

Traffic

Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift
Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars,
Beading thy path—condense eternity:
And we have seen night lifted in thine arms.

Hart Crane, "To Brooklyn Bridge," 1930

Between Brooklyn and Manhattan, still jammed on the
upper level Manhattan Bridge to Manhattan. Avoid the
Brooklyn Bridge in each direction. That's still loaded up.

Kenneth Goldsmith, *Traffic*, 2006

The Brooklyn Bridge, whose elegant "curveship" Hart Crane and others celebrated as the emblem of Modernist engineering, is now just one of the many clogged arteries—bridges and tunnels-- connecting the island of Manhattan to the surrounding land masses. Those headlights, once seen from the city's skyscrapers as constituting a "swift unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars," have become the glare of the giant gridlock of the New York nightscape. Indeed, today traffic has become little more than an irritant—a fact of everyday life that we accept with shrug and a sigh as we navigate our way through it, our ears tuned to those radio "sigalerts" that tell us which freeways to avoid and which tunnel is blocked by an overturned vehicle. Kenneth Goldsmith's *Traffic*, cited above, is a transcription of precisely such traffic reports, taken at ten-minute intervals over a twenty-four hour period at the beginning of a major holiday weekend in New York.

Traffic, to put it most directly, is the enemy of speed—the speed that seemed so promising when F. T. Marinetti wrote his first Futurist Manifesto exactly a hundred years ago. “We affirm,” Marinetti famously declared, “that the world’s magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath—a roaring car that seems to ride on grapeshot is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*.” And even when—or especially when-- the poet’s own automobile overturns in a ditch, leaving him and his friends “smeared with good factory muck--plastered with metallic waste, with senseless sweat, with celestial soot,” Marinetti keeps the faith. In a 1916 manifesto called “The New Ethical Religion of Speed,” he announces that “Speed at last presents mankind with one of the characteristics of divinity—the *straight line*.” No more zig-zags or arabesques of mountain and river transport, with their infuriating slowness. Rather, “Places inhabited by the divine are trains with restaurant cars for dining at high speed; railway stations, especially those in the American West, where trains speed along at 140 kilometers per hour. . . Bridges and tunnels.” Indeed, “gasoline is divine. So is religious ecstasy inspired by one hundred horsepower. And the joy of moving from third to fourth gear. The joy of pressing down on the accelerator.”¹

Such wild enthusiasm about the power of motorized traffic must be understood against the backdrop of the nineteenth century. When, in *War and Peace*, Count Rostov’s family, fleeing Napoleon’s army, makes its exodus from Moscow, the Count’s caravan of horse-drawn vehicles, some of them transporting the wounded, takes a full day to cover thirteen miles! Traffic along the muddy and hole-filled roads of the vast Russian countryside was undoubtedly horrendous. No wonder the great avant-garde poet Velimir Khlebnikov, who otherwise had little use for the bombastic and war-mongering Marinetti, shared the Italian Futurist’s belief in the beauty of

speed and the potential of traffic produced by the new technology. In "Ourselves and Our Buildings" (1920), Khlebnikov spells out his Utopian vision for a city that has removed itself from the street level to the "beautiful young rooftops" of skyscrapers: "The city crowds will no longer move about on foot or on their four-legged colleagues; they will have learned to fly above the city, raining their glances upon the place below." And how will they fly about? Each person, Khlebnikov posits, will have "a container of molded glass, a mobile dwelling module supplied with a door, with attachment couplings, mounted on wheels." The glass module will be set on a train or steamship and inside, "without ever leaving it, its inhabitant would travel to his destination." Such traffic would pose no problem for "Every city in the land, wherever a proprietor may decide to move in his glass cubicle, [is] required to offer a location in one of these framework-building for the mobile dwelling-module (the glass hut). And with a whine of chains the traveler in his glass cocoon is hoisted aloft." (351). Khlebnikov now provides a narrative of the new urban mobility:

For the sake of this innovation, the form and dimensions of all dwelling units were identical throughout the entire country. The number and row of the proprietor's unit was marked on the glass surface. He himself was able to sit quietly reading as they moved him into place. And in this way we created proprietors: (1) not on the basis of land-ownership, but only on the right to a space in a framework-building; (2) not in any one particular city, but generally in any city in the country that takes part in this union for citizen exchange. And all this in order to serve the needs of a mobile population.

