



Copyright © 1997 Ohio University School of Film. All rights reserved.

Wide Angle 19.4 (1997) 109-130

[Muse](#) [Search](#) [Journals](#) [This Journal](#) [Contents](#)

Access provided by Claremont College

The City as Motion Picture: Notes on Some California City Films

[Scott MacDonald](#)

[Figures](#)

I've long recognized that, whatever pretensions I have about being an individual, for the most part my experiences are typical of large numbers of people; and therefore, if I say that in my lifetime I am aware of three distinct attitudes toward the American city, I do not mean to privilege my personal experience, but to recognize it as an index to the experiences of at least a portion of a particular generation. As I was growing up in Easton, Pennsylvania, during the 1940s and 50s (I was born in 1942), New York City was for me "The City" and our family trips into New York were the most exciting moments of my life. While I was thoroughly bored by what my family called "beautiful scenery" (expansive vistas of the mixture of farms and low Appalachian mountains characteristic of Pennsylvania and Virginia) I was fascinated by cityscapes --the more industrial, the better. The drive from Easton across New Jersey on Route 22 was foreplay leading to two climactic moments: the incredible industrial vista that opened between Newark, Elizabeth, and Jersey City; and the sight of Manhattan from the Pulaski Skyway. For me, and for my father, New York City and its industrial surround were a human creation beyond art, **[End Page 109]** and whatever pollution and environmental devastation we were vaguely aware of seemed not only inevitable, but romantic. For my father, whose hopes of a college education vanished the year he graduated high school when the Great Depression hit, the distant, wavering flames burning off petroleum fumes in Elizabeth were candles lit in honor of America's postwar industrial boom and the smoke that darkened the sky was incense--even the horrific stockyard smell near Secaucus (if we were entering Manhattan via the Lincoln Tunnel) was humorous: "P.U. Secaucus," we'd laugh. Of course, the conclusion of our journey, and the greatest product of America's industrialization, was New York City itself. It was the largest and, we assumed, the most dynamic city in the world. That seemed obvious from the panorama we could see from the top of the Empire State Building and from the awesome golden cavern of the Radio City Music Hall, two of the inevitable goals of these trips.

This consciousness of New York City as the great American product of successful, democratic industrialization remained with me through my adolescence and into my twenties, when history and my personal circumstances revealed a new sense of the American city. During my six years living in Gainesville, Florida, as a graduate student at the University of Florida, I couldn't help but wonder what Gainesville residents did for a living. Except for the university itself, there didn't seem to be any substantial employers, no big factories--and yet every year I was there, Gainesville grew by a considerable percentage. It wasn't until much later that I realized the obvious: that Gainesville's "industry" was the building of Gainesville itself (when I arrived in 1960 the population was less than 30,000; as of 1990 the city had tripled in size, and Alachua County had passed 180,000). Increasingly, my sense of the city as a product--epitomized by Manhattan--gave way to a new sense of the American city-in-process, growing larger and suburbanizing, so that increasingly it made sense to rank cities in terms of the population of the metropolitan **[End Page 110]** areas of which they were a part. If I remained snobbishly loyal to the idea of New York as the best an American city could be, I couldn't help but recognize that the "new," expanding metro areas in Florida, Texas, Arizona, and especially, California, were where the real city-building energy was, and as the metropolitan area of Los Angeles passed the metro area of Chicago, I was forced to realize that it might be only a matter of time before the New York area was no longer the biggest urban space, even in the United States.

