



Article

Muriel Rukeyser’s “Campaign” and the Spectacular Documentary Poetics of the Whistle Stop Tour

Michael Anthony Smith

The Fine Foundation, Pittsburgh, PA 15222, USA; michaelsmith.aa@gmail.com

Abstract: This article examines how documentary poetics—particularly as employed by Muriel Rukeyser—use a montage of images to form a visual landscape. This visual landscape is wielded effectively by politicians during the Whistle Stop Tour electioneering. In Rukeyser’s “Campaign”, one section in her long-form poetic biography of Wendell Willkie, entitled *One Life*, she describes the journey of the 1940 Republican presidential candidate as he campaigns from the observation car of a train. The visual landscape created by the Whistle Stop Tour and described through documentary poetics contains Willkie, his audience, and the train itself. It is a unified spectacle, one that contains the rider, the reader, and the onlooker. Rukeyser’s documentary poetry and sensory-rich verse delimit the observation car as the mechanism through which this spectacle forms. The documentary poetics genre is one aptly suited for the description of the landscape through this railcar—a high velocity railspace that relays information by montage, which is to say, through a filmic collage of information assembled into a readable layout of the perceived world.

Keywords: Rukeyser; railroad; Willkie; documentary poetry; montage; geocriticism; whistle stop tour



Citation: Smith, Michael Anthony. 2022. Muriel Rukeyser’s “Campaign” and the Spectacular Documentary Poetics of the Whistle Stop Tour. *Humanities* 11: 157. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h11060157>

Received: 30 September 2022

Accepted: 2 December 2022

Published: 9 December 2022

Publisher’s Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

In Muriel Rukeyser’s “Campaign”, a poem within *One Life*, her biography of the 1940 presidential candidate Wendell Willkie, Rukeyser pieces together a montage of imagery (visual and polysensorial) to describe the Whistle Stop Tour as an omni-objectifying spectacle created by the combination of Willkie, the observation car, and the audience.¹ This paper uses Bertrand Westphal’s (2011) method of conducting geocriticism to read this long-form documentary poetry of Whistle Stop Tour campaigning as a unique method of creating spectacle. Through Rukeyser, the observation car becomes a railspace that frames the rider, reader, and onlooker as always caught within spectacle, either as audience or actor. The interplay of senses that is characteristic of Rukeyser’s documentary poetry is the perfect means through which one can investigate the railspace through the geocritical tenet of polysensoriality, which argues that space can only be understood by engaging all the senses (Tally 2012, p. 142).

The term “railspace” intentionally alludes to a comparison between space and place by Yi-Fu Tuan in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Tuan hypothesizes that “If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place” (Tuan 2001, p. 6). Space is a concept and place is the manifestation of the concept, and a known space that humans endow with particular value becomes a place (Tuan 2001, p. 6). This idea of a space that sits between space and place finds purchase in Edward Soja’s “thirdspace”, which mediates between the real and imaginary (Soja 1996, p. 57). For my purposes, “railspace” falls within Soja’s categorization. What I call “railspace” is the multivalent collection of spaces and places that comprise the American railroad as both imagined and manifest, from the individual railcars that comprise its trains to its network of tracks and stations that develop through the right-of-way legally granted by the federal government.

As a genre, documentary poetry—especially as undertaken by Muriel Rukeyser—shares a commonality with print advertising in its materialism; the form “find[s] its feet outside . . . art galleries and instead locate[s] itself . . . on factory floors, in union halls, at political rallies” (Nowak 2010). Documentary poetics uniquely situate the poem in created space, and they in turn interrogate that same space to discover how it has been shaped and by whom. The form is collage-based, with poets assembling first-person accounts, interviews, newspaper clippings, to document notable, usually politically charged, events. With “The Book of the Dead”, which takes up the Hawk’s Next Tunnel disaster in West Virginia, Rukeyser popularized the form along with William Carlos Williams’ Paterson, though the term “documentary poetry” was developed only later in discussions in the mid-1990s about Rukeyser’s work (Magi 2014, p. 249). Contemporary practitioners like Mark Nowak, Phil Metres, and C.D. Wright have deepened the form’s concentration on materiality and “representation as a non-neutral”—that is to say, political—“practice” (Magi 2014, p. 248). The genre’s immersion in material culture helps to underscore the railcar’s celebrated ability to lay the landscape bare to the gaze of the passenger and to call attention to the power of the gaze to dictate representation and reality.² Simultaneously, through its polysensorial imagery, the reconstructed railspace of the observation car takes a dual form—as a space that both provides the opportunity for passengers to witness a spectacular panoramic landscape and situates itself as a spectacle in its own right.³

By concentrating on polysensorial close readings of Rukeyser’s poem, we can more clearly see the correlation between surveillance and spectacle that occurs while riding within its confines and stumping on its platform. This correlation leads to the conclusion that the observation car is a railspace that produces spectacle by alternatively objectifying the rider, audience, and spectacle. That is to say, as the observation car opens space for the production of a spectacle, it simultaneously, as a by-product, creates the opportunity for secrecy, obscurity, and concealment. Debord argues that this is not an opportunity but rather a necessary “unity of misery” that hides underneath the spectacle (Debord 1977, thesis 63). The “misery” felt by those surrounding the spectacle is commented upon by Muriel Rukeyser. This misery creates the opportunity for the spectacle (and/or its producers) to see its audience in full, without semblance. In effect, Rukeyser describes the observation car as a machine that produces spectacle, while the observation car itself simultaneously informs American culture by providing it with a malleable trope and machine of spectacle to be deployed politically.