Whole cities consisted of such frameworks, products of the joint labor of glassmakers and Ural steelworkers. Every city had such a half-occupied iron framework waiting for glass occupants, like a skeleton without muscles. . . .²

In their wildest dreams, neither the Russian nor the Italian Futurists imagined that a time would come when the "right to a space," not just in a "framework building" that one's glass module might occupy indefinitely, but

anywhere at all would be a special privilege. Today, in New York and Paris, Tokyo and Beijing, even those who own expensive condos often pay separate fees just for a guaranteed parking space in a neighboring parking facility. At California campuses, especially UCLA, the right to a parking space in a multi-level garage is such a privilege that when professors retire, they are rewarded with a lifetime parking decal, renewable every year! I have heard professors say they value these parking permits more than their pensions. And there was the Hollywood film, some years back, in which the UCLA freshman, on the first day of classes, returns home by mid-morning, announcing to her mother that she is not going to attend college after all. When the dismayed mother asks why, the girl answers, "I couldn't find a place to park."

In the early decades of the twentieth century, such dilemmas were inconceivable. There were as yet no traffic regulations: no road signs, speed limits, turning signals, no driver's permits, traffic courts, or even (before 1923), traffic lights. Marinetti—like Gertrude Stein in her beloved Ford a few years later-- could just get on the road and GO. No wonder, the automobile was regarded as a magic carpet. As late as 1951 when Jack Kerouac was writing *On the Road* (1957), the automobile speeding down the highway, especially in the Western U.S., spelled freedom, promise, possibility. So potent was this myth that the British architectural critic Reyner Banham, examining the "autopia" of the late sixties in his famed *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971), could declare that "the wide-swinging curved ramps of the intersection of the Santa Monica and the San Diego freeways [figure 1], which immediately persuaded me that the Los Angeles freeway system is indeed one of the greater works of Man, must be among the younger monuments of the system."³

The freeway system, as Banham assesses it, can be understood as "a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life" (195). True, "traffic jams can

pile up miles long in rush-hours or even on sunny Sunday afternoons, but these jams are rarely stationary for as long as European expectations would suggest. . . . for most of the time traffic rolls comfortably and driving conditions are not unpleasant" (197). In the illustrations for his book [see figure 2], as in his witty and delightful 1973 BBC documentary (available on Ubuweb or You-Tube),⁴ this is indeed the case: 1970 freeway traffic still flowed, and as in the case of those early auto-aficionados from Marinetti to Kerouac, Banham did not foresee a time when it would be otherwise.

But otherwise it is. In the past few years, the #10 (Santa Monica) to take just the freeway I know best since I drive it twice a week between my home in Pacific Palisades to the University of Southern California, where Banham was a visiting professor, has become, at least between 3-8 PM, a giant parking lot. In part, population density is to blame, but demographic shifts have also played a major role. In the late 1990s, a number of film studios moved to Santa Monica, their thousands of employees often living at the other end of the city since the West Side has become increasingly expensive. At the Lincoln Boulevard and Cloverfield onramps of the #10, the traffic is backed up for miles, and, for the West Sider, it is no longer possible to drive to a concert or theatre performance at the Music Center downtown at the appropriate hour, so that determined concert goers must resort to city streets, using various alternatives to beat the traffic. Indeed, contrary to Banham's account of the ubiquity—and pleasure-- of freeway traffic, many Angelenos barely use the freeways at all, preferring to work, shop, and attend cultural events within their own communities in what remains a fairly decentralized city.

But even in 1970, Reyner Banham's optimistic take on LA was by no means ubiquitous: in his review of *Four Ecologies* for the *New York Review of Books*, Francis Carney reminded readers that the more usual view was of LA as "Reaganland, the Ur-city of the plastic culture, of Kustom-Kars and movie

stars . . . the Dream Factory, fantasy land, Watts and the *barrio*, glass and stucco-built, neon-lit, chrome-plated, formica-topped”—indeed “the *Schlockhaus* of the Western world, where the pursuit of pleasure has become a way of life, auto-ridden, freeway-scarred, smog-choked Los Angeles, fortress city on the desert from whence each weekend the denizens spill out in their great belching machines to pollute the countryside.”⁵ Ironically, the image of the family car as “great belching machine,” spilling out of the city to pollute the surrounding countryside, is less apropos for Los Angeles, where the open country is nowhere in sight, than for New York or Paris. It is the latter that gave Jean-Luc Godard his venue for what was probably the most horrific critique of traffic of the period--namely, his 1967 film *Week-End*.