In recent years, the relationship of the expansion of cities and their resulting transformations not merely of the landscapes within them and immediately surrounding them, but of landscapes geographically distant from city centers, has resulted in a third sense of the city, one suggested by Marc Reisner in his discussion of photographer Eliot Porter's *The Place No One Knew*:

In most years, San Francisco, a full-fledged semi-desert, sees no rainfall for six months; it is sustained by distant snowmelt collected behind a dam--the only large dam [the Hetch Hetchy Dam] ever built inside a national park [Yosemite]. Los Angeles, on the threshold of true desherhood while it emulates Miami, lies in its dry basin with three huge river-fed catheters hooked to its nose. ¹

That the modern cityscape is developed by the transformation, even the destruction, of rural landscapes long distances away is increasingly confronting all thinking people who love both the dynamism of the city experience and the serenity of the traditional experience of landscape, with the complex riddle of how to achieve a productive balance between the two, no-longer-separable worlds.

Of course, lovers of visual spectacle have been fascinated with cities since before the invention of the kinetograph and the cinématographe. Indeed, the popularity of panoramic paintings of major cities during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries suggests that public enjoyment of the imaging of urban life may have been a contributor to the development of an audience for cinema. ² And further, from the beginning of film history, imaging of cities (in this country, of New York and San Francisco, in particular) was popular--and sometimes visually inventive: see, for example, *Panorama Water Front*

and *Brooklyn and Bridge from East River* (1903) and *New York City "Ghetto" Fish Market* [End Page 111] (1903), both produced by Thomas Edison.³ New York was also the subject of the Charles Sheeler/Paul Strand collaboration, *Manhatta* (1921), one of, if not the first landmark of American avant-garde film.⁴ And by the end of the nineteen-twenties, the modern metropolis had not only become the location for a good many memorable commercial films--Charlie Chaplin's *The Immigrant* (1917) and *The Kid* (1921), Harold Lloyd's *Safety Last* (1923), King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928), Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1928), Buster Keaton's *The Cameraman* (1928)--but had inspired its own form: the city symphony.

The city symphony form began as a set of homages to the first sense of the modern city I've described. Alberto Cavalcanti's *Rien que les Heures* (*Nothing but the Hours*, 1926), Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: die Sinfonie einer Grossstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a Big City*, 1927), and Dziga Vertov's *The Man With a Movie Camera* (1929) provided choreographed depictions of a representative day in the life of the modern city from before dawn until after dark. In the United States the city symphony developed first in the nineteen-thirties in a series of New York City films (largely imitative of, and less impressive than the triad of European city symphonies); then in the nineteen-forties and fifties in films by Rudy Burckhardt, Weegee, and Larry Jordan; and in more recent decades by a wide range of depictions of city spaces and life.⁵ In general, the history of the New York city symphonies (and for that matter, the early New York City films by the Edison and American Muto- scope & Biograph Studios and *Manhatta*) has confirmed the sense of the modern city as the ultimate product of modernity--the attitude toward the city that dominated my childhood. Those films closest to being city symphonies of San Francisco and Los Angeles, however, have tended to reflect the second and third senses of the modern American city I've described.

I. San Francisco: Frank Stauffacher's *Sausalito* (1948) and *Notes on the Port of St. Francis* (1952)



Of course, any discussion of films about San Francisco must be contextualized by our recognition that no American city, with the possible exception of New York, has been as frequently depicted by as wide a range of filmmakers. Few [End Page 112] American locations are as familiar to post-war American film audiences. Such pop classics as *Vertigo* (1958), *Bullitt* (1968), and *Dirty Harry* (1971) established San Francisco as a location for cinematic romance and suspense, which it has remained; and a good many avant-garde filmmakers have used San Francisco as a location for psychic and formal explorations: in the nineteen-forties, Sidney Peterson and James Broughton (*The Potted Psalm*, 1946; *The Cage*, 1947); Peterson working alone (*Lead Shoes*, 1949); in the nineteen-sixties, Bruce Baillie (*Mass for the Dakota Sioux*, 1964), Robert Nelson (*Oh Dem Watermelons*, 1965; *The Great Blondino*, co-made with William T. Wiley, 1967); and more recently, George Kuchar (*A Reason to Live*, 1976) and Ernie Gehr (*Eureka*, 1974; *Side/Walk/Shuttle*, 1991). In fact, Gehr's *Side/Walk/Shuttle*, which was shot from a location close to where Eadweard Muybridge made his San Francisco panorama, reminds us that the Bay Area's importance in the history of motion pictures predates cinema itself.⁶