2. The Observation Car and the Whistle Stop Tour

Passengers ride in the observation car in order to observe. As such, the foremost purpose for the observation car/platform is to provide a railspace from which to best observe the panoramic landscape. Across its multiform layouts, several characteristics unite this railspace, all of which indicate how sight is the dominant sense of the space. Observation cars typically have fewer seats, which are more comfortable and often intentionally left unsold so as to give as many passengers as possible the opportunity to enjoy the railcar. These seats are either angled or face directly outward toward the windows. The windows are larger, and in the case of the dome cars described below, expand upwards as part of the ceiling. Most observation cars are located at the rear of the train and feature an open-air platform from which to view the receding landscape, thus affording a panoramic view of more than 270 degrees out from the rear and sides of the train (White 1985, pp. 367–71; Stilgoe 1985, p. 257).⁴ As these spatial layouts and arrangements encourage riders to look out to the landscape, they aggregate attention and draw a crowd—either as readers or an in-person audience—to the railcar. This effect exists throughout the re-construction of the observation car in the railspace that Rukeyser discursively constructs in “Campaign”.

The observation car has always been a space where it is possible to enjoy the view of the landscape, but always operating in the background is the simultaneous gaze back from the landscape, its inhabitants from potential passengers. American politicians have been quick to leverage the attention generated by standing on an open-air platform, developing

the Whistle Stop Tour as a novel way to engage with the public and to create a spectacle.⁵ Rukeyser describes these political messages through documentary poetics and discursively defines the observation car as a railspace that produces spectacle.

Political theorists have long held the Whistle Stop Tour as an early supplement to the particularly American form of political spectacle but do not often regard it as an event that hints at anything new or novel. In a text oft cited by his successors, Murray Edelman treats the political spectacle as mainly a linguistic construct or a “social phenomenon” in which politics themselves are the spectacle beholden by the voting public (Edelman 2010, pp. 95, 120). Television producer Sig Mickelson (1989) does acknowledge the stage-like spectacle of the Whistle Stop Tour, but he concludes that “the paid political speech from the auditorium was the main event. We were involved in a sideshow” (Edelman 2010, p. 99). Phil Harris situates the Whistle Stop Tour within the “pre-modern” column of an expansive table that attempts to follow “Political Campaign Evolution” (Harris 2001, p. 48). Harris aligns this chart with the 1996 study of Politics, Media, and Modern Democracy by Swanson and Mancini to argue that “modernisation”—that is, the move to daily press conferences and televised broadcasts—“causes changes from direct involvement in election campaigns to spectatorship”, which ultimately “makes it easier for voters to relate to media-centered campaigns more as spectacle than political action” (Harris 2001, pp. 47–48). In his rush to discuss the implications of what he defines as “modern”, Harris (and Swanson and Mancini) looks beyond the Whistle Stop Tour as the genesis of the spectacle.⁶ By the era of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the Whistle Stop Tour “had been honed into a science of safety, comfort, efficiency and security”, yet still “Their circus atmosphere of bands and bunting, rousing speeches and declarations of principles stirred the imagination and presented the perfect way to bring the candidate or the president together with the people” (Edelman 2010, p. 131).⁷ Roosevelt increased the drama of the Whistle Stop Tour speech when he intentionally timed his speeches to end just as the train would be pulling out of the station (Edelman 2010, p. 131). Furthermore, by keeping to a rigorous schedule, Roosevelt further aligned the Tour with a staged performance that could only be seen at specific times, thus ensuring a large, captive audience at each stop.⁸ Adding to the performance were the names of these presidential railcars—the Ferdinand Magellan, Marco Polo, Henry Stanley, David Livingstone, Robert Peary, Roald Amundsen, and the Pioneer (Withers 1996, p. 384). The explorer/pioneer theme underscores the attempt to associate these candidates with something new, untraveled, as-yet unseen. Up through the 1940s and into the early 1950s, the observation platform still worked to attract large audiences thanks in part to these associations.

Before its recession from the American consciousness, Wendell Willkie rode the Pioneer on a Whistle Stop Tour in an ultimately failed bid to unseat the then-two-term President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a trip that would be documented by Muriel Rukeyser in “Campaign.” Willkie, a lawyer and corporate executive who gained national prominence as a tough negotiator with the Tennessee Valley Authority and for his congressional testimony and role as an interlocutor who spoke as a relatable businessman. Through his early outspoken belief that the United States should actively support Great Britain and the allied powers at the start of World War II, Willkie received a boost to his eventual nomination as the Republican nominee for the presidency (a Party, it should be noted, into which Willkie converted after Franklin Delano Roosevelt made it known he would seek a third term as president on the Democratic ticket).

A polysensorial examination of this Whistle Stop Tour—led by the primacy of the visual image—can help piece together what the aforementioned political scientists and historians could not recreate: the observation car’s transition from window to the world to spectacle on stage. Rukeyser’s poem goes further, complicating the concept of spectacle by invoking other stratigraphic potentialities of the railcar to blur the line that demarcates the spectacle from the spectator. What follows from this point is a de/reterritorialized railspace where actor and audience conflate, and the spectacle is revealed as an all-encompassing activity. In other words, where a rider would normally be able to mark the railcar as their

territory, Rukeyser's poem—through what Gander calls “semiotic ambiguity” (Gander 2013, p. 103)—de-territorializes the railspace and helps shake it free from the grasp of ownership claimed by the rider. The space then becomes discursively re-territorialized into a space where the rider is prone to objectification by the reader and/or audience.⁹

3. Willkie's Campaign and Rukeyser's “Campaign”

Muriel Rukeyser lived and wrote through much of the twentieth century, reporting on the Scottsboro Trial and the Spanish Civil War as a correspondent, writing poetry about the Hawk's Nest Disaster, and taking up political activism in opposition to the Vietnam War and as a staunch second-wave feminist. Her poetry bled into several biographical works, including varied individuals such as mathematicians Thomas Harriot and Williard Gibbs and composer Charles Ives. Her biography of Wendell Willkie, *One Life*, is a collage of real quotes from newspapers, autobiographical sketches, and political speeches alongside poetic re-creations of real events from Willkie's life. Written within this docupoetic biography of the businessman and presidential candidate, “Campaign” follows Willkie on his seven-week, 17,300-mile Whistle Stop Tour through 30 states in his bid for presidency over Roosevelt in 1940.

