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From Central to the World: a Day in the Life in Transit

Jorge de La Barre

Abstract

This essay is a reflection on images, memory and movement in Rio de Janeiro's railway space, inspired by the itinerant play *In_Trânsito—Urban Odysseys*, from theater group Cia Marginal. More particularly, the article explores the experience of displacement in Rio's suburban space, in relation with the mediation devices staged during the show: protective goggles, memory helmets, headphones for images. These strange devices seem to function as instruments for distancing, questioning, and metaphorizing an everyday reality experienced by thousands of users of railway lines in Rio de Janeiro.

(...) the journey begins before. It begins with the myths attached to the oceans, and the primeval identification of water as a source of life; it begins with Man's wishes and aspirations to overcome his own limits. Ulysses, the first navigator, explores the frontiers of the known world, where the real and the marvelous mingle, in a journey filled with adventures and exploits that only the superhuman capacities of a hero could undertake. The journey of Ulysses, marked by a wondrous gaze at worlds until then unknown, symbolizes this common worry for the unknown sea, probably populated by monsters and other creatures of enchanting capabilities that made one lose his way to home.

Simonetta Luz Afonso, "A Viagem: uma história e uma exposição", 1998.

Our lifetsyle changes, evolving towards scenarios where lights, sounds, images and communication are ever more the main protagonists. But our daily gestures remind us that in a virtual world, our greatest asset is still our body. According to that, we use materials, surfaces, forms and colors which confer authenticity to our body rituals.

Design company advertisement, *Wallpaper magazine*, July-August 2001 (in Toop, 2002, p. 59).

In the play *In_Transit: Urban Odysseys*, displacement is the motor drive for a paradoxical exercise in maximum contingency.¹ The itinerant play on rail tracks combines myth and the contemporary in a game that explores the relationship between artist, public space, the urban fabric, and subjectivity. Freely inspired by Homer's *Odyssey*, the piece begins on the platform of the Central do Brasil train station, and pursues its interactive route through stations and wagons to the Bonsucesso, Triagem, Manguinhos, and São Cristóvão stations. Aiming at bringing art directly to public spaces, the show brings together actors, spectators and passengers-travelers, and mixes the mythical journey of Ulysses with the daily train adventure of the *Carioca*.² Isabel Penoni, director of Cia Marginal and co-director of the play, explains:

The mythical journey of Ulysses going home after ten years of war is compared to the daily adventure of the contemporary subject, which sails daily by the rail veins, from the center to the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. The return of Ulysses inspires a new look at everyday

¹ *In_Transit: Urban Odysseys*: directed by Isabel Penoni and Joana Levi, staged by Cia Marginal—a theater group formed by actors living in Maré, Rio de Janeiro's largest complex of *favelas* (slums). *Note about this article*: translated (and slightly adapted) by the author, it was originally written in Portuguese.

² *Carioca*: the inhabitant of the city of Rio de Janeiro.

odysseys. Boats are like wagons, the sea is like rail tracks; islands are represented here by stations.³

Co-director of the play Joana Levi comments:

One of the central objectives of *In_Transit* is to establish a poetic dialogue with the city, its pace and architecture. Our attempt is to connect the savant references of the story of Ulysses in *Odyssey* with common daily life, causing an unexpected circulation between parallel realities and worlds apart.⁴

The *Odyssey* tells the journey of a man who takes ten years to get back home. We realize, then, that in life one spends way too much time just commuting. In a way, we are all Ulysses. (...) It is an experience that all of us, inhabitants of large cities, have to face. The analogy with the *Odyssey* occurs in direct relation to this space. The railways are like channels that connect the center to the outskirts of the city. And the Central do Brasil station is like a large port that connects people and multiple realities. (...) By taking the play to a train we are mixing different audiences: residents of the South Zone, that do not often use this kind of transport, and residents of the periphery, who usually do not go to theaters.⁵

For those who do not usually travel by train, the show is an opportunity to make the experience, and thus expand their vision a little, and the dimension that they have of our city.⁶

In this article-evocation, I want to trace the experience of displacement in Rio's suburban space, in relation with the mediation devices staged during the show: *protective goggles, memory helmets, headphones for images*. As I recall them after attending the play on April 22, 2013, these strange instruments seemed to function as instruments for distancing, questioning, and metaphorizing an everyday reality experienced by thousands of users of railway lines from Rio de Janeiro.