By the time he made *Notes on the Port of St. Francis*, Frank Stauffacher was aware not only of the San Francisco surrealist films of the forties, but of the [End Page 113] earlier history of European city symphonies, as a result of his collaboration with Richard Foster on the Art in Cinema film series, which began at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1947 and was to influence a generation of West Coast filmmakers (and to serve as a crucial resource for Amos Vogel's New York film society, Cinema 16).⁷ Art in Cinema's seventh program, "Fantasy into Documentary," presented Cavalcanti's *Rien que les Heures* (*Nothing But the Hours*, 1926) and Ruttmann's *Berlin: die Sinfonie einer Grosstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a Big City*, 1927). In fact, Stauffacher's first film *Sausalito*, co-made with Barbara Stauffacher in 1948, was a loose amalgam of surrealist invention and the city symphony. Whimsical bits of observation of Sausalito--a small town just across the Golden Gate to the north of San Francisco, that during the forties was an artists' colony with a raffish history as a port town with saloons, bordellos, and gambling joints--are combined with surrealist juxtapositions and interruptions of image, and of sound and image. Divided into two parts ("Landscape" and "Song"), *Sausalito* reveals the various sectors of the town and some of its moods while developing a set of visual motifs reminiscent of [End Page 114] Maya Deren and Sidney Peterson and of the French avant garde of the twenties: an eye looking at the camera through holes in a fence, a man carrying a violin, a phone off the hook, a seashell seen in various contexts....

Perhaps the most notable dimension of *Sausalito* is Stauffacher's care with the soundtrack, which is developed as fully as the visuals and in analogous ways.⁸ For example, in the midst of a sequence of Sausalito houses accompanied by violin, Stauffacher includes a close-up of a woman peeking out a window from behind the curtain. For this one shot, the violin music stops abruptly, then continues again with the next image: a pan of a sailboat moving across the harbour, a vista that is interrupted by a pole halfway across the image--just as the sound was interrupted a moment earlier. As is true with Stauffacher's visual imagery, the soundtrack develops a series of motifs, and from time to time it is layered, just as images are superimposed.

In a sense, Stauffacher uses *Sausalito* as a metaphor for his own filmmaking. The unusual environment of Sausalito, just beyond the margins of the commercial center of San Francisco, is analogous to his whimsical surrealist film, which is part of a tradition that has developed outside the margins of commercial filmmaking. For Stauffacher, in fact, *Sausalito* was experimental by virtue of its very informality. In a response to a letter from Amos Vogel that included criticisms of the film by the Cinema 16 audience (*Sausalito* was presented at Cinema 16 in November 1950), Stauffacher explained,

I felt it legitimate to let it go as a truly experimental piece, with the good and the bad left as they were [rather than, as he explains earlier, to change the film in response to the "quite valid" criticisms]; in the nature of a 'sketch.' For I feel an experimental film carried to a point of perfection can really no longer be called experimental.... What I was trying to do was to convey a mood, an atmosphere--but punctuated with enough satire to prevent it's [sic] becoming pretentiously arty.⁹

Notes on the Port of St. Francis was Stauffacher's second foray into the city film. It, too, is distinct from the city symphonies of the twenties, not only because--like *Sausalito*--it is not precisely a city symphony in the classic sense of the term (it does not present a day in the life of San Francisco), but because of its emphasis on the city's remarkable history. **[End Page 115]**