Catherine Gander situates *One Life* within a series of documentary poetry-based biographies written by Rukeyser, within which the poet “constructs compound portraits of exemplary lives in order to demonstrate what she believes to be ideal ways of approaching the world” (Gander 2013, pp. 112–13). This fits within the larger scope of Gander's text as she seeks to situate the poet “firmly in the canon of essential twentieth-century American poets and acknowledg[e] her role as a critical cultural figure of her age”, ultimately arguing “for a distinct and direct correlation between Rukeyser's writing and the modes, techniques and ideologies of the documentary movement as it flourished during the 1930s” (Gander 2013, pp. 1–2).¹⁰ The documentary poetics genre is one aptly suited for the description of the landscape through the observation car, a high velocity railspace that relays information anachronistically by montage, which is to say, through a collage of information assembled into a readable layout of the perceived world.

The massive ambition of Willkie's Whistle Stop Tour ensured that he would only see the country in passing. Totalling 18,789 miles over 31 states in seven weeks, the campaign took Willkie from Rushville, Indiana over to New Mexico before doubling back and heading to New York City (Neal 1984, p. 143).¹¹ Viewing and describing the crowds and the landscape perceived at such a pace requires a new technique—montage—wherein the subject processes sequences of images rapidly. It is through this technique that we can analyze the accumulation of images Willkie encounters as he merges with the spectacle of the observation car. Rukeyser intuits this herself when she relays Willkie's kinetic awareness of the speed at which he is traveling:

At a certain moment the railway forfeits metal,
Speed seizes this track, we are going fast.
The calendar's contagions, days, declarations,
Flaunted away on a Hollywood montage. (Rukeyser 1957, p. 134)

Despite Rukeyser explicitly using the word “montage” only once in the poem, no less as an action through which details are “flaunted away”, the technique—as generated by the American railspace—exists on a deeper level in the American imagination. Rukeyser knew as much, explaining in *The Life of Poetry* that “The rhythm of these sequences are film rhythm, the form is montage; and movies could easily be made of these poems, in which the lines in the longer, more sustained speech rhythms would serve as sound track” (Rukeyser 1949, p. 84).¹² Within “Campaign”, this rhythm plays out by forming poetic reveries of memory in verse, with prose paragraphs of documentation interrupting the memory and providing background to the scene. The aforementioned scene, wherein Willkie notices the speed of the rail, incites one such reverie/nightmare, punctuated by a rapid succession of images that evoke despair:

girls away at a dance . . .
 Lost villages, my frontier, . . .
 My brothers who will never vote for me.
 My lost self who will never vote for me

*

He forgets. 30 states in 7 weeks. (Rukeyser 1957, p. 135)

Though Willkie loses himself in this montage of images, ostensibly forgetting and flailing and despairing, the “sound track” to his life at this moment indicates that even these fleeting images are part of his heroic progress: “Freedom is not just a set of laws. It is the ability of men to make these infinite combinations between one another, and between the communities in which they live. . . . And so we say to you: Bring us together” (Rukeyser 1957, p. 136). “Freedom” for Willkie, writes Rukeyser, contains “infinite combinations” such as the ones he experiences in the earlier montage. Gander notes that montage, for Rukeyser, allows the poet to assemble a collection of images presented to the reader rapidly. In stitching these images together to perceive a unified narrative, the reader fills in the blanks and creates a “third image” that provides new meaning (Gander 2012, p. 103). Ultimately, Gander argues that Rukeyser uses montage to depict Willkie’s “personal awakening through a procession of images” (Gander 2012, p. 104). In this case, the “third image” constructed between the interplay of images and “sound track” is one that illustrates Willkie’s hope and determination, even in the midst of despair. It is this process of transformation and not Willkie himself, argues Gander, that Rukeyser seeks to heroize (Gander 2012, p. 98).

Preceding Rukeyser’s general proclivity toward montage in her documentary poetry, Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s reading of Walter Benjamin’s (1969) “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” compares the act of watching the landscape from a moving train to this filmic technique. By montage, or “the juxtaposition of the most disparate images into one unit—the new reality of annihilated in-between spaces”—the reality created by the speed at which passengers travel by rail—“finds its clearest expression: the film brings things closer to the viewer as well as closer together” (Schivelbusch 2014, p. 42). Within the whistle-stopping observation car, the technique has the ability to force an encounter between rider and onlooker and briefly examine how this “new pattern of narrative construction” provides “a model for a serial and sequential ordering . . . of narrative situations and events” within which Rukeyser situates Willkie (Ceserani 1999, p. 5). As such, Rukeyser’s poetry moves beyond a character study of Willkie and becomes vital to the discursive construction of the observation car as a site of transformation. Rukeyser recognizes the potential for the observation car to be a space of spectacle as much as it is a space of observation. It is a railspace perceived and experienced through montage and documentary poetics. Both of these forms bring the reader/audience and the author/actor “closer together” and affect a “personal awakening through a procession of images” that extends well beyond Willkie himself.

Through the poem, Rukeyser brings to life the risk that John F. Kennedy later put into words: from an observation car platform, “there is no chance to use gimmicks to dress up a candidate. The campaign train exposes him as he is” (Withers 1996, p. 281, emphasis mine). This exposure ranges across the senses; the train exposes Willkie to the harsh glare of the sun, the monotonous din and vibration of the wheels, the taste and smell of smoke on the air. Rukeyser weaves all of these senses and more into her description of Willkie, his Whistle Stop Tour, and the train itself, often conflating the three and exposing the candidate as a pure spectacle.

