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
sleep. According to Crary, even these hard-

Sleep Medicine shows that “paid work time

forced to sleep less and work more to get

constant progress, in which workers are

underprivileged, a form of political resistance.

pressure to consume, making sleep, for the

available wealth of goods and a constant

under neoliberalism, sleep is increasingly

the Ends of Sleep, Jonathan Crary argues

On the Night Bus

within the larger context of the city. Yet, even

Brooklyn, and Queens by situating the bus

approaches it only obliquely. In the characters

such resistance is largely private, our film

the day and its demands. Since the space of

resistance precisely because it is relief from

fatigue, on the work behind or ahead of them.

the characters reflect, in voices heavy with

blackness of the city. Appearing only as hazy

reflections slipping across dark windows,

and illusion, universality and particularity. The

Four characters in the film whose voices are

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. The night is the backdrop of the

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 birds, through which it tried 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

Night Bus offers a glimpse into the life

of night-shift labour through dark, dreamlike

depictions disrupted and penetrated by

fleuret-light formations. Changes in sleep-

wake patterns denote changes in light-dark

cycles. Instead of 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

electricity made possible 24-hour-a-day

society, workers “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.”

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

dark, interior and exterior, night and day.

The camera is the only thing that grows

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 that move the bus. 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 handheld

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 still 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

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

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 work and leisure, a constant

pressure to consume, making sleep, for the

underprivileged, a form of political resistance.

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

the primary waking activity exchanged for

sleep.” 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 toll, moaning air brakes,
squealing hinges, and the low rumble of

motors as the bus moves away 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.

how the views from the window seem

close, they are ultimately unattainable. Night

Bus is like being on the bus, riding, drifting,
halted, 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, levelling visible content 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

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just leaving work. Their voices reflect their

train of thought: expressions of exhaustion

enveloped by the reflected images of the

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characters have. What brings them together

is their commute and the disruption of their
On the Night Bus, circadian rhythms because of capitalism's insatiable need for productivity.

NOTES
6 Jonathan Crary, 24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep (Verso, 2014).

Caption Information:
Still from Night Bus, 2015, HD Video, Run Time 13:25; Format 16:9
Sophie Hamacher, Sarah Stein Kerr, Tessa Rex