Notes on the Port of St. Francis is shaped in two ways: by Stauffacher's organization of his visuals and by the juxtaposition of these visuals and the soundtrack. Visually, *Notes* is divided into eight sections, each separated from the next by a fade-out, a moment of darkness, and a fade-in. After the opening credits (and a quote from Walter de la Mare, the first stanza of "An Epitaph": "Here lies a most beautiful lady;/Light of step and heart was she;/I think she was the most beautiful lady/That ever was in the west county"), ¹⁰ the opening section provides a rough overview of the history of San Francisco. The remaining sections focus on, respectively, people negotiating the city's hills via cable car, automobile, and go-cart; the speed of the city's development; the general mixture of ethnic groups and types of people; the Italian-Americans and Fisherman's Wharf; the Chinese-Americans and China-town; the fog; and finally, the city's diverse neighborhoods, a section that leads to the concluding idea of San Francisco as a "City of Contrasts." ¹¹ Each of the sections has its own overall structure; and some sections are structured more rigorously than others: the second section, for example, is precisely organized by means of intercutting, so that we see cable cars, an automobile, and several young boys with go-carts climbing hills, reaching the top (actually, the automobile gets stuck part way up a hill), and descending the other side (the automobile backs down the hill the driver apparently had hoped to climb). Throughout the film Stauffacher enforces the "City of Contrasts" idea by shooting the city from both San Francisco Bay and from the hills.

Stauffacher's use of sound provides a second kind of organization. During sections 1, 3, 4, 6, and 8, the visual imagery is contextualized by a spoken narration, delivered by Vincent Price, made up of excerpts from an 1882 essay about San Francisco by Robert Louis Stevenson, ¹² along with assorted passages **[End Page 116]** of music and environmental sound). The excerpts from Stevenson emphasize the speed with which San Francisco had developed by 1882: scarcely one generation before Stevenson wrote, the area had barely been settled, and during the span of a single lifetime San Francisco had become a major city. The juxtaposition of Stevenson's commentary with Stauffacher's contemporary images of the city causes what we are seeing to seem further proof of Stevenson's observations: when he explains that "According to Indian tales, perhaps older than the name of California, it [San Francisco] once rose out of the sea in a moment, and sometime or other shall, in a moment, sink again," Stauffacher provides a downward tilt shot of the city filmed from the Bay that replicates the idea of the city rising suddenly out of the water. Given the introductory quotation from Walter de La Mare, it is difficult not to think of San Francisco as a goddess, like Botticelli's Venus, rising from the sea.

Overall, *Notes on the Port of St. Francis* is a relatively conventional city film that **[End Page 117]** sings the city's distinctiveness and beauty without betraying much consciousness of the the down sides of city life that might be a function of the city's

development or of the effects of this development on the geography of California. While this film is less openly inventive than *Sausalito*, Stauffacher's imagery is capably shot and edited and his soundtrack is reasonably dynamic: in fact, his mixture of music, sound, and narration is thoughtful enough that he may have meant the "Notes" in his title to refer to both the informality of his visuals and his care with sound: the idea of musical "notes" may have been a subtle way of connecting his film with the European city symphonies of the twenties.

The one obvious "downside" to San Francisco life evident in *Notes on the Port of St. Francis* is implicit in the phrase, "and sometime or other shall, in a moment, sink again." The vulnerability of San Francisco to earthquake inspired a good many of the earliest films about the city, which documented the disaster of the 1906 earthquake and fire. ¹³ However, my (non-Californian) sense of both Stauffacher's use of the Stevenson line, and of the early actualities that **[End Page 118]** record the devastation of 1906, is that a good many San Franciscans (including filmmakers who are drawn to live in the Bay Area and make movies about it) have always seen the beauty of San Francisco as, at least in part, a function of the city's precariousness. Indeed, there seems a defiant determination among some San Franciscans (then and now) not only to take earthquakes in stride, but to take pride in this particular urban version of "living dangerously."



