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Jeremy Deller: The Reenchantment Of Public Transportation

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Auteur(s) (texte brut)

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Chapô

“It's like some psychological warfare on the customer.” In response to an invitation from London transportation officials, artist Jeremy Deller chose to insert somewhat provocative philosophical messages in ads aimed at commuters. For instance, we hear a female driver citing Gandhi, or Sartre’s famous quote “Hell is other people,” shedding a philosophical light on issues such as promiscuity, which concern passengers directly.

Présentation longue

Jeremy Deller - Drivers to quote Gandhi on Tube

Presentation

Born in 1966, British artist Jeremy Deller studied art history at Dulwich College, the Courtauld Institute of Art in London and the University of Sussex. Author of numerous art installations and videos among other things, he was awarded the Turner Prize for his film Memory Bucket in 2004. His works often have an historical and/or political dimension, as his film The Battle of Orgreave, which recounts a battle between miners and police officers during the Thatcher administration. His works are likewise characterized by the intervention of people from outside of the art scene in the creative process. This is notably the case for the project we will see here, in which both London drivers and London public transportation users participate fully.

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Analysis and presentation of concepts

The reenchantment of public transportation

The purpose of the project is to instill enchantment in commuter transportation, potentially helping to change its image. The spontaneous statements in the form of quotes blend in with normal ads, producing an unexpected, surprise effect that captures attention. The impact of the novelty of this approach leads one to believe that regular ads no longer have an impact on users. We also noted that the driver's intonation naturally changed when she read the philosophical quotes, even if she tried to read them in exactly the same manner: the messages undoubtedly differ too greatly for her to be able to do so. Thus does she take on a new role wherein she develops a new type of relationship with passengers. Using her voice to suddenly intervene against the backdrop of a subway commute, she suddenly comes to life as a person, an individual, whereas before she simply blended into the automation of normal ads. Discussing the results of this experiment, the driver said that passengers seemed to appreciate this change, but that, observing them, some nonetheless remained passive and unreceptive. Those interviewed expressed mixed feelings, stating that the effect of surprise could possibly lead to a change in their habits or, conversely, be an intrusion in the form of "philosophical advice," which could possibly become irritating, were it to become part of their daily commutes in the long term.

The experience of mobility

- *With the advent of John Urry's concept "mobility turn," emphasis is placed on, among other things, travel as an experience in and of itself; the focus is on how people experience, live and feel their mobility (Urry, 2006).*
- *Kesselring distinguishes between mobilities in areas of transit, which are characterized by their direction and linearity, and wherein places, meetings and interactions are transitory experiences in view of an objective, and mobilities in spaces of connectivity, wherein the trip itself is a veritable experience, and not merely a moment between a point of departure and a destination (2006).*

Imaginaries of the promiscuity of public transportation

With this attempt to reintroduce a human dimension, Deller seems to want to recreate a shared social bond and to give qualitative value to the time spent during this type of commute. The mixed reactions of users can be explained by the absence of specific conditions to produce open-mindedness and put people in a new setting in order to create social ties. Exceptional incidents or the role of tourists during faraway travels, for instance, can offer these types of favorable - though temporary - conditions that do not exist in situations of daily mobility. In general, those intrusions that bring us into personal contact on public transportation, such as the extensive use of telephones on trains - which researchers like Berry and Hamilton (2010) have investigated - are ones that bother us, leading the researchers to the conclusion that such intrusions makes the experience of the mode of transportation as a lived in, social space. Changing habits - however unpleasant they may be - takes time and involves a process of habituation.

The qualitative value of travel time

- *The value of time is based on the idea that each person has limited resources in terms of time and money, and thus will seek to make the best use of them (Mobile Lives Forum - Lexicon - The Value of Time,*

by Emmanuel Ravalet: <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/value-time-594>).

