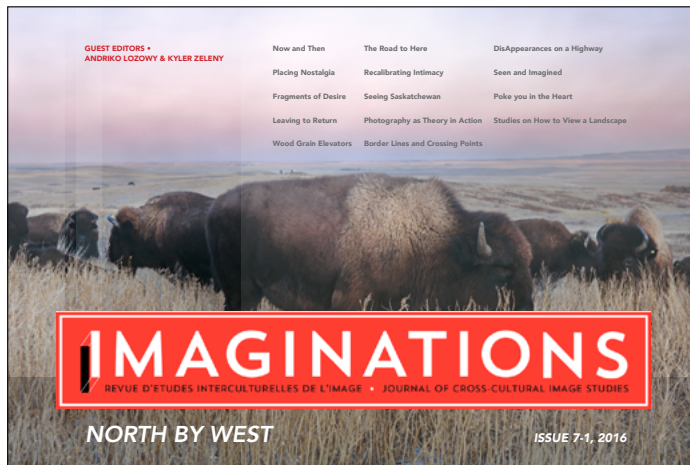


# IMAGINATIONS

REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE ▪ JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES



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# DIS/APPEARANCES ON A HIGHWAY: A MODEL DRIVE

ERIN ASHENHURST

## Résumé

*Dis/Appearances on a Highway met en scène les éléments d'un voyage en voiture de Vancouver à Stewart, en Colombie Britannique. En juxtaposant des extraits de textes décrivant une histoire personnelle avec des images de paysages qui semblent avoir été prises depuis l'intérieur d'une voiture, cette œuvre explore un espace perçu comme une altérité. L'autoroute n'offre pas à ses usagers un paysage rural idéalisé ou une nature intacte mais plutôt une artère traversant la province et autour de laquelle de petites villes exhibent des motels lugubres et des mines et églises abandonnées. Pour ce conducteur, les montagnes sont une présence menaçante à l'horizon.*

*A première vue, la photographie de Dis/Appearances pourrait être perçue comme une série d'images sans prétention si ce n'était pour la fraude et l'aspect ludique que l'on voit dans leur construction. En bousculant les normes des images d'un voyage en voiture traditionnel par le biais d'un pare-brise illusoire, les images créent une subjectivité fictive. Dans Dis/Appearances, les vastes étendues de l'Ouest canadien ne rappellent pas le périple d'un aventurier mais plutôt une relation instable naviguée au travers des vitres d'un véhicule en mouvement perpétuel.*

## Abstract

*Dis/Appearances on a Highway constructs elements of a road trip from Vancouver to Stewart, BC. Juxtaposing fragments of text describing a personal narrative with photographs of the landscape that appear to be taken from the secure distance of a car, the work explores a terrain experienced as an otherness. The highway does not offer its user an idealized countryside or untouched wilderness but is instead an artery running up the province, around which clusters of towns present grim motels, abandoned mines, and churches. For this driver, the mountains grow into a foreboding presence.*

*At first glance, the photography in Dis/Appearances could be read as unassuming snapshots, but there is a fraudulence and playfulness in their construction. By disrupting the traditional road-trip snapshot with the illusory layer of the model windshield, the images create a fictional subjectivity. In Dis/Appearances, the vastness of western Canada does not signify the journey of an adventurer, but rather an unstable relationship negotiated through the window of an ever-transient vehicle.*

*Dis/Apearances on a Highway* constructs elements of a road trip from Vancouver to Stewart, BC. Juxtaposing fragments of text describing a personal narrative with photographs of the landscape that appear to be taken from the secure distance of a car, the work explores a terrain experienced as an otherness. The highway does not offer its user an idealized countryside or untouched wilderness, but is instead an artery threading through the province where small towns host tired motels, churches, and abandoned mines. For this driver, the mountains grow into a foreboding presence.

