photographic principles, light-dark exposure, is directly connected to the brightness and darkness of an image. Capturing the night on camera entails capturing predominantly dark tones and colours, conveying atmosphere and mood, and creating striking contrasts

because of reduced lighting. Shadows would normally be the primary element of nocturnal composition, but since most of the recording was done within the bright interior of a bus, there is uninterrupted disparity between light and dark, interior and exterior, night and day.

“The city still hums, and as shadows grow with sparser visual competition, so too does the auditory sense, as we capture the raw acoustics within the contained space of the bus. There is a cyclical hum, a buzz, and embedded bass, and then air brakes, like pistols—clang clang clang, beep. The door opens.

The soundscape of Night Bus is layered and rhythmic, which gives it a degree of transparency—raw and illustrative, but organized in a way that the listener can pass through it, into the lucid and discrete sphere of the motorized vehicle. It captures the auditory ethnography of the bus, at night, in its seemingly infinite cycle of transit.” The bus sounds are in the forefront, overtly emphasizing the clanging of the engine and the mechanisms behind its functions. Yet Night Bus is not driven by mechanics, but rather by the human condition. The sounds of those who are awake fill those who are asleep.

The sound of Night Bus was largely captured as field recordings on hand-held, shotgun, and in-camera microphones. Iconic sounds were isolated in postproduction and layered in a cut-up style, mirroring the images to produce a symphony of found reality. The atmospheric sound is important, as the background hum of the city night acts as an empty stage that seems poised to turn the world in its totality into a sleepless bus.

Made with a minimalist script using the cut-up method, a technique in which paragraphs are cut into singular sentences and phrases and rearranged to create a new text, the film is intended as a mood piece, an atmospheric fragment that examines the city at night, labour, and the 24-hour economy in America. The labour is anonymous labour, and it isn’t clear which job the different characters have. What brings them together is their commute and the disruption of their

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circadian rhythms because of capitalism's
insatiable need for productivity.

NOTES

1 Christopher Ingraham, "The Richer You Are, the Better You Sleep," The Washington Post, 6 April 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/04/06/the-richer-you-are-the-better-you-sleep>.

2 Renata Silberblatt, "NYC Bus Riders Tend to Be Older and Poorer than Subway Riders," Mobilizing the Region. News and Opinion from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, 11 April 2014, <http://blog.tstc.org/2014/04/11/nyc-bus-riders-tend-to-be-older-and-poorer-than-subway-riders>.

3 Larry Buchanan, "Inequality and New York's Subway," The New Yorker, <http://projects.newyorker.com/story/subway>.

4 Thomas Heffron, "Many U.S. Workers Are Sacrificing Sleep for Work Hours, Long Commutes," American Academy of Sleep Medicine, 11 December 2014, <http://www.aasmnet.org/articles.aspx?id=5230>.

5 Erwin Montgomery and Christine Baumgarthuber, "My Soul to Keep," The New Inquiry, 15 October 2013, <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/my-soul-to-keep>. Jonathan Crary, 24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep (Verso, 2014).

6 El Gaviero Rojo, "Shift Work Disorder and the Normalization of Exhaustion," libcom.org, 15 February 2016, <https://libcom.org/library/shift-work-disorder-normalization-exhaustion>.

7 Steven W. Lockley and Russell G. Foster, Sleep: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford University Press, 2012), 119.

Caption Information:

Still from Night Bus, 2015,
HD Video, Run time 13:27,
Format 16:9

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Stein Kerr, Tessa Rex