Rukeyser infuses her poetry with rich sensory imagery, often playing the senses upon one another. In *The Life of Poetry*, the poet herself supposes that “No one sense is employed in perceiving a work of art, and probably no one sense is ever employed alone” (Rukeyser 1949, p. 134). Rukeyser practices these beliefs throughout her oeuvre, with the “synaesthetic meeting-place of human beings, of modes of human consciousness, and of communication” fueling the muckraking poetry of “The Book of the Dead” (Gander 2012, p. 192), and her

thorough examination of Wendell Willkie. The verses within *One Life* then use not only visual but olfactory, auditory, and tactile/ vestibular imagery in a way that makes the long-form poem a lesson in how to create a spectacular railspace polysensorially. By constructing this railspace through these senses, “Campaign” reveals the allure of the observation car for politicians—this mobile, speedy stage that seems to magically attract, retain, and incite an audience. The poem equally attempts to reaffirm the exhibitionism possible on the platform and to reconcile this spectacle with the earlier use of the observation car as a semi-private space for looking outward onto the landscape.

The visual imagery of Willkie’s campaign oscillates between representations of its railspace as auditorium and stage, or as reiterated throughout the poem, “Distance and the crowd” (Rukeyser 1957, pp. 117, 128). Rukeyser uses the phrase at the beginning of “Campaign” to introduce how Willkie, an audience of one, perceives the landscape as a never-ending “distance” and the people who watch him while on display. In her descriptions of the visual scenes, Rukeyser uses ambiguous language that could describe passersby as looking at Willkie or Willkie looking back at them. During the first leg of the journey, there appears “eleven men standing at a railroad crossing/ The arm of the signal swinging Stop red Look red Listen./ Stop. People standing, looking separate in the morning air” (Rukeyser 1957, p. 117). This small audience is “looking separate” at Willkie as much as they are “looking separate” to Willkie. The same is true for every person Rukeyser describes, from “a man in overalls walking the eleventh furrow” to “The hard eyes of bigots. The hard eyes of the poor” to “People standing, still and lonely-looking in the thin, chill air” (Rukeyser 1957, pp. 122, 136), the reader remains unsure about who is the subject and object. Every crowd both sees the stage and is seen by the candidate on it, if only for a moment, in passing. In this sense, and as indicated by the elimination of the word when Willkie ultimately speaks at Madison Square Garden—here there is no “distance”, only “The crowd” (Rukeyser 1957, p. 141)—“distance” does not just describe Willkie’s travel across the country; “distance” is the proximity of Willkie to his audience. “Distance” is the opportunity to remain apart, in order to draw the audience in, to aggregate and maintain the crowd.

While Willkie looks outward to “the famous view” of the receding landscape, his crowds look in on him with uncertain effect (Rukeyser 1957, p. 132). From the start of the Whistle Stop Tour, Willkie’s audience is largely unresponsive. Near Chicago, the crowds stare blankly at Willkie:

They shine in their leather, but they make no sign.

. . . They make no sign.

In their stained aprons they listen, standing; they turn

Back to the cool immense bloodyards. (Rukeyser 1957, p. 118)

In Tukumcari, New Mexico, a “great pure Apache watches from his eyes” and simply “stares at the candidate” (Rukeyser 1957, p. 124). Despite the crowd’s lack of enthusiasm, Willkie attracts people and maintains their stare with the act of speaking from the train. Even if the message itself is an uninspiring one, like in Albuquerque, reporters still “said it was the largest rally in the state’s history” (Rukeyser 1957, p. 125). The spectacle of seeing a presidential candidate on the platform makes people curious enough to come see it. The Whistle Stop Tour manifests an audience through the novelty of seeing an imposing machine at rest display a political candidate. While not in motion, the observation platform naturally creates an outdoor thrust stage, where the actor/ candidate can be seen and heard from three sides.

The observation car was created and marketed as a space for rail passengers to visually take in a panoramic view of the landscape. As such, the Whistle Stop Tour transgresses the norms of the railroad, one of which being the use of the observation deck by riders to look out to the rapidly receding land. The railspace enables a view out to the landscape, not a view in. But when the train does something that runs counter to its designed purpose—such as remaining at rest and/or giving its riders access to its outdoor platforms—the

riders transgress the rules of operation, and a singular experience occurs. A spectacle manifests. Giorgio Agamben alludes to this act of creating the spectacle in his definition of “use” as all routine performance and action: “What cannot be used is, as such, given over to . . . spectacular exhibition” (Agamben 2007, p. 82). In other words, this quirky theater-space attracts an audience through sheer novelty and attraction to the show at-hand. Thus, back in Albuquerque, people “invisible” from an airplane now “Came down/To bleachers piled with local cotton and beef” sitting on “Hills of oranges, glass honey-hives” to see the spectacle of Wendell Willkie as he breaks with the norms of railspace and speaks from the back of the Willkie Special (Rukeyser 1957, p. 125).

The visual spectacle of Willkie conjures another image for Rukeyser, one that underscores the absurdity of the scene. In a poetic dialogue between undefined supporters and detractors, Republican boosters imagine Willkie as a “giant” on the observation platform who stands eye-to-eye with Roosevelt, before others quickly argue upon and reconstitute Willkie’s appearance in a brief dialogue:

He’s not a giant!

He draws his crowds.

Dead whales on flatcars draw their crowds.