Something of the spirit of Stauffacher's *Sausalito* and *Notes on the Port of St. Francis* remained alive, first, in Larry Jordan's *Visions of a City* (shot in 1957, edited in 1978); and in a series of recent films by Dominic Angerame: *Continuum* (1987), *Deconstruction Sight* (1990), *Premonition* (1995), and *In the Course of Events* (1997). All of these films combine the observation of downtown San Francisco characteristic of *Notes* with a surrealist sense of composition and sound-image juxtaposition reminiscent of *Sausalito*. ¹⁴ Unlike Stauffacher's San Francisco film, however (and the Stevenson essay it seems to have evolved from), the Angerame films do not sing the excitement either of the evolution of the modern city or of the city as **[End Page 119]** the culminating product of the industrial revolution. The focus of the Angerame films is, increasingly, the precariousness of the modern city.

Continuum uses single, and sometimes multiple, exposures to depict maintenance workers sandblasting, tarring, welding in compositionally mysterious urban spaces. In *Deconstruction Sight*, the focus is on the demolishing of a large modern building by men and machines, both during the day and at night. Indeed, as the film moves into evening, the pace of the "destruction" accelerates via time lapse photography, and the steam shovels roam around the rubble like mechanized raptors. While the disassembling of the building in *Deconstruction Sight* seems an implicit critique of the emphasis on progress in conventional city symphonies, *Premonition*, as its title suggests, uses a notable result of the 1989 earthquake--its undermining of the Embarcadero Freeway ¹⁵ --as a "premonition" of the second half of the Indian tale Stevenson refers to. Angerame's film focuses on the virtually empty freeway (used only by an occasional jogger or bicyclist, and by graffiti artists) in a series of juxtapositions with the busy downtown through which it curves--juxtapositions sometimes reminiscent of those in Stauffacher's *Sausalito*. Near the end of *Premonition*, Angerame focuses on an anonymous graffiti work, painted on the surface of the roadway, in which huge sperm seem to march forward into emptiness. As

Premonition develops, Angerame traces the sperm to their source: a masturbating stick figure. The graffiti seems an apt metaphor for modern city-building as a self-serving extravagance, in the long run an "ejaculation" into nothingness. The implications of *Deconstruction* and *Premonition* are combined and elaborated in *In the Course of Events*, where Angerame focuses on the demolition of the Embarcadero Freeway. While Angerame is aware of the history of avant-garde depictions of San Francisco (and environs), his mood is sometimes creepy, sometimes eerily sensual, but virtually always somber. If his compositions sometimes (and perhaps consciously) evoke Stauffacher's imagery, the difference in the two filmmakers' moods suggests Angerame's rebellion against a more upbeat attitude toward this urban center. Angerame's rebellion is confirmed by his particular use of black and white, which reflects his somber vision of San Francisco, even as his frequently arresting chiaroscuro and texture reveal a passion for the remarkable city where he has spent his adult life. **[End Page 120]**

2. Pat O'Neill's *Water and Power* (1989)



If *Notes on the Port of St. Francis* is, at least on one level, a rumination on the growth of a metropolitan area, and Angerame's trilogy, a rumination on its possible demise, Pat O'Neill's *Water and Power* can be seen as a reflection on the nature of metropolitan development from a position beyond the original excitements and doubts about its physical construction and potential longevity. Indeed, as the opening sequence (a man, seen in extreme long shot, walks out onto a railroad trestle and jumps off) suggests, contemporary urbanization may be a form of psychic suicide.

Even more fully than *Notes on the Port of St. Francis* and the Angerame films, *Water and Power* does not conform to the city symphony structure developed in Europe: indeed, O'Neill's depiction of Los Angeles can be read as a revision of the form, that reflects the more complex relationship of city and country we have been forced to recognize as a result of the West's dwindling water resources. In *The Sky on Location* (1983), Babette Mangolte's imagery of Mono Lake is contextualized with a narration that makes clear that the startlingly beautiful tufa columns that rise out of the lake, and that presumably draw tourists (including filmmakers and photographers), are only visible because the water that would otherwise rise above even the highest of these formations has been siphoned off by one of the aqueducts that supplies L.A., hundreds of miles to the southwest. The paradox of Mono Lake's beauty--that these bizarre formations, which in another era might have caused Mono Lake to be set aside as a national park like Bryce Canyon or Arches, are a result of L.A.'s urban sprawl--lies at the heart of *Water and Power*.