This famous *nouvelle vague* film follows a bourgeois Parisian couple as they leave for a weekend trip across the French countryside to collect (by murder, if need be) what they consider to be their rightful inheritance from the wife’s parents. After a breakdown on the road, the couple gets involved in scenes of violence, killing, and even cannibalism: the film is designed to present traffic as the emblem of the venal consumerism of the Capitalist class, itself a form of brutality, inhumanity, and death. Thus the film’s most famous scene is an eight-minute tracking shot of a traffic jam on the country road outside Paris [figure 3]. It is a shot almost unbearable to watch: bombarded by a sound track of incessant honking of horns, we see cars, trailers, and trucks wiggling through the traffic, stuck in the roadside ditches, overturned, going backwards, crashing into one another. Bleeding corpses line the roadside even as passengers in some of the stalled vehicles play cards or car-to-car volleyball, embrace, sunbathe, have picnics, and flag down each others cars. Only at the very end of this seemingly interminable sequence, does the couple’s black convertible pass the police barrier and

make a right turn into the “open” countryside, the sound of screeching horns giving way to pop music. And of course, their mobility doesn’t last long.

Week-End takes a romantic view toward traffic as embodiment of the evils of consumerism in a heartless society. Technology is the enemy of the human spirit; the automobile pollutes the natural world. Godard’s is the antithesis of the Marinetti dream in which “Combustion engines and rubber tires are divine. Gasoline is divine.” But the spirit of 1968 with its Maoism and taste for violence has not lasted: in the new century, Godard’s indictment of French consumer culture is as anachronistic as Marinetti’s celebration of his black shark of a motor car overturned in a ditch. Indeed, in our own day, the weekend traffic crunch is nothing if not normative. And here Goldsmith’s *Traffic* (2007) is apposite.

Goldsmith’s narrative covers twenty-four hours, from midnight to midnight, of radio traffic reports as given at ten-minute intervals on the first day of a major holiday weekend. The scene is the greater New York area, although the cover image [see figures 4-5] looks more like Paris (or another European city), given the appearance of the taxis and busses. Not a word of this cited text, in any case, is Goldsmith’s own; his is the art of transcription rather than invention, and he calls his mode “uncreative writing.” But of course framing and selection, in such a text, is all: in observing the Aristotelian unities of time, place and action, Goldsmith has produced a powerful image of contemporary life in all its boredom, ritual, nervousness, and fear. Unlike *Week End*, Goldsmith’s book casts no blame, finds no first cause, and attributes no venality to anyone. Rather, *traffic* is that which IS—messy, unbearable, infuriating, debilitating, but also challenging, invigorating, and unpredictable. Traffic it is a linguistic challenge: the anonymous Panasonic Jam Cam renders the scene graphically in phrases like “what a doozy,” “snail’s pace,” “absolutely crawling,” “stacked up,” “the makings of a rough ride.”⁶

Traffic is the second volume of a trilogy, whose first volume (2006) was called *Weather* and transcribed a year's worth of daily radio weather reports. What makes *Weather* so strange is that, despite their endless detail, weather reports are notoriously inaccurate. It does not always snow when those WINS reports say it will and vice-versa. Similarly, in *Traffic* (and in volume 3, *Sports* as well), all the facts at one's disposal can't quite tell us what to expect. Who can predict when an accident will block the road, when a bridge will clear or clog, or whether there will be any let-up on the Long Island Expressway.

All the same, there are winners and losers. Tunnels (the Holland and Lincoln to New Jersey, the Queens, Midtown, and Battery to Long Island) and bridges (the George Washington, the Verrazano, the Tappan Zee, and Brooklyn) are the greatest gamble, for once the driver has opted for them, there is no turning back and no alternative. Elevated highways like the Major Deegan, running through the East Bronx, are more user-friendly; clogged, they might just reopen. Here is the entry for 11.11 A.M.:

Whoa! What a backup lining up to the tolls here at the Holland and Lincoln Tunnels. We now have probably close to a twenty minute waiting lining up for the tolls at the Holland Tunnel from all approaches, and twenty-five to thirty minutes coming down into the Lincoln Tunnel. Still pretty good along the GW Bridge. And we had an accident and construction on the Tappan Zee Bridge in Westchester, but not a bad looking ride overall. The Brooklyn Bridge has gotten very slow coming back into Manhattan and the delay coming into the Midtown Tunnel has ballooned. There's gotta be over a thirty-minute backup, it goes back up to before the BQE [Bronx-Queens Expressway]. As I look in live here on the Panasonic Jam Cam, you do have delays along the Whitestone and Triboro Bridge too. And if you're in Manhattan coming downtown, it has improved a bit on the West Side Highway and the FDR Drive, especially the FDR Drive in the 90s. But what has gotten worse is Broadway. Don't get involved in Broadway at all.