- *Time is increasingly gaining qualitative value, which opens new horizons for research, including greater focus on how mobility is used (Lyons and Urry, 2005).*

Reducing automation in favor of the collective dimension of mobility:

However, Deller's project opens an exciting avenue for finding solutions to the problem of the lack of appreciation for public transportation, which, in particular, is reflected in the difficulty users have in understanding the information they receive, and their low opinion of spaces of transit, which they consider unpleasant to use, experience and spend time in (Tillous, 2009). Regardless of whether the commuters to whom these messages were addressed were receptive to them or not, they undoubtedly understood/ the underlying idea: to re-instil value in public transportation and create a more direct link between users, drivers, operators, experts and politicians. In attempting to thus bring together the various players of mobility, the project by the same token proposed a more general approach to this concept, one that goes beyond the notion of travel and can be transformed into a physical, social and mobile experience (Urry, 2006), accompanied by a rediscovery of the pleasure of moving.

The collective dimension of travel

- *Many of the inconveniences linked to travel seem to be the consequence, among other things, of the automation of traveler services. The people who once served as representatives for travelers (ticket punchers, station managers, conductors, etc.) are gradually disappearing from spaces of mobility (Tillous, 2009).*

Mobility and movement

- « *Broadly, the word mobility can be defined as the intention, then the realization, of moving through a geographical space, implying a social change.* » (*Mobile Lives Form - Lexicon - Mobility*, by Vincent Kaufmann : <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/mobility-450>).
- « *Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between a place of origin and one or more destinations, or it is closer to the idea of simply wandering, where there is no real origin or destination.* » (*Mobile Lives Forum - Lexicon - Movement*, by Vincent Kaufmann : <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/movement-460>).

Abandoning the paradigm of speed:

The artistic work here is particularly representative of public policies' tendency to gradually abandon the paradigm of speed in favor of a quality travel time experience and to reduce the purely functional and rational dimension of travel, thus moving more towards a policy of mobility rather than one of movement (Lyons, 2005; Crozer and Joly, 2004), developing the possible implementation of a comprehensive approach to mobility (Paolini, 2011). Nonetheless, the most well-known examples of "best practices" in the domain of public transportation for the most part seem to have been conditioned by a certain number of elements (i.e. preexisting morphology, laws, system of reference or regional employment distribution), which are in no way are related to imaginaries. When such elements are lacking, are imaginaries enough to replace them? In any case, the latter have the advantage of not requiring physical materialization in space, at least not in the form proposed by Deller.

The myth of speed

- *The increase in speed in recent decades has greatly changed the characteristics of our mobilities and our territories (Kaufmann, 2011). The myth of speed seems to imply the idea that time we save likewise is accompanied by savings in money and freedom, and presents this idea as a truth. But these savings - if they exist - also conceal losses, particularly in terms of social segregation (Wiel, 2011).*

Suggestions for good mobile lives

Basically, setting out a series of philosophical quotes, even as a simple proposition, is also a way of suggesting guidelines for what could be “good mobile lives,” a concept that is very much present in the scientific literature (Dick, 2009; Freudendal-Pedersen, 2007), but even more so in the references and ideologies of public action (Gallez et al., 2010). Behind this, one surmises a kind of utopia that includes, among other things, this good mobile life, expressed here as the questioning of speed and functional travel— one that is reminiscent of the concept of altermobilities. This utopia shapes and models a social space that also includes the space of lifestyles, attitudes, opinions and values (Ohnmacht et al., 2009)

Altermobilities

Altermobilities encompass all of the travel behaviors which serve as an alternative to the exclusive use of the private car. They also claim the right to a slower pace, implying a unique link between geographical and social spaces and limited car use (Mobile Lives Forum - Lexicon - Altermobilities, by Emmanuel Ravalet:

<https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/altermobilities-449>).

What art suggests for the research: a call to imaginaries to soften the harsh reality of travel

With its unique nature, Deller’s project contributes to the effort to change the image associated with a particular mode of transportation— an image that is all the more important as it plays a significant role in individuals’ mobility choices (Flamm, 2004). Is it really possible to improve comfort and well-being in people’s daily commutes on public transportation through the application of such a proposal? Attempting to restore meaning to the travel experience itself can help awaken the attraction users seem to feel for urban spaces and mobility practices in semi-urban spaces (Kaufmann et al., 2011). Finally, the project’s humoristic dimension adds a component that hitherto was completely absent from scientific discourse, and whose application came with a risk that the operators willingly agreed to undertake, along with the artist. This type of risk-taking is common for artists but is still rare among experts, politicians and transportation operators, who agreed to accept it here only on a temporary and exceptional basis.

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