At first glance, the photography in *Dis/Apearances* could be read as unassuming snapshots, but there is fraudulence and playfulness in their assembly. While photographs taken on location gesture to cinematic staging, the framing of the car interior is done using a *Playmobil* toy from a kit appropriately titled “City Life.” By disrupting the traditional road-trip snapshot with the illusory layer of the model windshield, the images create a fictional subjectivity from what might otherwise be seen as documentation. While pages of prose juxtaposed with imagery are conventionally used to signal the development of a linear storyline,

here the fragmentation of text and the falsity of image test a viewer’s desire to form a cohesive narrative. Indeed, in one image, the glimpse of a plastic deer threatens to push things towards the absurd.

Though the trip described traverses less than two-thirds of the province, it is a distance of almost 1,500 kilometers—the same distance of a drive from Rome to Paris, or less than Madrid to Marrakesh. In *Dis/Apearances*, the vastness of Western Canada does not signify the journey of an adventurer, but rather an unstable relationship negotiated through the window of an ever-transient vehicle.




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It was August and it seemed as if we had spent the summer driving and watching things die. They died all day in sudden, lonely blasts of yellow cream, and red jam, and clear jelly. We would comment on how big or bloody, and then I would yank forward the lever for the windshield fluid and the wipers would spread their exotic carcasses in half-moons across the glass.



By the time we made it to the town of Clinton,  
British Columbia, we were desperate to escape the  
shape of the car. Hours on the road and the catch  
of our knees like a reluctant folding chair, wood  
bloated in the heat.



On the highway, human density was exchanged for  
insects, bunions of brown grass, and trees with crooked  
white arms. Gravel shoulders hissed under tread and  
the wide sky turned robin's egg blue to seething sepia.  
There were stars.

As the sky grew dim, the insects thickened the air with the vehemence of a death drum. In a pink sunset towards Williams Lake, we mistook the rapid explosions of their bodies for rain. Then, in the dark, oncoming headlights turned their ruins opaque and I had to squint through the smears to keep on the road. We turned the music up and the twists of the canyon were abstracted in orange reflectors and the floating taillights of monstrous big rigs.



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A MODEL DRIVE

One night, after the evening had throbbed with lightning before the quiet, deep black, the hazard lights of a hatchback ahead flashed the body of a deer. The car was pulled off the road and the deer lay behind on its side, head pointed towards the near edge of the highway. We slowed to see the haunches, hooves perfectly aligned and motionless. A pickup truck had pulled in front of the car and a large man walked between the vehicles, cigarette smoke snaking around his face.

I turned the high beams on through the mask of insect sludge as we lunged into the valley.



At the mouth of Vanderhoof, we saw a billboard for a missing woman. Her face was three meters tall, blonde, beaming. A number with a long string of zeros measured the value of her return. She had been at a lake party two years ago when, just before dawn, she slipped into the unknown. I saw a poster for her in a coffee shop and one taped to the back window of a grimy gray van. The message was clear: careful, this highway could consume you.



I could feel he had changed once we passed the city limits. Become calm and loose. He had done this drive for years—a feverish marathon in a battered Ford Tempo hot with summer, or a cramped doze in the back of a Greyhound bus on Christmas Eve. I had only flown to his hometown before, where the sudden dwarfing proximity of the mountains made me nervous.

DIS/APPEARANCES ON A HIGHWAY:  
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In these towns, video stores thrived and phone reception wavered. Buildings were brick and wood, stucco, and aluminum siding. It felt as if the rules were different, but then I thought of my husband's disapproving look when I explained why I had decided to leave the pleasant malaise of my towel to wade in the lake. "I had to pee," I said. It had seemed natural, clearly the best place.

The couple had an RV and two Siberian Huskies named Smokey and Bandit. They said a party of three had made it through the tunnels last spring. It had taken most of a day with their headlamps illuminating the rusted debris abandoned in the dark. "You shouldn't try in those flip-flops," they agreed.





We drove for days and I wondered if,  
at the end of this highway, the mountains  
would swell and swallow me up.

Perhaps, I thought, I could just wait in the car.