This radio bulletin, as Goldsmith transcribes it, makes for theater of the absurd. There is an accident on the Tappan Zee Bridge, yet the report

maintains that the bridge crossing is “not a bad looking ride overall.” The Whitestone and Triboro Bridges, connecting the Bronx and Queens to Manhattan, are jammed, but they feed into the FDR Drive which is OK whereas Broadway is inexplicably jammed. Where is everyone going? How and why? Given the common wisdom about holiday traffic jams, why are so many people traveling in their cars to begin with? Isn’t the holiday crush perfectly predictable?

For Goldsmith, traffic, no longer either glamorous or deplorable, is the epitome of the human condition, *the way it is*. The Jam Cam reports suggest no solution, no corrective: they merely offer practical alternatives for specific problems. Here’s a tip: take the Holland Tunnel rather than the George Washington Bridge. Given our existential situation--too much available money, too many cars, too many places to go, even on weekends, and even through bumper-to-bumper traffic—there is little that can be done to change things. But problems also produce solutions: one must be *inventive* and find *another road—an alternative*. So driving becomes a mental challenge—how to get there—rather an actual move toward one’s destination. Getting there, ironically, really does become half the fun!

Given this necessary deviousness, what has happened to Marinetti’s straight line? To the beauty of speed on this now snail’s-paced journey? Why hasn’t everyone left the metropolitan area long ago and moved to the country? Or to the Midwest where the roads are often excellent—and empty? Goldsmith’s *Traffic* is by no means the “objective” transcription of Jam Cam news it purports to be. For as the “story” continues, there is increasing complicity between listener (and reader) and newscaster (and author). First, there is the shared vocabulary. We are expected to know all these names—Queensboro, Major Deegan, Industry City. The complicity of New Yorkers creates a curious sense of community. The traffic bulletins practice a very particular language game—a game only insiders fully

understand. As an ex-New Yorker, I know that the LIE is the Long Island Expressway but my husband, a New Orleanian, probably does not, and a visitor from Japan would have no idea. Traffic is thus conceived as a Wittgensteinian language game: only those who know the rules can play.

Goldsmith's seemingly neutral transcription of traffic reports is punctuated by the refrain "Remember, alternate side of the street parking is suspended today and for the duration of the weekend" (3:31). What a bonus! What a reward for those who stay in Manhattan over the holiday weekend! But caveat auditor/lector: it won't last. The book's last sentence, "Remember, alternate side of the street parking rules are in effect for tomorrow" (12:01), reminds us that the holiday is about to end. Such slight shifts in the circulation system absorb our collective attention and teach us to discriminate. Marinetti's beauty of speed, Hart Crane's unfractioned idiom of traffic lights, Jack Kerouac's pleasures of the open road and Godard's attribution of sinister meanings to the road trip—all these have given way to the sense of *traffic* as everyday life. A recent report in the *Los Angeles Times* described the manifold activities drivers and passengers engage in while stuck in traffic—everything from polishing one's toe nails and eating a pizza to listening to foreign language CDs, all the while talking on one's cell phone. Never a dull moment!

At 8:01 in *Traffic*, Goldsmith's Jam Cam reports, "Well, hopefully there will soon be an end to the traffic nightmare caused by this holiday weekend getaway, but it's not over yet." Of course it can never be over. But we opt for the getaway just the same. Maybe this time things will be different.

Marjorie Perloff

Notes

¹F. T. Marinetti, *Critical Writings*, ed. Günter Berghaus, trans. Doug Thompson (New York: Farrar Straus, 2006), 255-56.

² Velimir Khlebnikov, "Ourselves and Our Buildings," in *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, ed. Charlotte Douglas, trans. Paul Schmidt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 350-51.

³Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 70-71.

⁴*Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles*, BBC documentary, Ubuweb <http://www.ubu.com/>; <video.google.com/videoplay?docid>

⁵ Francis Carney, "Schlockology," *New York Review of Books*, 1 June 1972.

⁶ On a witty assessment of metaphor in *Traffic*, see D. A. Huppertz, "Kenneth Goldsmith: the New York Trilogy," *Critical Cities*, <http://djhuppertz.blogspot.com/>.

Figures

1. Reyner Banham, "Intersection of Santa Monica and San Diego freeways," figure 33a, p. 71, *Los Angeles*.

2. Reyner Banham, "Freeway Signs" (San Diego Freeway looking South), figure 112, p. 201, *Los Angeles*.

3. Jean-Luc Godard, *Week End 1967*, film still <http://hollywood--elsewhere.com>

4. Cover of Kenneth Goldsmith, *Traffic*. Location not disclosed.

5. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Traffic*, larger image that is the source of 4.
Courtesy, Kenneth Goldsmith.