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Los Angeles
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Who knows the city? Only those who walk, only those who ride the bus. Forget the mystical blatherings of Joan Didion and company about the automobile and the freeways. They say, nobody walks; they mean no rich white people like us walk. They claimed nobody takes the bus, until one day we all discovered that Los Angeles has the most crowded buses in the United States.

– Thom Andersen, *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, 2003

Piensa en mí (2009), a 15-minute film by Ecuador-born Alexandra Cuesta, takes a Los Angeles bus as its central, mobile location and uses the sidewalk as punctuation, interspersing a series of shots taken in transit – people, seats and windows – with exterior sequences, including people walking and waiting on the sidewalk, endless cars on the freeway, and an urban park. The people we see on the bus are caught on camera, we assume, because they happen to be travelling in the same direction at the same time as the filmmaker. Hardly any of them are white, and most of them are there alone, lost in contemplation. The changing seat design and layout indicate that Cuesta shoots on multiple buses, as does the fading level of light as the film travels from day into night and back into day again (or many days and nights, for all the viewer knows). Cuesta isn't interested in revealing the end-point or goal of these passengers' journeys but nor does she ever perpetuate the mythologies of 'flânerie' or 'drift'. Cuesta knows that not everyone has the privilege of aimlessness, least of all in the unequal, unwalkable Los Angeles sprawl. Her democratic method of shooting lots of people for a short amount of time each leaves no room for romanticisation or over-narrativisation. Unrestricted by teleology, the film brings together portraits of individuals who have found themselves together in a city that has long prioritised private over public space, and which has done more to perpetuate the myth of the private automobile than any other in the United States except Detroit. No coincidence, then, that the film ends in a space of public leisure: a park.

In both her still and moving image work, Cuesta seems most interested in how individuals and groups use their surroundings – be they natural or urban. Sometimes this is glimpsed in a past but tangible marker of human intervention, like graffiti on a bus window, but mostly it can be found in the active present: kids bouncing balls off anonymous walls or families using the concrete picnic tables in an unremarkable park. To make the film, Cuesta traversed a large part of the city, working from east to west and back again, documenting the textures of a multitude of faces and the configuration of various crowds. But despite the interaction this entails – whether verbal or non-verbal, pre-determined or not – the viewer must strain to hear or see even a suggestion of the filmmaker. On my fifth viewing, I'm still unable to untangle what might be Cuesta's voice from that of others, her silhouette from the shadows of other passengers. Cuesta's ability to sometimes make herself and her camera less visible, perhaps as a woman, perhaps as a fellow non-white passenger, is the reason why the film exists as it does. More than just a shared interest in what people do within different spaces, it's this method of moving with

or alongside her subjects that reminds me of Chantal Akerman's experimental ethnographies – her journey from the former East Germany to Russia in *D'Est* (1993) and her epistolary survey of public space in New York, *News From Home* (1977). In Cuesta's tableaux of crowds, I ask myself the same questions I do while watching Akerman's: How much space does the individual leave between themselves and the stranger next to them? Why does this man look into the camera when this other one doesn't? Why is my eye drawn to this woman's face and not another's?

Cuesta is often much closer than Akerman, though, not protected by a car, as in *D'Est*, or buffered by any sort of film crew. This proximity can sometimes be disquieting. In the second populated sequence of the film, the camera is mobile, following a black man so closely that the top of his head and the bottom of his shoes are cut off. It's hard to imagine that he is unaware of Cuesta's presence on an otherwise empty street. Yet her camera's shakiness seems to suggest a feigned casualness or perhaps the willingness to abandon filming if he turns back. Later, this man reappears on the bus, carrying a skateboard, recognisable by his clothes and the shoulder bag he wears. This shot is surely too close, too perfectly composed, and the reencounter too coincidental to have been ignored by its subject. Later on, he appears again, having found a seat. This, surely, is a sign of complicity, if not pre-existing friendship. In the film's longest take, a young woman in the window seat at the back of the bus is captured in a mid-shot. Only when Cuesta cuts to reframe her a little further back does she look into the camera, a look that contains more recognition than a glance, but which is not pointed enough to be a stare. A flash of acknowledgement, a little embarrassment, maybe – a half-smile. Ambiguous, public intimacy. It's perhaps for this reason that Cuesta chooses to sometimes self-impose 'found' barriers, even when the shot is physically close, as when she films a man through the corrugated metal screen of a bus stop. It speaks to an awareness of her power as the one holding the camera, to intimacy as a balancing act.