Nobody votes for a dead whale. (Rukeyser 1957, p. 126)

Just as the whale show uses a specially built railcar platform to present the spectacle, so too does Rukeyser’s candidate stump across the country in his 12-car “Willkie Special.” By equating Willkie with a dead whale in the attempt to attract large audiences (with a potentially uninspiring message), Rukeyser presents the possibilities and limitations of the Whistle Stop Tour with regard to its ability to produce and maintain a spectacle. Any large-scale spectacle displayed upon the observation deck will command an audience, as proven in the 1930s with the “whale shows” to which Rukeyser alludes (Boyett 2005). During one such show, “a monster whale . . . a 60-ton mammal . . . a specimen of the largest animal ever created” was displayed upon a railcar in Henderson, Kentucky (Whale Car Is Side-Tracked in Henderson 1930). As reported by the Henderson Gleaner, each stop of the specially-designed Whale Car attracted hundreds of students and adults to the spectacle. The event does not relay any new information to the crowd—children recite whale facts from their school lessons and ask rudimentary questions like “is the whale dangerous?” The whale is accompanied by a nostalgia-filled whale hunter, who reminisces on how difficult it used to be to hunt the creatures, before explaining that the explosions used to kill this whale are quite ordinary, and there is no “danger or excitement in whaling any more” (Whale Car Is Side-Tracked in Henderson 1930). Despite the relative ease in which the whale was killed and displayed and the lack of a complementary compelling message, like Willkie, the sheer novelty of the event alone is enough to drive an audience to each stop.

Their similarities extend beyond the unique absurdity each presents upon the observation deck. The whale, an otherwise apex submarine creature that thrives out of sight, is killed in order to be seen; its carcass is presented as a carnivalesque science lesson for children at every stop. So too is Willkie, an otherwise compelling presidential candidate, momentarily laid bare as a despairing, lifeless novelty civics lesson as he is paraded across the countryside while lamenting about “my lost self who will never vote for me.” In the production of the whale’s corpse, life is stripped from the creature to produce a spectacle; the Whistle Stop Tour whittles lively debate about political change down to practiced quotes shouted and gestured from observation platforms. In each case, the spectacle is based upon two interrelated ideas: one, through observation, the real becomes objectified and thus, artificial (e.g., the whale is killed to be seen and Willkie’s message becomes inert); two, the very singularity that attracts an audience to an object (a dead whale, a Whistle Stop Tour) is made common by its recurrence throughout the countryside on the observation platform, and yet this commonality does not water down the marvelousness of the spectacle for each audience. In fact, this recurrence aggregates the experience into a larger and larger spectacle while simultaneously mass-producing it to become paradoxically an omnipresent

singularity. When combined, these actions undertaken as part of the Whistle Stop Tour and whale show delimit the observation car as a railspace that produces and reproduces spectacle easily, though the spectacle created as such is restricted to the realm of vision. How then do other senses collaborate to create the spectacle?

Rukeyser visually sets up a behind-the-scenes look at the political players witnessing Willkie's performance from the figurative wings of the stage. In doing so, she introduces the role that sound plays in the creation of railspace, particularly in its collaboration with the senses of feeling and balance to physically inculcate the candidate into the railspace. Rukeyser provides another "sound track" to transcribe this backstage chatter: "On the campaign train is a lounge car for the 'boll weevils'. The local politicians. They are criticizing Willkie's inability to 'get political'. . . . Every now and then we wonder whether he isn't beginning to talk mechanically" (Rukeyser 1957, p. 133, author's emphasis). This brief scene illustrates a railspace that contains various people seemingly destabilizing the visual spectacle of Willkie's Whistle Stop Tour by calling into question the candidate's effectiveness and lamenting his monotony. However, their ear for Willkie's "mechanical" talk hints at the candidate's gradual transformation into becoming part of the actual railspace and as such, effectively producing and maintaining the spectacle. Rukeyser invokes imagery like this to merge Willkie with the railroad, bringing in senses beyond sight and using what Gander calls "semiotic ambiguity" to re-signify Willkie as a symbol built into the observation deck, the train, the railroad (Gander 2013, p. 103). This interwoven sensory imagery merges the candidate-as-spectacle with the railspace-as-spectacle to give credence to Rukeyser's belief in the "efficacy of the symbol" through the "liberating and energising effects of velocity" (Tales 2017, p. 335), ultimately portraying Willkie himself as a map that lays out "the ideal way of approaching the world" (Gander 2013, p. 113).

The auditory imagery of "Campaign" aligns the candidate—specifically his voice—with the sound of the rail and complements the visual by creating a spectacle of the conflation between man and train. This connection makes solid the role of the individual in constructing railspace—through sound and feeling, the candidate both shapes and conforms to the observation car. Rukeyser finds commonality between the stage-voice projection that is possible on (and limited by) the observation platform and the unceasing echoes of the steel-on-steel train and rail. She describes Willkie sitting "on this side or that side of the balcony" of the rearmost car, traveling east and practicing his speeches, which, due to the speed and length of travel and the surrounding noise, "begin to be unreal to him" (Rukeyser 1957, p. 132). Here, Willkie is "On the red rails, the train hurling his words/Down all the arteries of tears" (Rukeyser 1957, p. 132). With his voice echoed and amplified by the rail, the candidate lets the railspace carry his message for him. Without the ability to define himself apart from the railspace through his voice, Willkie becomes disoriented and lost in thought, "dizzy and blind" (Rukeyser 1957, p. 133). This calls the reader's attention to earlier descriptions of the importance of Willkie's voice in self-reaffirmation of the candidate's ability to become president. "From the throat he can rally strength" and "Voice did this, Willkie heard the memory,/Voice, get me out again!" (Rukeyser 1957, pp. 119, 121), Rukeyser notes, during one of Willkie's daydreams about losing his voice like Roosevelt lost the use of his legs.

From the observation platform, Willie's voice rallies the strength of the people at the cost of his own, highlighting the auditory limitations of the observation car, establishing the primacy of the visual, and suggesting the interplay of other senses as they conflate Willkie with the rail. Choosing not to use a microphone for his whistle-stop speeches, Willkie strains his voice and endangers his campaign in the process. Willkie's advisers bring a throat specialist on board to examine the candidate (Neal 1984, pp. 146–47). Rukeyser's verse dramatizes it as such:

Doctor Barnard hearing
The rasping impossible voice under the beating light,
Rocking among the train: My God, I can't make him stop.