³ "Espetáculo de companhia da Maré é encenado em vagões de trens", *Redes da Maré*, 22 April 2013. Available online at <http://redesdamare.org.br/?p=7733> (accessed 7 January 2014).

⁴ "Espetáculo de companhia da Maré...", *ibid*.

⁵ "Peça baseada na Odisseia de Ulisses é encenada nos vagões da Supervia", *Jornal O Globo*, 20 April 2013. Available online at <http://oglobo.globo.com/cultura/peca-baseada-na-odisseia-de-ulisses-encenada-nos-vagoes-da-supervia-8168941> (accessed 7 January 2014).

⁶ "Passageiros dos trens da Central viveram experiência inédita neste fim de semana", *Agência Brasil*, 21 April 2013. Available online at <http://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/noticia/2013-04-21/passageiros-dos-trens-da-central-viveram-experiencia-inedita-neste-fim-de-semana> (accessed 7 January 2014).

Protective Goggles (Central do Brasil Station / São Cristóvão Station)

Somebody spoke and I went into a dream.

John Lennon, "A Day in the Life", 1967.

He awoke—and wanted Mars. The valleys, he thought.

Philip K. Dick, "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale", 1966.

From Central do Brasil to the suburb, displacement (re-)constructs places in motion, from images. And from the suburb to the world beyond, this extraordinary daily rail journey is a process that is about to mix the imaginary and the lived. "*I close my eyes and the pictures keep passing by...*"⁷ Riding along the rail veins, places of transit become special, and spacious. If, usually, it is just passing by and there is no time to think, we ask now: how do we think about places in motion, while on the move? Passing by quickly is like thinking fast. In this suburban archipelago, we pass by small isles, islands and stations, all by train, and always thinking. "*I close my eyes and the pictures keep passing by...*" What if the images cannot stop either, what if the images are actually thinking us as well? When the journey of Ulysses becomes daily, our maximum contingency becomes odyssey.

Isabel Penoni comments:

More than telling a story, we want to intervene poetically on the route that people make, almost with their "eyes shut", as if closed in themselves.⁸

Close your eyes, you see nothing. Put on protective goggles that are perfectly dark, you see nothing... With dark goggles, I am the spectator of an inner journey. From the world out there, I only hear sounds. Inside the goggles, ports and ships at sunset are on display: miniature reproductions of the famous "imaginary landscapes" painted by Claude Gellée aka Le Lorrain. I am blind, therefore open to everything. Any possibility of displacement has been confirmed with this mental slideshow: with dark goggles over my eyes shut, the imaginary landscape-image has already passed onto my thoughts. Leaving Central station, all ears alert to the sounds of the rail tracks, I enter the soundtrack of the train. Beside me, seated passengers and actors; around, the sounds of conversations mingle with the rail sounds and become suggestive.

⁷ The phrases in italics and quotation marks are from the script, or from the interactions among players, spectators and passengers, as I registered them when I attended the play.

⁸ "Peça baseada na Odisseia de Ulisses é encenada...", *ibid.*



1: Protective Goggles (photo: Jorge de La Barre).

Sailing is necessary, seeing isn't. If seeing isn't necessary, then conversation is. With the actors asking, we, blind spectators, exchange impressions of our inner journey. Not seeing anything and just hearing: what does it make you think?

"This is like, the essay on blindness, isn't it?"

"The samba train was packed! I went there twice, yes! To Madureira. You've never been there?!"

"It makes me think like, I don't know, something strange..."

