

Dear Go Train

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CCT300: Critical Analysis of Media

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December 2nd, 2025

Dear Go Train,

I don't remember the first time I saw you, but I do remember what you symbolized to me. Coming to Canada at the age of nine, you were a symbol of progress and betterment. I remember my uncle taking you to work every day. Dressed in his best suit, briefcase in hand, he was on his way to downtown Toronto. He would often share how you made his commute so easy. To my younger self, you were the luxury that came with a professional life and a hallmark of success itself.¹ I remember the first time I travelled with you on my way to Union Station to watch the Toronto Raptors. I loved how easy you made the journey feel.

Now I always have to prepare for you. Our interaction doesn't just start on the platform at Guildwood Go Station; it begins the night before, as I check your schedule, figure out how I will get to the station, and then finally set my alarm. Then there is the decision between comfort and style. If I have learned anything from our journeys, it's that comfort is better. Soft pants, comfortable shoes and warm layers change the way I present myself to the world.² You love to make an entrance. Even before I see you, I hear the announcement of your arrival. When you are close, I can listen to your bell ringing and the horn sounding. I climb to the top section where I can spend time sleeping, working, or people watching. I see the same faces in the same spots. The older gentleman always dressed in a fancy suit, but always in basketball shoes. The lady with the coffee who always sits next to the window. Navigating our lives according to your schedule.³

Inside your cars, time changes. When I travel for an exam, I find myself scrambling to study, and the trip flies by. On the way home, as I am exhausted and just wanting to get home, the time stretches.⁴ Through the trip, I see a landscape that transforms. Scarborough, with its townhomes and apartments. Towards Union Station, everything becomes compact but taller. Then Mississauga, with its modern homes, schools, and suburbs. Seeing houses and condos being built, seeing new buildings, you show me the progress Toronto is making. But when I'm tired, I just scroll on my phone or blankly stare out the window. My experiences with you highlight what it means to be a commuting student. Other students go home between classes, participate in extracurriculars and join clubs. All the while I'm trying to plan my commute home, I miss events and opportunities because I need to catch you and do this again tomorrow. And my relationship with the university becomes a transactional one, one where I do my work and go home.⁵

I won't say that I have gained nothing from our travels. Being close to home has only improved my relationships with my childhood friends. You have made that possible. Our travels have also helped me understand people across the GTA. From Scarborough to downtown to Mississauga, I have experienced our multicultural city in ways that I doubt many others have. You have also given me moments. I remember running late for my internship while riding with you, and somebody had a medical emergency. We sat there and waited together for over half an hour. But then I saw my uncle, the same uncle who used to take you to work and still does. He was on the same train heading to work. We talked for the entire time, and I realized there, just talking to him, that it was a full circle moment. I was now the person taking you downtown for work. What I once considered a signifier of success in Toronto was exactly what I was experiencing. The moment allowed me to recognize how far I had come, and I am grateful for that.

For me, you've stopped being a symbol, but a tool to build a life full of experiences. If this is the last letter I ever send to you, and the last time I ever talk to you, I want you

to know that I'm grateful. I'm grateful for the ways you've supported my education, my professional experiences, and my social life. I'm thankful that you exist, and that you connect this amazing city and all of its people, allowing them to balance their lives at work, at home, and at school, which would otherwise be too far apart.⁶

What I'll remember, years from now, is the snowy winter nights while I wait for you at the station. Wishing you would hurry up or that I could teleport home instead. You are no longer a symbol of success to me. You are the infrastructure that keeps us connected.

Thank you for carrying me.

Sincerely,

A commuting student

Endnotes

1. Larkin argues that the infrastructure surrounding us is not only physical and technically complex systems, but also represents politics and poetics. Larkin mentions infrastructure “. . . store within them forms of desire and fantasy. . .” (Larkin, 2013, p. 329). My early feelings for the Go Train as a “hallmark of success” is an example of this. For my immigrant family, the train and its riders represented success. The fancy suits, clothing and expensive purses and briefcases. The GO Train also came with the desire and fantasy of working our way up through opportunities in cushy, respected and well-paying jobs that we believed only downtown Toronto offered.

2. In *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (1964/2013), McLuhan argues that clothing is a medium that extends our skin and shapes our relationship with the world. My desire to wear comfortable clothing and layers is an extension of my relationship with the GO Train and the discomfort of the long commute. Moreover, McLuhan (2013) notes that clothing communicates status. My letter related to this idea when I mentioned how my clothing shapes how I “. . . present myself.”

3. Edensor (2011), through his work in “Commuter: Mobility, Rhythm and Commuting”, details how daily routines are shaped through transport. Edensor highlights “. . . there is a repetitive temporal span within which travellers must attempt to get to work or back home, predictable destinations, departure and arrival times, route consistencies and mobile rituals. . .” (Edensor, 2011, p. 193). The scheduled and predictable nature of taking the same train to work at the same time and sitting at the same spot contributes to the rhythm of commuting. An example from my letter includes people wearing the same style of suits and shoes, and always sitting in the same spot with coffee. These riders seem to replicate the predictability of transportation in their own lives, creating a synergy between the mechanical rhythm of the train and the natural rhythm of a person.

4. This distortion of time can relate to how trains can change our perception of distance. Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s historical analysis of rail travel focused on how it “annihilated space and time” (Schivelbusch, 1986, p. 36). Schivelbusch argues that the trains change our engagement with the landscape, where the rider “knows only points of departure and destination” (Schivelbusch, 1986, p. 38). Schivelbusch called this ‘panoramic perception,’ where the landscape is separated from the traveller (Schivelbusch, 1986, p. 64). This helps explain the elasticity of time I experience in the car. Without noticing the landscape and focusing on studying, time becomes compressed, but stretches when I am tired and staring out the window.

5. This transactional relationship I mention aligns with Marshall McLuhan’s “the medium is the message.” McLuhan argues that the message of any technology is “the change of scale or pace or pattern it introduces into human affairs” (McLuhan, 1964/2013, p. 8). The GO Train extended my physical commuting range. It made it possible for me to attend the university, but its rigid schedule also altered my connectivity to campus life outside of classes. For me, the message became one of logistical planning and exclusion brought about by the medium of the GO Train. These experiences are reflected among commuter students. Research by

Tett et al. (2025) has found that commuting to university undermines a student's sense of belonging and reduces engagement with campus life.

6. By the end of my letter, the train had changed from a symbol to a tool. This portrays John Durham Peters's concept of "infrastructuralism." Peters argues that infrastructures are most powerful when they become "mundane to the point of boredom," and begin to be taken for granted (Peters, 2015, p. 43). I would argue that this is how many riders view the GO Train. Moreover, the GO Train could be categorized as what Peters calls a "logistical media", such as a clock or calendar whose job is "to organize and orient, to arrange people and property" (Peters, 2015, p. 37). The GO Train is exactly this kind of media, enabling complex organization of people between work, school, and social life.

References

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