For nearly thirty years, Pat O'Neill has explored the potential of the optical printer for synthesizing diverse imagery into surreal films that are simultaneously high spirited, formally stunning, and mysterious. *Water and Power* was, at least as of 1989, the most elaborate and impressive of these films. ¹⁶ While it is only fifty-four minutes long, its impact is that of a feature film, and a complex one at that, not only because it is in 35mm, but because, throughout the film, we are seeing multiple layers of image, most all of which were originally recorded in time lapse, accompanied by a complex and evocative soundtrack made up of jazz, sound effects, and bits of narration. **[End Page 121]**

By the seventies the virtually inevitable use of time-lapse to reveal the representative patterns of daily life in the city, especially in Weegee's *New York* (1954, by Weegee and Amos Vogel), *Go! Go! Go!* (1964, by Marie Menken), *Organism* (1975, by Hilary Harris), *Concern for the City* (1986, by Peter von Ziegesar)--as well as in Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (1984) and Ron Fricke's *Chronos* (1987), which depict urban spaces as parts of a broader survey of human experience, had rendered the representative day in the life of a city a cell of larger cinematic organisms. *Water and Power* represents a further step in this evolution: O'Neill reveals the modern city as layer over layer of time-lapsed cells of experience, and makes no pretense of reducing Los Angeles into anything like a single, coherent understanding. In *Water and Power*, Los Angeles is not merely an elaborate reality; it is a nearly overwhelming surreality.

O'Neill's use of the optical printer for synthesizing each sequence of *Water and Power* is, in a sense, the film's fundamental metaphor: just as O'Neill's optical printer provides a second level of representation, where the imagery he has recorded with the 35mm camera is re-presented as a series of confluences of diverse spaces and activities, the Los Angeles he reveals to us is a series of confluences of divergent experiences, all of which are interwoven within the larger urban tapestry. A series of particular confluences provide the prevailing motifs of *Water and Power*. The most obvious of these involve the depiction of indoor/outdoor spaces, of urban/rural spaces; and of the present and the past. Immediately after the title "Water and Power," O'Neill reveals, simultaneously, the inside of a bare room with a small table and chair in front of an empty water-stained wall, filmed in time-lapse so that the sheets of light made by the sunshine coming from the window to the left and behind (the same windows, presumably, that we see in the first shot after the title) move from left to right, across floor and wall; and a blue sky with cumulus clouds, again, recorded in time-lapse, moving from right to left on the same, far wall (a further "layer" of information is provided by an excerpt from Edgar J. Ulmer's *Detour* (1945), heard on the soundtrack--more on this, later). After a moment, the time-lapsed sky and clouds fade out and the movement of time-lapsed light through the bare room continues through the day until dusk and the screen fades to darkness. Next, a time-lapsed image of the moon--accompanied by the sound of a locomotive--moves diagonally across the frame from **[End Page 122]** lower left to upper right (as if to signal the passing of the night following the day represented by the image of room and sky); and then, after another moment of darkness, a second "representative day" dawns, and we are tracking along the Owens Valley aqueduct from left to right (in time-lapse, to the accompaniment of jazz)--a desert mountain is visible in the background--and, a few seconds later, from left to right along an Los Angeles street where (time-lapsed) people go about their business.