The actor repeats our comments, echoing them. Again, he messes with our ears. The actor becomes an auditory mirror, and he comes suggesting other mirrors and future devices, as we will see. Being immersed in the anonymous subjectivity of the train user makes us, spectators, spectators of ourselves, introverts. Maximum contingency, and strengthening of the mind in motion: we are in a Zen train. Already blurred by remote imaginary landscapes, our gaze now watches the thinking passing by. Displacement of the thinking again, now the actor is astounded by space oddity. *"Every time the doors open or close, I feel like I am in a space-ship."* Movement itself is the narrative for this urban odyssey, as Isabel Penoni puts it: *"The journey itself embodies the drama".*⁹

⁹ "Peça baseada na Odisseia de Ulisses é encenada...", *ibid.*

Blind, we all surrender to the multiple dimensions of displacement – physical, metaphorical, spatial and temporal. To guide our body in motion, we are bound to following the “trajectories of sound” (Toop, 2002, p. 60).

In the twenty-first century, the traversal of physical space is overshadowed by disembodiment. Words, sounds and images disperse in hypertextual depth (...). Movement is a shadow process, a geographical memory passing through the two-dimensional frontier of virtual space. Yet insubstantiality maintains an inevitable attachment to corporeality. The body lingers. (*op. cit.*, p. 60-61).

Memory Helmets (São Cristóvão Station / Triagem Station)

Dancing is like dreaming with your feet.

Joaquín Sabina, "Jugar por jugar", 1996.

Sleeping is out.

Wim Wenders, *Until the End of the World*, 1991.

If one walked backward, one would not need such device as a memory helmet, with mirrors in the front, to remember what is going on in the back. Since São Cristóvão station, we stepped out of blindness into a kaleidoscopic hyper-vision multiplying the points of view to the infinite in an attempt to see, as in Salvador Dalí's "paranoiac-critical method" (1971), what happens when you're not looking... Not long ago the actors were whispering their impressions to our ears, now they are screaming, arousing our memory. In a trance, they invoke and evoke the lost memory of the suburban archipelago. From Triagem station, the iron-colored sea has much history to remember.



2: Memory Helmet (photo: Jorge de La Barre).

The dream of Dom Pedro II¹⁰ was to unite Brazil with an entire railway network, from Engenho de Dentro to the outside.¹¹ From the Valongo wharf¹², not far from Central station to the North Zone, the memories are screaming. Transit places, places of passage and forced labor: transition spaces. Transitoriness: a permanent cycle, an incessant flow. Trans-territorialities: territorialization, de-territorialization, re-territorialization,... And after all, what best defines a “non-place” (Augé, 1992), if not our own *non-thinking*? Place (re)turns only to its non-place condition if we stop looking and thinking. In this sense it is our thinking and looking that *reveal* place. Yet, spaces are increasingly made of other spaces: “information” spaces, small screens and large screens, loudspeakers, billboards,... Spaces are filled with other spaces, filled with images, invaded by “extra” narratives and other meta-texts. Spaces themselves are becoming devices, creating their own “regimes of fiction” (*ibid.*).

From the North Zone to the lost zones of memory, other space-times, real or imaginary, past or future, suddenly invite themselves in. Actors earn the gift of medium-ship, they force our memory into a trance. *Trance in transit*. Mirrors of memory, the actor-helmets are also mirrors of the city.

The mirror does not just copy what it reflects, it sets the wandering vision of the eyes, brings together the spectacle defined within the limits of its framework, and makes it a “scene”. We thus discover form structures until then unthinkable – Panofsky’s “system space”. A hole drilled in the uncertain extension where the “naïve” eye is submerged, an investigation of the world. (Duvignaud. 2008, p. 186. Our translation).

That is the question: *Does the image reveal or deceive?* That is the obsession: *I see* (this, that,...). I always see in immersion, with devices and machines: immersion in the train (the locomotive machine), immersion in the mirror (the extension of memory). My machine, my memory: thought is displacement, until the end of the line. In *Until the End of the World*, Wim Wenders invented a machine that recorded dreams, so that the dreamer (or the blind) could *rewind* and review them afterwards (see: La Barre, 2012). Here, on the iron tracks, the machines are mirrors, to remind and reveal, always. Perhaps Wenders meant that, once dreams get recorded in HD format, then... *the dream is over*. Here, the helmets are mirrors (re)creating the city. Objective and subjective at the same time, they reflect and reveal, as in a trance, the facts and figures of Emperors and forgotten sugar mill factories. *Trance in transit again*.