He goes right on night and day.

Words traveling

Straight on the land. (Rukeyser 1957, pp. 121–22)

Willkie's voice is "rasping", "beating", and "rocking", which all suggest something rhythmically enduring to his speech, like feeling the pulse of the train tracks while traveling by rail. Using this railspace as an amplifier, Willkie channels his "impossible" voice into a straight-lined trajectory through the landscape.

The trajectory of Willkie's voice mirrors the trajectory of his body, now inextricably merged with the railroad. On this ride, the rail alternates between smooth, straight stretches across the landscape and jarring, bumping jolts felt by all passengers. Rukeyser describes the journey as a "plexus of rails" in Willkie's own body (Rukeyser 1957, p. 134).¹³ Throughout the "Campaign", the train incorporates Willkie auditorily, kinetically, and vestibularly. Willkie is "bull-thewed . . . in rocking corridors, talking torrents, his arms making giant swipes in the dark air" while he feels the speed at which he travels (Rukeyser 1957, p. 137). At other times he perceives the smoothness and straightness of the rails. After an invocation of "Distance and the crowd", the focus shifts to the rails:

The track, the development, the tracks on their light-gray crystal,

The knotless, nodeless line. Stuck into water-light.

No but knotted, cloved, notched, scarred, travel brightened by tears,

Good steel rails and riding them

Development riding onto the tracks of law.¹⁴ (Rukeyser 1957, p. 128)

The "semiotic ambiguity" created by Rukeyser in these lines conflates Willkie both with the "knotless, nodeless" rails and the "development" riding upon them. In merging the two and reiterating (and celebrating) the rail's uninterrupted straight line, Rukeyser instructs how to read Willkie within and as part of the railspace and gives us an encapsulation of how spectacle operates within the observation car.

Attending to Rukeyser's dependence on geologic and geometric symbols such as the precipice, the boulder, and the spiral in her documentary poetry, Bryn Tales quotes *The Life of Poetry* and argues that the poet "offers the diagrammatic symbol as a depiction of the process by which we consciously question 'the existence of the problem of the relationship of movement with life'. They offer us, in their diagrammatic form, the chance to conceptualise and view our agency, or lack of agency, in the midst of relationships." (Tales 2017, p. 335). If we take minor liberty with what Tales would consider a diagram, then the straight line that Willkie inhabits through his immersion into railspace becomes its own sort of diagrammatic symbol for Rukeyser. In this symbol, the straight, "knotless, nodeless line" runs uninterrupted because it is the pathway of the hero, of Willkie, of the "ideal way." Following this trajectory still demands a sensitivity to how the "tracks of law" are created—with "travel brightened by tears" of laborers, which the railroad then manifests as "knotted, cloved, notched, scarred" rails. The straight line ultimately suggests progress forward across a level route. Along the way, others can see, track, and follow clearly, paralleled by Willkie's continuous forward motion across "30 states in 7 weeks", which constantly exposes him to the view of the audience. Rukeyser employs this symbol of the straight line to meditate upon Willkie's agency (or lack thereof) during his Whistle Stop Tour and extrapolates that meditation to comment on his entire life. For Rukeyser, the observation car is a manifestation of this two-dimensional symbol, with which Willkie navigates the "relationship of movement with life." Furthermore, by describing Willkie as feeling the "plexus of rails" in his body and sonically equating his "talking torrents" with the train's "rocking corridors", Willkie becomes part of this symbol, thus developing Rukeyser's long-form attempt to read the candidate as an actualized diagram of the "ideal life" and which, incidentally, further incorporates the individual rider into the railspace as a component perpetually exposed to spectacle. The byproduct of this polysensorial stitching-together is the revelation of the observation deck as a railspace invested in the production