Even this brief opening passage (what I've described takes approximately

2 1/2 minutes) is full of implications for the city symphony form. While both the European city symphonies of the twenties and the post-war American city symphonies of New York and San Francisco focus on public spaces and on individuals as components of the public sphere, O'Neill suggests the obvious: that the modern city is not simply a public space or a set of public spaces, but a concentration of particular private spaces as well. And while the city symphony form has assumed that the city is a space that can be dealt

with as basically separate from the country, O'Neill suggests what we know to be true: that every dimension of city life is made possible by alternations in the country that surrounds the city--and further, that the very social and political power of modern cities, and especially those of the American Southwest, is dependent on the water table of land hundreds of miles from the city. Indeed, as O'Neill himself has pointed out to me, the drainage of water from the Owens Valley by the Owens Valley aqueduct has rendered that valley a new "death valley." ¹⁷ In the world of *Water and Power*, city and country are not alternative spaces or synergic spaces: one exists precisely at the cost of the other.

O'Neill's confluences of present and past in *Water and Power* extend these implications. In the tradition of the city symphony, the city is quite precisely the primary artifact and symbol of modernity, of the present: it is where everything is happening. But in *Water and Power*, O'Neill uses several strategies for undercutting **[End Page 123]** the simplicity of this notion. For one thing, the Los Angeles O'Neill documents in the "present" is simultaneously the Los Angeles of a generation ago: we never see the current center city skyline that's recently become so familiar; when a skyline shot is included, the centerpiece is the Los Angeles City Hall, that art deco landmark so familiar from fifties and sixties film and television. If typical recent imagery of Los Angeles seems an attempt to display the city's "city-ness" by revealing that, like other American cities ("real cities" like New York and Chicago), Los Angeles can boast its own distinctive cluster of center-city skyscrapers. O'Neill presents an earlier sense of Los Angeles--the one Babette Mangolte refers to in her *There? Where?* (1979)--as a city without a focus, where "there is no there there." (A significant exception here is the film's longest "shot," a one-minute, forty-nine second time-lapse image of a street, down which, midway through the shot, come tens of thousands of runners in the 1988 Los Angeles Marathon; on the left side of the street we do see a skyscraper of more recent vintage; nevertheless, even here, the focus of the shot is the street and the evolving activities, not this building).

This conflation of present and past is also confirmed by O'Neill's recycling image and sound from a series of Hollywood films that suggest a skeletal history of the film industry. Near the end--of the multi-layered sequence described in the previous paragraph, O'Neill incorporates--within a frame-within-the-frame--imagery from Cecil B. DeMille's original version of *The Ten Commandments* (1923). At other moments in *Water and Power*, image and sound from Josef von Sternberg's *The Docks of New York* (1928) and *The Last Command* (1928), from a fifties television commercial for General Electric; and--as mentioned earlier--from Ulmer's *Detour* become part of O'Neill's imagery. These recyclings, like the imagery of the Los Angeles City Hall, are a regular reminder **[End Page 124]** that the present Los Angeles in which O'Neill is living and making film is what it is in considerable measure because of what it has been during earlier decades of this century. That nearly all the recycled imagery can be read as suggesting a collapse of hope or energy--and in the case of *Detour* and *The Last Command* of failed dreams of a new life in Los Angeles/Hollywood--confirms the mix of fascination and concern evident from the opening moment of *Water and Power*, when the man jumps off the trestle within a gorgeous, apocalyptic composition.

A final, and crucial interweaving of past and present is evident throughout the film in O'Neill's techniques themselves. If the sophisticated use of the optical printer (and during

indoor time-lapse shots, of O'Neill's own technique of making frame-by-frame time exposures so that gestural movements are captured on individual frames and pile up on the retina) represents an unusually high-tech approach for an independent filmmaker, O'Neill uses this approach in a way that recalls approaches used by the earliest filmmakers and by some **[End Page 125]** of those whose work paved the way for cinema itself. The time-lapsed indoor, black and white imagery of men and women doing various actions--walking, playing a ukelele, climbing a ladder--are modern versions of the motion photography of Eadweard Muybridge and of Etienne-Jules Marey. The reliance on relatively long takes of (usually time-lapsed) imagery suggests the one-shot-equals-one-film approach of the early Edison and Lumière Actualities. And O'Neill's complex layering of imagery to produce impossible scenes is a modern version of the trickfilm, as it was developed by George Méliès, Edwin S. Porter, and others. Of course, O'Neill's refusal to develop any sustained narration in *Water and Power* confirms the relationship of his approach to the beginnings of cinema.