¹⁰ Second and last ruler of the Empire of Brazil, Dom Pedro II reigned for over 58 years (1831-1889).

¹¹ A middle-class and lower-middle-class neighborhood in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro, Engenho de Dentro echoes, if only by its name, colonial Brazil and the sugarcane cycle: “engenho de dentro” literally translates: *inland sugarcane mill factory*.

¹² Thousands of men and women forced into bondage in Africa emerged from the bellies of ships onto the Valongo wharf in Rio de Janeiro, once the busiest slave-trading port.

Headphones for Images (Triagem Station / Manguinhos Station)

I sing the body electric.

Walt Whitman, "Leaves of Grass", 1855.

And the sea isn't green

And I love the Queen

And what exactly is a dream

And what exactly is a joke.

Syd Barrett, "Jugband Blues", 1968.

"I see... I see..." The actors see things, so that later we, spectators and passengers, can see them too. We are all (Ulysses) in transit.

Exile and impermanence are there at the beginning of literature. Oral traditions speak relentlessly of journeys. Heroes leave and seldom return. If they do, it is under magical circumstances, in an atemporal fashion, with the aid of the gods. All journeys begin in the adversities of history and end through the benevolence of the divine. Homer wandered and sang of other wanderers. We are all exiles if only because, by virtue of His never having left the womb, God is the only native. (Codrescu, 2001, p. 54).

The actors make comments, they question and say; memory machines reveal other times. Vision and eyesight become risky instruments. Photography itself becomes the essence of missing things. It is pure—and dangerous—appearance. The actor questions:

"What is a smile on a picture? Not a real smile. Photographic smile ain't no real smile; it is illusion, and this is true."

Not long ago I was blind, immersed in me, the sounds out there guided me; I was looking with my ears. Now everyone is taking pictures: of himself and of others. *"That smile of mine on the picture: was it for me, or for the other?"* Shooting the moment is necessary, living it isn't!



3: Headphones for Images (photo: Jorge de La Barre).

"I see... I see..." The actors show the way, we spectators follow them. At Manguinhos station, we exit the train. On Manguinhos platform: vision of the future, radical futurism, Olympic (pre)vision. The actors hand us headphones. Let us hear the soundtrack: let us listen to the landscape's images. The platform looks over destroyed houses – the pre-Olympic removal. We're walking around. At the horizon, green mountains remind other Mount Olympus. In the headphones, a voice keeps repeating: *"I close my eyes and the pictures keep passing by..."* The soundtrack is an obsession. Out there, the landscape shut up. Walking around, we look around the platform out there, still listening inside. *"I close my eyes and the pictures keep passing by..."*

Olympic Interval (Manguinhos Platform)

On the train to get here, the actor screamed, letting off steam:

Everything is Olympic now! It's all about Olympics! The Olympic City, the Olympic Village, the Olympic Port, We are all Olympic! This train is Olympic! The Indians are Olympic! The shopping is Olympic! The cable car too,... And the poor, is he Olympic too? But of course! And the favela,¹³ is it Olympic too? Sure! All Olympic!



4: Manguinhos Station Platform (photo: Jorge de La Barre).

