

A Joyful trip on *Bus 143*

In classic literature, one of the defining qualities of a literary work is how the setting of the work contributes to its meaning. In the arena of modern film, this adage still holds true. The city of Los Angeles is one such setting which is used again and again in many different kinds of films, from the cult classic *Bladerunner* to the *Terminator* trilogy. The new upcoming film entitled *Bus 143* also makes use of Los Angeles, and uses it as a backdrop to tell the story of a one of its Latino residents, and how his life changed after his car broke down. *Bus 143* weaves together many realities of the city of Los Angeles, with an action packed love story which can be appreciated by many.

The film opens with a man sitting at the counter of a diner looking dejected. The waitress calls his order, revealing that his name is Jack Garcia. Suddenly, his phone rings and he looks up at the phone number. The caller ID says – Informant Dennis. He picks up and immediately leaves, walking west on 1st street. “The girl you wanted me to look into? I’ve found her – and she has a flight to New York at 7:25 pm tonight,” Dennis explains. “If you want to wait 45 minutes, I can give you a lift to LAX.” “No, that won’t be necessary, you’ve already been a great help. I’ll take the Metro myself.” This sequence, and others later in the film, is filmed using noir styled film conventions, but by the nature of Jack’s character, this contrasts with the classic Hollywood noir in that the protagonist is not a white detective, but a Latino everyman. This is meant to evoke an evolution of the city from the old white dominated and white majority location, to one which is multi-ethnic and diverse. Concluding this sequence, the camera pans up, past a clock that shows the time is 2:45, and then many characteristic sweeping shots of the city are shown. After a shot of the Hollywood sign, the camera turns back to Jack, who into a Metro Rail station in Boyle Heights, and the train’s destination header is Union Station.

On the Gold Line train, the camera settles on Jack himself, but because the train is so tightly packed, he seems eclipsed by the multitudes of other riders surrounding him. This portrays the reality that there is rarely much breathing room during rush hour rides in LA. The searing hot mid-day sun is shining through the window onto Jack's seat, and the air conditioner is busted. Of the other patrons seated on the bus, only a very small number are white; the majority of riders are Latino and African American. Jack rests for a minute, and when he closes his eyes he has a flashback to a time when he didn't have to take the Metro, a time only 8 months past. On the 10 freeway, a policeman pulled him over for quote "suspicious behavior," in order to search his vehicle for drugs. This issue of racial profiling is a real issue prevalent among Los Angeles' police force today. But before the policeman could go on to open the trunk, a speeding car smashed into the side of Jack's vehicle, causing a massive wreck. The policeman's reaction was shocked but unapologetic.

The flashback continues the next day where Jack takes his first bus trip. Because he did not have exact change, he missed the first bus he wanted to get on which caused him to be late to work. Already angry about his car, Jack was almost seething when he got on the next bus only to find out it was all but full. The camera stays on Jack for the duration of two stops, emphasizing his frustration, but then he finds a seat as people leave at the third stop. He takes a seat next to a beautiful blond woman in business attire named Sarah Miller. She instantly notices that Jack is new to taking public transportation and surprises him with her knowledge. Jack is surprised by Sarah's resourcefulness and asks her why a woman like her would take the bus in Los Angeles because she looks wealthy enough to own a car. She explains she is actually in the middle of doing field research for her PhD. She is studying urban planning at the University of California, Los Angeles, and her dissertation is about discretionary ridership and social imaginings of the

LA Metro system. She has gone out many times on the buses observing social behaviors and interviewing people about their attitudes toward the buses, and what she has learned has surprised her. There are a lot of discretionary riders and the trend is that as gas prices are increasing, there are even more and more people taking the bus instead of driving even when they have the means to. It is a testament to how much the bus system has improved in recent years. The whole time, Jack is amazed by both her knowledge and her beauty. Just as she is about to leave, Jack asks for her number, and she replies “Oh, you’ll be able to reach me at 143,” and gets off. It takes him a minute to realize she is referring to a bus line which is nearby, but he is very happy when he realizes this. The flashback ends as the Gold Line stops at Union Station, and Jack walks out into the light.

