

Evan Legaspi

elegaspi@chapman.edu

21 November 2024

Mobility as Representation in *Tangerine*

Sean Baker's *Tangerine* (2015) is an important film regarding its representation of communities and for a bold take in filmmaking. The film offers a rough, grounded portrayal of Los Angeles as we follow Alexandra, Sin-Dee, and Razmik in a chaotic narrative that shows perspective on class and gender. One specific sequence in the film tackles social barriers in a fast-paced, high energy transportation montage that strongly highlights class levels and financial status. Through its use of sound, editing, cinematography, and mise-en-scene, this sequence in *Tangerine* shines light on how mobility is a reflection of class levels and the layers within them.

Before we dive in, I want to bring attention to Stuart Hall's "The Spectacle of the Other", where the concept of binary forms of representation is explained. He writes that people are represented through binary extremes in images, examples being good and bad or ugly and attractive. He then explains that "what is important is the fact that this image both shows an event (denotation) and carries a 'message' or meaning (connotation)" (229).

Let's now look into *Tangerine*: this sequence's denotation, or literal showcase, is our three characters transporting around Los Angeles in their own different ways. The sequence kicks off with Sin-Dee getting up from a bench, urgently rushing to the next heavy rail train. We move on to Razmik, as he drives two drunk guests in his cab who proceed to vomit all over the interior. Following this, Alexandra walks the streets of Los Angeles; the montage ends once Sin-Dee gets off the train, as most prominently signaled by the music coming to a stop. The connotation goes much further than that, attributed by the cinematic elements the filmmakers use

throughout. Starting off, the score, which was slowly amped up leading up to this, blasts loudly as soon as Sin-Dee gets up from the bench, intensifying the beginning of the sequence and engaging the audience quickly. She proceeds to hop over the ticket scanner, a quick way to comment and add a layer to her class status, as she does not pay for the transportation fare. The score cuts completely to force the audience to focus on the dialogue of Razmik's two guests in his car. This adds clarity to the fact that they are under the influence, letting the audience hear the slurred, rude comments toward Razmik. A form of power dynamics and class commentary can be seen when Razmik drives his drunk guests, as they dehumanize him and feel comfortable doing so, giving the audience a showcase of some type of higher class among the characters. There is no way for the audience to truly feel their position in society without the contrast of a higher kind of power, and the film portrays this through marginalization, this scene being one example. On top of that, silencing the score and fully immersing the audience through the vomiting sounds within the cab assists in creating a visceral reaction of disgust. The music begins again and lasts until the end of the sequence.

In addition to those impacts on the audience, the connotation is expanded on further through the film's cinematography. The film, being shot entirely on iPhone, feels down-to-earth and fully real due to the shot choices and camera movement. The shots are consistently at subject level, enhancing the groundedness and realistic feel of the film; within all three characters, the camera follows them as they move, with handheld shots helping add to the chaotic and frenetic feel of the entire sequence. Paige Macintosh highlights the cinematography well in her writing on the film: "Baker's iPhones facilitate the audience's seamless access to trans' perspectives. The size of the iPhone allowed the director to 'shoot clandestinely' around Los Angeles and cultivate an intimacy with and between performers" (217). This intimacy is clear and feels fully

transparent with the audience; it feels as if the filmmakers are hiding nothing. The cab sequence specifically feels like a personal insight of true events that occur in the city that feel common. Razmik knew how to handle the situation, and while he appeared angry, Karren Karagulian's performance strongly shows this anger without showing any stress. There is a calmness within his anger, showing a commonality within that experience as a driver in the city.

With that, let's move over to the mise-en-scene, which is key in analyzing the characters. In this case, Razmik's cab, tying into Macintosh's point, serves as a signifier for his daily work. This work is placed in a confined space, making him appear to be trapped in this type of work, and to go further, trapped in his financial state. His constant cycle of making money and spending it on sex work highlights Hall's points of binary extremes; he represents someone who is stuck between the limitations of the city and the opportunities he has. This is strengthened through Alexandra and Sin-Dee as well: their work also takes place in cars. For all three of them, the moment they step out of a car, they have no work and no way to make any money to provide for themselves. As the two of them walk through the city, the openness of that space combined with the camera movement and cutting create an effect that can be described as sporadic or irregular; the open space here and the confined space with Razmik is another showcase of binary representation.

That sporadic or irregular feeling also ties into our characters, as marginalized groups. The frantic style of filmmaking used here represents instability and constant movement, a theme shared within all three characters. The editing between these three scenes connect all of their lives together while still showing their class divides: Sin-Dee walks and takes the transit, then Razmik drives, then Alexandra walks. Putting it in this order ensures that Razmik is not in exactly a higher class than the two of them simply because he drives; this goes back to my

previous point of the layers within class that is shown within the film. Regardless of their forms of transportation, they are connected together through their overall livelihoods, and the editing here highlights that. This also connects to race, gender, and class tying together to create their respective levels of oppression.

Tangerine brings a bold, real portrayal on the city of Los Angeles by taking a look at lower-class work and living conditions, specifically that of sex work and cab driving. With a sequence as simple on paper as three people navigating the city, the filmmakers brilliantly incorporate some leveled yet aggressive camera work and editing with juxtaposed staging to critique marginalization and highlight lower-class groups through its representation of sex workers and immigrant laborers. There is no true signifier of the sequence concluding outside of the music. Events within the three characters continue on as they were seen, reflecting on the resilience of each of them.