Audio Link: [Cia Marginal, "In Trânsito" \(Cia Marginal, 2013\).](http://people.lib.ucdavis.edu/~davidm/barre.mp3)
<http://people.lib.ucdavis.edu/~davidm/barre.mp3>

The past may be the only guarantee for the thickness of time. Subjectivity searches for a reason that was lost in the past. It wants to see things that occurred yesterday, objectively. Right here also perhaps, the reason is searching too. This valley seems like it stopped in time, as an interval: half time. The reason is searching backwards, and then runs forward: broken homes, destroyed houses, removal,... The great—and (pre)visible—overthrow toward

¹³ *Favela*: slum.

the new, Olympic city... The city is no longer “divided” (Ventura, 1994)!¹⁴ It is *pacified*, it has *UPP*...¹⁵ Soon enough perhaps the memory machines will also remember this unique moment, right before the advent of the “post-divided” city. Pre-Olympic pacification: is this just another slice of violent (future) memory, in this long urban odyssey? From the engines and engineering of the past, to the genius of (sub)urban reengineering in the post-sugarcane mill factory... From Greece to Rio, and then, from Central to the world: a city mayor’s (pre)vision, wanting to go down in History with the symbolic forceps of the Olympics, (re)placing Rio under the eyes of world. At the horizon of the Manguinhos platform, the integral timeline of the (sub)urban reforms—past, present, and future... The platform that I see looks like a treadmill, it keeps rolling down. We are in the heart of a broken landscape: the removed houses on the side, the green Mount Olympus at far distance. Shock of order, shock of landscape. No, the pre-Olympic removals will not let me enjoy the green horizon and its future promises.



5: View from Manguinhos Station Platform (photo: Jorge de La Barre).

¹⁴ *Cidade Partida, or The Divided City*, is a book written in 1994 by journalist Zuenir Ventura where he painted the picture of Rio de Janeiro as a city composed of two separate parts: that of the rich, particularly the *Zona Sul* (South Zone), and that of the poor, the *favelas* (slums) and the outlying areas of the north and west.

¹⁵ *UPP (Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora)*: Pacification Police Unit. Since 2008, in preparation for the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics, the state government of Rio has adopted, in order to tackle crime, the installation of permanent security police units in *favelas*.

(I See and Sing) The Cyber-Olympic Suburb (Manguinhos Station / Bonsucesso Station)

*It began to circulate, the Express 2222
Direct from Bonsucesso to later in time
It began to circulate, the Express 2222
From Central do Brasil
Direct from Bonsucesso
For after the year 2000
They say there is a lot of people from now
Anticipating, going there
For 2001 and 2 and even later
Until where will this road take us...
Gilberto Gil, "Expresso 2222", 1972.*

*Today is the first day of the rest of your life. And of mine too.
Rita Lee, "Hoje é o primeiro dia do resto da sua vida", 1972.*

Way beyond the Express 2222 imagined by then future ex-Minister of Culture,¹⁶ the Olympic speed of the wireless communication networks. And so it remains: endless, and senseless. In the meantime, culture became *digital*, or *cyber*, and now the Bonsucesso station is called Bonsucesso *TIM*.¹⁷ Remember, TIM is like: *You, without frontiers*¹⁸ (and me too!). "*I close my eyes and the pictures keep passing by...*" Indeed, telecommunications networks never sleep.

It started as a game without frontiers, between Central station and the suburb. In tuning our eyes and ears, the urban odyssey *In_Transit* revealed, precisely, the new frontiers. Along with an increasingly busy life, the exercises in suburban (de/re)territorialization, remind us of how spaces and places are always contingent, yet they are becoming increasingly *augmented*, in the most natural(ized) ways. Increasingly sophisticated, the mediation devices are also increasingly *emerging*, and increasingly *escapist*. The *refrain*—Deleuze and Guattari's "ritournelle" (1980),—used to delimit identifiable moments—of territorialization, deterritorialization, reterritorialization. Here, in the "life in transit" (Toop, *op. cit.*), the mediation devices are filled with images, sounds, information; they produce a repetitive obsession. "*I close my eyes and the pictures keep passing by...*" The non-place is being incorporated by flexible territorialization. In other words, as technologies of mediation are increasingly embodying our everyday experience, the distinction between place and non-place becomes obsolete. Virtualization is not just about metaphorizing our

¹⁶ Singer and composer Gilberto Gil was Brazil's Minister of Culture between 2003 and 2008.

¹⁷ Now a sponsor for the Bonsucesso train station, TIM is also one of Brazil's leading mobile phone operators.