Exiting Union Station, Jack quickly goes to his home, which is adjacent to the LA Plaza, and grabs a jacket and cash. The camera work of the plaza’s introduction is done with lots of shots of the environment and vehicles, creating an impersonal depiction of the public space. However, the next flashback is told with shots that are from Jack’s own point of view. Jack remembers when he was a small child and would always look up to (both literally and figuratively) his grandfather, and he remembers many stories about working hard at the orange groves and the worker camps where his grandfather lived. Having come to the US through the Bracero program, Jack’s grandfather greatly encouraged him to become a teacher, and through education, advance in life. This flashback covers most of Jack’s life from when he was a child to Jack now. As Jack grows older, the depiction of the city changes; during Jack’s childhood there was an excess of smog, ridiculous amounts of graffiti, very unclean, and very few whites around. However, the plaza shown at the end of the flashback is contemporary, a lively center across from Union Station with lots of residents and even some multi-national tourists visiting the area.

Some of the graffiti seems to have been cleaned up as well, but the constant sound of the nearby freeways remains.

The sun is starts to set; the time is now 4:55 pm. When viewed through Jack's eyes, there is a certain quaint beauty about the sunset over the plaza, but this effect is not reflected when the camera's POV is outside of Jack. The dualistic nature of the sunset makes it seem that, when viewed from the outsider's perspective, that the plaza is at the end of its life and will fade away into obscurity. From Jack's perspective, the sunset does not represent this, but instead is portrayed romantically. This subtle effect is done to convey the difference between the perceptions of LA from the insiders versus the outsiders. As the sun finishes setting, Jack reaches a bus bench and rests. A white pickup truck passing by the bus triggers Jack to descend into another flashback. This time, Jack exits a similar white truck, and thanks his friend for giving him a ride to his workplace, Compton High School. Making his way through a flood of students, Jack approaches the principal's office. There is a lot of graffiti on the way there with emphasis on two prominent gang logos. Also the shot shows that Latino students and the Black students are occupying different areas of the hall, speaking to the real divide that exists between the two ethnic groups in Compton. The principal welcomes Jack and thanks him for being a long term substitute, "at a school like this one." Jack insists that he has been at many schools, some worse, some better than this, and he will be fine.

Later that school day during math, Jack is doing his best to teach to the students in the front rows who are actually paying attention, when he notices a student in the back acting suspiciously on edge. Jack dismisses his initial concerns, realizing that he is stereotyping his students, and continues the lesson. Jack then notices that one of the African American students, named Derrick, is struggling with his lecture, and offers to slow down the pace a little bit.

However, some of the other learners, including all three white students in the class, complain instead that he is already teaching at a sluggish pace. The three white children represent the Compton reality of white flight; from their dress and the way they hold themselves it is clear that they are as bad as or worse off than some of the other minorities in the class. As whites, they would not live in the inner city if they came from families of means. The cinematography of this scene puts the Derrick next to the barred window, and in the shadow of the sun's light, he looks like he is in a cage. This is symbolic of how hard it is for a student to learn anything in an inner city school. Jack feels sorry for him, but he must attend to the whole class, or at least the portion that wants to learn, and continues as he did before.

At the end of the school day, Jack goes to the bus stop to catch his bus home, and he sees Derrick waiting for a bus there as well. Jack apologizes and offers to give him extra help with the material, and suddenly Derrick starts to snifle. None of his other teachers had ever paid any attention to him or done anything nice for him since elementary school, because he just looked like trouble. Jack insists that it won't be any trouble. As Derrick gets on the bus, out of the corner of the film screen is the sharp glint of a handgun. The suspicious student from class walks out in the middle of the road and starts firing in a fit of rage. With the hood of his jacket down the gang tattoo on the side of his neck is clearly visible. Jack, in the nick of time, jumps towards Derrick to block him from the shooter. As Derrick's bus speeds away, Jack is left vulnerable. Just before he gets shot however, another gunshot is heard, and a full on gang incident occurs. Jack flees during the commotion. He manages to get three blocks away from the school before the police drive by him and shut off the entire traffic artery, blocking the bus Jack needed to take home. Again cursing his bad luck, Jack sits at a faraway bus stop, relaxing happily that both he and Derrick got away safely. Then a bus pulls up in front of Jack, and the flashback ends with him

getting onto the bus at the same stop in the present.