Writing on ethnographic film often concerns itself with questions regarding the transparency of the relationship between filmmaker and subject, examining the poles of closeness and distance, participation and observation. Such binaries seem a little irrelevant to *Piensa en mí*. If the observational mode, contested though its definition is, can be categorised by a proclivity for long and unbroken takes and the presentation of an 'unmediated world', then Cuesta is far too active, cutting back her material brutally and frequently. But her approach extends beyond the participatory, too, where the filmmaker might 'acknowledge his [sic] entry upon the world of his subjects and yet asks them to imprint directly upon the film their own culture.' Cuesta's approach to her subjects does not rely on any performance to the viewer of the contract between filmmaker and subject; she doesn't so much introduce her portraits as advance them. A few minutes into the film, a young boy appears, and the camera is so close that his face almost reads like a landscape. Cuesta then cuts to a woman: the repetitive, circular gestures she makes with her hands, then a corner of her face. The movement of her lips is out of time with her speech, which is the only speech in the film. She talks quickly in unsubtitled Spanish. Is this boy connected to this woman in any way? Did Cuesta initiate this conversation? Might hers be the second voice we hear here? I feel like I can make out an English 'I don't know', but maybe I'm projecting. Without subtitles, the

non-Spanish speaker is forced to receive this speech as a unit of sound, like the film's other non-verbal elements. This lack is a very deliberate choice by Cuesta, who in other works subtitles all spoken English in Spanish and never translates her films' titles.

Piensa en mí. Think of me. The film's title is the only time Cuesta is overt in her otherwise subtle process of 'giving voice' to the disenfranchised. Otherwise, the viewer is forced into activity, tasked with deducing the film's politics from its rare discordant images: the life-sized Marilyn Monroe mural next to a shop covered in Christmas decorations, the rows of anonymous cars that pass unforgivingly on the freeway – an institution Joan Didion described as 'the only secular communion Los Angeles has'. Los Angeles's relationship to the car is historically linked to race and class. When the city's population swelled in the 1910s and 1920s, the middle classes looked to the suburbs, buying pieces of land on which to build houses with driveways. This 'sprawl' is the reason the city and state have historically given for their heavy investment in freeways and refusal to better subsidise public transport. Cuesta's car sequences are striking in their violent banality. They show a rush hour that never seems to end, in which automobiles appear almost robotic: no passengers can be seen, and each car leaves the same amount of space behind it and the next. The car endows the privilege to interact with nobody but yourself.

The film's credits are made up only of a 'thanks' – one that includes the Bus Riders Union, a civil rights organisation established in 1994 when the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority announced plans to raise fares and get rid of a monthly bus pass. Since then, the union has consistently demanded safe, clean, affordable and reliable transportation in the city. Its slogan – 'Fight transit racism!' – points to the fact that 81% of bus riders in Los Angeles are people of colour, while 60% have an annual household income of less than \$15,000. Most of the passengers who appear in *Piensa en mí* travel alone, but there is a togetherness in this aloneness too. At one point, the man with a skateboard finds a seat next to a man and a toddler, who, not yet aware of the distinction between public and private space, intermittently leans on him and kicks him. The skateboarder doesn't flinch. As the bus rides through the night, some of the passengers fall asleep. A man in a cap and hoodie; a woman with her hair over her face to block out the light; a man asleep on a woman's shoulder. It is here that Cuesta proposes an extension to the function of the bus – it is a rare place where someone who is tired, whether from a day or night shift, an evening spent at the park, or because they don't have anywhere else to sleep might feel safe to doze off. Another, different 'secular communion'.

1. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 40–41.

2. David MacDougall, 'Beyond Observational Cinema', *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Paul Hockings (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 119.

3. 'Piensa en mí' is also a popular song, written in the 1930s by Mexican siblings Agustín Lara and María Teresa Lara. It has been widely covered since and appears on many film soundtracks, including Pedro Almodóvar's *High Heels* (1991).

4. Joan Didion, *The White Album* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 131.