of all-encompassing spectacle, both of the landscape and itself. Rukeyser symbolizes the “energising [sic] effects of velocity” through Willkie’s unceasing straight line of a Whistle Stop Tour, which attracts audiences as it runs along the track. Simultaneously, when viewed by the observation car rider, the entire landscape rests upon the straight line of the horizon, displaying the spectacle to rail riders.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: This author is particularly appreciative for the support and patience of Linda Kinnahan, Jamie T. Smith, and the editors of *Humanities*.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ I use “observation car”, observation platform/deck”, and “platform” interchangeably, though the argument could be made that each has its own nuances. Indeed, the term “observation car” is used almost exclusively by commercial passenger trains, whereas “observation deck” is most often reserved for Whistle Stop-touring politicians. Arguably there is a physical distinction as well. The “deck” is the rear platform on any final train car, while the “car” is just that—the entire rail unit within which passengers can view the landscape, often with the advantage of large windows and more open space. As typically conceived, the observation car was located at the rear of the train, as the open backend of the last car provided a wider view of the landscape. In both cases, sight is the dominant sense through which the passenger or onlooker experiences and constructs the railspace of the observation car. This shared trait is enough to effectively join the deck and car together as a single railspace to geocritically investigate. Thus, for the purposes of this study, the train’s railspace that concerns itself with “observation”, whether of the landscape or the train’s riders, will be considered as part of the observation car.
- ² Furthermore, as a genre “fundamentally concerned with cultivating historicity” (Metres and Nowak 2010, p. 10), documentary poetry can serve as a reasonable guide for the blueprint for Willkie’s travel and the observation car itself.
- ³ While the Oxford English Dictionary defines spectacle as “A specially prepared or arranged display of a more or less public nature (esp. one on a large scale), forming an impressive or interesting show or entertainment for those viewing it” (spectacle, n.1 2018), Guy Debord presents an extended noteworthy investigation on the term in *The Society of the Spectacle*, his Marxist/Situationist critical take on how the spectacle operates within a capitalist society. Debord develops his theory on the society of the spectacle through 221 theses in the eponymous text. I will refer to Debord’s definitions occasionally as a counterpoint or segue from the relationship between railspace and spectacle. For example, in one thesis, Debord writes that “The spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image” (Debord 1977, p. 34, emphasis in original). In this reading, the observation deck and its pivotal role in electioneering is less of a natural evolution from the theater and more a gluttonous accumulation of capital generated by the need for more efficient forms of labor. Thus, the democratic system is perhaps implicated in the perpetuation of capitalism. This hypothesis and its conclusions exceed the limit of a geocritical study of railspace, and as such, it is helpful to limit our discussion of the spectacle to the OED definition and include Debord’s theses when there is a pertinent intersection.
- ⁴ Stilgoe states that the Observation Car affords “a nearly 360-degree view” from the rear platform of the train (Stilgoe 1985, p. 257). A railspace that enables a panoramic view of the landscape but that does not allow for the rider to see what lies ahead (“nearly” a full circle, but not entirely) is a useful metaphor for politics, as demonstrated below by Muriel Rukeyser in her poetic biography of Willkie discussed below.
- ⁵ The term “Whistle Stop Tour” generated from criticism by Senator Robert Taft in 1944, who complained often and loudly about then-Vice President Truman’s “whistle station” tours, which frequently criticized and condemned Congress (Withers 1996, p. 194).
- ⁶ Overlooking the Whistle Stop Tour in discussions about the political spectacle is a common occurrence. Ulrich Keller traces the acts of “producing/controlling spectacle” from the eighteenth century to the early 20th, highlighting the political speech as the central spectacular act through which presidents create spectacle (Keller 2005, p. 131). Keller argues that twentieth century presidents developed the ability to control this spectacle. Lyford and Payne cite Debord in their argument that photojournalism both “sustains th[e] power” of the spectacle and “open[s] up a space of critical resistance” within it (Lyford and Payne 2005, p. 119). Each critic leaves open the question of how the observation car serves as an early stage upon which presidential candidates developed, perpetuated, and complicated the production of political spectacle before the political speech was televised and before photojournalism could be digitally mass-produced. What have also gone under-studied are the ways in which the physical composition of the railcar lends itself to the seen/being seen duality.
- ⁷ The earliest Whistle Stop Tours and political processions contain the germ of the experience’s theatrical trappings and hint at what is so spectacular about a person speaking from the rear platform of a train (or being displayed thereon). As dated by Bob

Withers in *The President Travels by Train: Politics and Pullmans*, the earliest iterations of the Whistle Stop Tour occur in the mid-nineteenth century. Withers speculates that Abraham Lincoln's opponent, Stephen Douglas, started the idea. He put a cannon on a flatcar and shot it to announce his arrival into the station (Withers 1996, p. 9). The flatcar-staged event will come up again below, with literally larger implications for the observation deck. Of course, the funeral procession of Lincoln himself exemplifies the spectacle the train affords. In the spring of 1865, Lincoln's body traveled by train from Washington D.C. to Springfield, Illinois and was seen by thousands of mourners along the way. As an early indication of the power of the railroad to unite people in patriotism (and in grief), Lincoln's funeral train evoked the feeling of an "ancient 'royal progress'" in "creating a union of its own, bringing together at places along its way more people than had ever been brought together before" in order to "justify [the nation's] claims on the people, acknowledge their sacrifices, and sustain their devotion" (Schwartz 1991, p. 348). Its success in doing so inspired similar funeral tours for Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Robert F. Kennedy.

⁸ No primary source materials have yet been discovered that confirm a unified and commonly held political strategy for undertaking a Whistle Stop Tour. Withers determines that rather than a political strategist, it was Charles B. Ryan, the Assistant General Passenger Agent for the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway, who first suggested an observation platform-based campaign (Withers 1996, pp. 63, 131), lending to the theory that the Tour was a shared strategy to leverage the spectacular nature of the train to aggregate attention, both for the candidate and for the railroad itself. I am of the opinion that the tour manifested organically before Ryan's outright suggestion, as an outgrowth of the balcony speech and perhaps as an acknowledgement that a locomotive circuit around the country would unite geographically and politically disparate factions of Americans. Starting with Andrew Johnson and Rutherford B. Hayes, presidents felt at-ease with the prevailing transportation technology and were naturally drawn to the similarities to the balcony, namely: the ornate iron railing, the peripheral curtains, the framed opening to an enraptured audience. These allusions were intentional, as proven by a 1947 memo from Harry Truman's political strategists. Withers hypothesizes about the intention behind the decorations of the observation platform: "A blue velvet curtain was hung outside the rear door . . . of the Ferdinand Magellan, apparently to provide a cleaner background for photos and newsreel films" (Withers 1996, p. 189). Interestingly, both Johnson and Hayes claimed that they did not intend to make a speech from the rear observation platform but rather sought to dialogue with people face-to-face. Of course, each ended up making a speech at every stop (Withers 1996, pp. 32, 46). These presidents shared an (ultimately failed) intention to re-fashion the observation deck as less of a stage and more of an informal access point to the public.

⁹ The term is loaded with meaning imbued by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*. For a more thorough examination on its effect in railspace, see (Smith 2020, pp. 113–48).

¹⁰ Others have taken on Gander's task as their own, both in their acknowledgement of the poet's role in shaping the genre of documentary poetics and in their estimation as an essential, canonized poet. Elisabeth Däumer introduces a collection of Rukeyser's scholarship in the *Journal of Narrative Theory* by calling attention to the poet's ability to "push[] against the conventional boundaries that still to this day demarcate the proper realm of the poetic" (Däumer 2013, p. 247). Several other recent studies discuss Rukeyser's methods of writing documentary poetry: Nasaif (2015) *Muriel Rukeyser: Poetry and the Body*. University of Reading; Kingsley (2015) "'A poem among the diagrams'": *Poetry as Archival Work in Muriel Rukeyser, Susan Howe, and M. Nourbese Philip*. Northeastern University; Grieve (2015) *Environmental Justice Witnessing in the Modernist Poetry of Lola Ridge, Muriel Rukeyser, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Elizabeth Bishop*. Arizona State University.