The next flashback is triggered as the bus drives by a Starbucks on Broadway Street. Jack remembers another time he met Sarah, when she invited him for coffee in the Valley. Sarah's home is in a gated community, and because he did not have a car, Jack had difficulty getting up the steep hill to the community entrance. The videography of Jack climbing up the hill to reach the gate makes the hill look even steeper than it actually is, and the long uninterrupted shot makes the climb take a long time. This is done to convey the difficulty it is for a low income minority to take part in upper class society. When he made it to the Starbucks, it was already packed with people who were there for some kind of meeting. Sitting down over in a quieter corner is Sarah, who is dressed more fancily than he has ever seen her on the buses. When he asks her what the meeting is about, she says that it was just a bunch of old stooges who wanted the valley to secede from the city. Over coffee, Sarah tells Jack about how her parents want her to marry Joe, a rich businessman, and she doesn't exactly complain about it, but there are clear hints that he does not love him. Their conversation shifts to something mundane, and then the camera shifts its focus from Jack and Sarah in the foreground, to the frame's background. In the frame are many agitated homeowners holding up angry signs saying things like "San Fernando is not an Angel!" and "Tax yourselves, help yourselves!" A tall handsome man introduces himself as George Schmitt, and begins a speech where he uses the language of the South's secession from the North. The roused homeowners cheer and clap in the background as Jack and Sarah enjoy themselves. Sarah excuses herself to use the restroom, and Jack listens to some of the speech, where they key points about valley secession are brought up. After the meeting ends, the speaker makes his way over to their table to greet Sarah. George introduces himself to Jack, and says that he is surprised to meet a Latino home-owner at this meeting. Jack tries to explain that

he doesn't actually live around there, but Sarah nudges him to play along. When George asks Jack why he is for secession, he cannot think of a good answer, but Sarah answers for him that Jack wants higher pay as a teacher and if the San Fernando Valley broke off, their teachers would be paid more. Schmitt is impressed, and says "No wonder you can afford to live around here, you've got the right attitude!" The implication is that he has a good attitude for a Latino man. Jack excuses himself for the restroom, and as he opens the door to the restroom, the door of the real bus opens as well and Jack runs out.

During the final flashback of the movie, Jack remembers the amazing date he had with Sarah around the plaza, but at the end Sarah looked sad as she said goodbye. Jack has been unable to reach her since, and this is why he is now in such a rush to find her. Through a thorough noir-inspired investigation, he found out that Sarah was engaged to a famous plastic surgeon named Jonathan Anderson. The marriage was arranged by Sarah's parents. Because of his connections to wealthy politicians and movie stars, Jonathan is a snobby jerk, and the information Jack has implies that he and does not care about Sarah. The flashback ends with the opening scene of the movie, re-iterating that Jack is nearly out of time to catch Sarah before she flies away.

This last half hour of the film is filled with more action sequences where Jack is in the last stretch of buses to reach LAX. The tension is built up by intercut sequences of Sarah's car stuck in traffic. It seems that Jack will be able to make it before Sarah does, but suddenly Jack's bus breaks down. With his car gone, and the bus system also failing, it seems impossible for Jack to get to LAX. Determined, Jack continues, sprinting at breakneck pace in the direction of the airport and as he runs, Derrick passes by him on a bicycle. With the help of Derrick's bike, Jack again continues pursuit, demonstrating that it is possible to get around Los Angeles

successfully without a car. He calls out and stops Sarah right before she enters the terminal itself, confessing his love for her! Seeing him again for the first time in two months, she also breaks down and starts crying and apologizing. They end up together happily ever after.

Bus 143 calls to attention many issues and realities regarding Los Angeles life, but it passes no judgments nor makes any attempts to resolve them. The final conclusion, where Jack wins Sarah's heart and leaves with her, is both fanciful and real, as interracial marriage is no longer uncommon. All in all, Bus 143 is a happy "guy gets the girl" story, one of Los Angeles, told not from behind the wheel of a car, but from the buses and rail lines that make up the heart of the city.