¹⁸ "*Você, sem fronteiras*" is TIM's official slogan.

(sub)urban experience. Now in motion, place itself becomes an extension of the body, accompanying us at all times.

In times of cyber-Olympism, riding along the rail tracks is also an invitation to revisiting the slices of space-time, while questioning systematically the origins of all frontiers. By multiplying the points of view, we always run the risk of finding ourselves precisely without frontiers. For the passenger, spectator or actor, a space supposedly without frontiers can only be virtual, disembodied, deterritorialized, *posthuman*. As a metaphor for the Olympic city, the “athleticity” and its rhetoric of a constant self-surpassing, makes us wonder: what would be a city without frontiers, without limits? An impossible perspective, a crazy paradox: how can one possibly be pushing the limits all the time? What happens when we reach the end of limits? What comes after the limits?

Railway networks are like veins flowing; the stations are islands. Cyber-Olympic, potentially (or virtually...) without frontiers, the network city has in fact already entered the “culture-monde” (Lipovsky and Serroy, 2008). Implicitly or explicitly, the rhetoric of the *absence of frontiers* traces the contours of a *techno-culture* that is progressively invading *all* landscapes: urban, suburban, sonic, visual, real, imaginary, symbolic, mental. As it becomes iconic, the “symbolic economy” (Miles, 2007) is producing new centralities: virtual, creative, mental, or moral – rather than strictly physical. Thus, the center is gradually shifting, from the idea of physical/geographical centrality, to the virtual/conceptual centrality of techno-culture itself – with all its current and future devices included. For cities and states, the cyber-Olympic dream is the current paradigm, the most secure way to successfully connect to the global network. *You, without frontiers?* And Rio too!



6: Poster for *In Trânsito* (photo: Cia Marginal).

Heading Back Home, or Terminal Escape? (Bonsucesso Station / Central do Brasil Station)

There's no going home.

'Weird Al' Yankovic, 1996.

Home is where the heart is... on the bus!

Frank Zappa, "Wet T-Shirt Nite", 1979.

After all, what did we come here to see, what have we seen, and is there anything else to see? We are still in the Express 2222, but in the meantime the time and information highways got much faster. The Express began to circulate direct from Bonsucesso indeed, but now it is Bonsucesso *TIM*. Ulysses has returned home, but we do not yet know whether our return to Central will not extend our odysseys over yonder. After all, what is a day in the life in transit?

When displacement is permanent, the transient condition becomes a metaphor for life itself. In this train of life, we always run the risk of extending our journey, or derail at any time, or collide with other space-time walls. In the saying according to which happiness is not a destination but a way of traveling, the fact that journeys are always tiresome is unspoken. And there is always, perhaps, the promise of a future re-rootedness. Looking at the memory of places, *In_Transit* revealed the tunnels of time, the tectonic-mnemonic plates of sedimented time and their porosity somehow, and finally maybe, *the laws of transitivity*.

Our voluntary escapism rehearsed a journey *in a day*. The passenger-traveler contemplated the stupidity of the spectator ("*What the hell is this?!*"), and complained about the actor's vanity ("*Please don't scream, I'm exhausted*"). We surrendered – all of us – to the permanent plurality of the islands-places. Ulysses, odysseys, trains, tracks, archipelagos, islands, suburbs, *Central*, travelers, navigators! Still ahead of us, other "communicating vessels" (Breton, 1933), other chains of (dis)continuities. From Greece to Rio, from Central to the suburb, and the suburb to the world... From Rio de Janeiro-Olympic city, to Mount Olympus-home of the Olympian Gods, from Manguinhos station to the platform of the future! And yet, always: we, commuters in trance! Imaginary travelers of an everyday Olympism sailing across the transatlantic suburbs – all in transit! Perhaps the odysseys transform Rio into the "Marvelous City"¹⁹ again, and the earth into sea. With the challenge of permanent displacement, everything swings flexibly: everything turns into odyssey!

¹⁹ The city of Rio is also known as the *Cidade Maravilhosa* (also the name of a song, Rio's civic anthem).

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