¹¹ Rukeyser tallies the mileage at 17,300, though she may be taking poetic license; Neal's biography of Willkie lists the former number, which is corroborated by The Lilly Library at Indiana University Bloomington, home of Willkie's papers.

¹² For more on how film—specifically the films of Sergei Eisenstein—influenced Rukeyser, see Gander, *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary*, pp. 100–3.

¹³ Further considerations of the vestibular sense and the railroad's effect on the nervous system are featured in Harrington's (2003) "On the Tracks of Trauma: Railway Spine Reconsidered."

¹⁴ Rukeyser recognizes the physical labor that went into making these "knotted, cloved, notched, scarred" rails with the same sensitivity that Willkie physically feels them. For an examination of the railroad tracks and their discursive and material construction, see Smith (2020), pp. 113–48.

References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 2007. *Profanations*. Translated by Jeff Fort. New York: Zone Books.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1969. The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. In *Illuminations*. Edited by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, pp. 217–52.
- Boyett, Frank. 2005. Whale of a tale: Traveling show came complete with lecture, smell. *The Henderson Gleaner*, October 2.
- Ceserani, Remo. 1999. The Impact of the Train on Modern Literary Imagination. *Stanford Humanities Review* 7: 127–35.
- Däumer, Elisabeth. 2013. Introduction: Muriel Rukeyser's Presumptions. *Journal of Narrative Theory* 43: 247–57. [CrossRef]
- Debord, Guy. 1977. *Society of the Spectacle*. English translation. Detroit: Black & Red Books.
- Edelman, Murray. 2010. *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gander, Catherine. 2012. The Senses of Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*. *European Journal of American Culture* 30: 175–94. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Gander, Catherine. 2013. *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary the Poetics of Connection*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

- Grieve, Sarah. 2015. Environmental Justice Witnessing in the Modernist Poetry of Lola Ridge, Muriel Rukeyser, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Elizabeth Bishop. Ph.D. thesis, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA. Available online: <https://repository.asu.edu/items/29662> (accessed on 1 August 2020).
- Harrington, Ralph. 2003. On the Tracks of Trauma: Railway Spine Reconsidered. *Social History of Medicine* 16: 209–23. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Harris, Phil. 2001. To Spin or not to Spin that is the Question: The Emergence of Modern Political Marketing. *The Marketing Review* 2: 35–53. [CrossRef]
- Keller, Ulrich. 2005. Producing/Controlling Spectacle: Presidential Speech in Media Reportage. *Visual Resources: An International Journal on Images and Their Uses* 21: 131–45. [CrossRef]
- Kingsley, Anne. 2015. 'A poem among the diagrams': Poetry as Archival Work in Muriel Rukeyser, Susan Howe, and M. Nourbese Philip. Ph.D. thesis, Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA. Available online: <https://repository.library.northeastern.edu/files/neu:349706> (accessed on 1 August 2020).
- Lyford, Amy, and Carol Payne. 2005. Photojournalism, Mass Media and the Politics of Spectacle. *Visual Resources: An International Journal on Images and Their Uses* 21: 119–29. [CrossRef]
- Magi, Jill. 2014. Poetry in Light of Documentary. *Chicago Review* 59: 248–75.
- Metres, Phil, and Mark Nowak. 2010. Poetry as Social Practice in the First Person Plural: A Dialogue on Documentary Poetics. *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies Issues* 12: 9–22. [CrossRef]
- Mickelson, Sig. 1989. *From Whistle Stop to Sound Bite: Four Decades of Politics and Television*. New York: Praeger.
- Nasaif, Fathi K. I. 2015. Muriel Rukeyser: Poetry and the Body. Ph.D. thesis, University of Reading, Iskandar Puteri, Malaysia. Available online: <http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/55811/> (accessed on 1 August 2020).
- Neal, Steve. 1984. *Dark Horse: A Biography of Wendell Willkie*. New York: Doubleday.
- Nowak, Mark. 2010. Documentary Poetics. *Poetry Foundation*. April 17. Available online: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2010/04/documentary-poetics> (accessed on 1 November 2022).
- Rukeyser, Muriel. 1949. *The Life of Poetry*. New York: A.A. Wyn.
- Rukeyser, Muriel. 1957. Campaign. In *One Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster, pp. 117–41.
- Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. 2014. *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*. Oakland: U California Press.
- Schwartz, Barry. 1991. Mourning and the Making of a Sacred Symbol: Durkheim and the Lincoln Assassination. *Social Forces* 70: 343–64. [CrossRef]
- Smith, Michael A. 2020. Railspace: A Geocritical Study of the Railroad through American Literature and Culture. Ph.D. thesis, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA. Available online: <https://dsc.duq.edu/etd/1951> (accessed on 1 November 2022).
- Soja, Edward. 1996. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers.
- spectacle, n.1. 2018. *OED Online*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available online: www.oed.com/view/Entry/186057 (accessed on 1 September 2018).
- Stilgoe, John R. 1985. *Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Tales, Bryn. 2017. Salvaging the Symbol in Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*. *Comparative Critical Studies* 14: 323–46. [CrossRef]
- Tally, Robert. 2012. *Spatiality*. New York: Routledge.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. 2001. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Westphal, Bertrand. 2011. *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*. Translated by Robert Tally. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Whale Car Is Side-Tracked in Henderson. 1930, *The Henderson Gleaner*, October 2.
- White, John H. 1985. *The American Railroad Passenger Car*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, vols. 1–2.
- Withers, Bob. 1996. *The President Travels by Train: Politics and Pullmans*. Brattleboro: Echo Point Books & Media.