While the scope of this discussion does not allow for anything like a thorough exploration of *Water and Power*, one last conflation, suggested perhaps by the foregoing discussion, deserves mention: O'Neill's combination of what, in this country, have traditionally been seen as quite different cinematic histories. Like his fellow Southern Californian, Morgan Fisher, O'Neill works between the history of industry filmmaking and the history of what is variously called avant-garde or experimental filmmaking (I prefer the term "critical cinema": avant-garde film has developed as a series of explicit/implicit critiques of mass-media conventions). *Water and Power* is a 35mm film. It is made by someone who has worked in the industry, using equipment generally reserved for big-budget movies--and it frequently alludes quite directly to this history. And yet, it is clearly an avant-garde film, and one that evokes several of the forms avant-garde film has taken during the past seventy-five years. Of course, the focus of this discussion has been the relevance of *Water and Power* to the history of the city symphony; but the surreality of O'Neill's imagery--and of the brief visual texts that interrupt his more complex visual imagery **[End Page 126]** (e.g., "Lucy, a man/who once made thousands of dollars a day/and who ran into trouble/ran out of luck/and now does other people's jobs/answers telephone calls/cleans up after dogs/cuts down trees/drives to the dump in a rented truck/hurls branches off the truck/hurls old televisions off the truck/boxes full of glass jars, hubcaps, mirrors/hurls everything as far as he can/and listens to the screaming of the Caterpillars")--relates the film to the history of surreal film that begins in Europe in the twenties and becomes so typical of post-war independent filmmaking in San Francisco. And other familiar avant-garde tendencies--recycling earlier film has been mentioned--are also evident. There are even moments of abstract animation, à la Oskar Fischinger.

In its mixture of geographic and historical terrains, and of cinematic approaches, *Water and Power* can be seen as, simultaneously, an emblem of despair and of hope. That the film begins with an apparent suicide, and from time-to-time echoes the implications of this opening (in one, three-layered sequence, time-lapse imagery of a tidal flat is layered with a time-lapsed pan **[End Page 127]** of a city dump, and with a time-lapsed man who paints the phrase, "swamp of despair" (the "despair" subsequently turns into "desire") on a wall; in another, two-layered sequence, time-lapsed imagery of a city intersection with the word "danger" painted on the street, and a time-lapsed man's shadow making

ambiguous hand gesture, is accompanied by the sound of an air-raid siren, suggesting O'Neill's ambivalence about the future of Los Angeles, and perhaps of American city life in general. Certainly the city is complex and fascinating, energetic and often beautiful. But this is a beauty leading... where? If O'Neill tends to take cover in an earlier sense of Los Angeles, when for most people it was an image of sunshine and Hollywood, he is haunted by a newer sense of the city as the epitome of environmental exploitation. No solution is posed; indeed, as a filmmaker who chooses to work in Los Angeles because of the facilities available there--and because he is rooted in this desert space--O'Neill is aware that he is more problem than solution. If the difficulty of *Water and Power* is its very obscurity, its endless surreal pile-ups of image and sound that must be virtually opaque to the majority of viewers (even as we recognize O'Neill's technical dexterity and his commitment to a labor-intensive film that can hardly repay his abilities and efforts in any practical way), its strength is in its rerouting of the city symphony, a form O'Neill implicitly deconstructs in order to renew.

[Scott MacDonald](#) has authored three volumes of interviews with independent filmmakers--*A Critical Cinema* (University of California Press, 1988), *A Critical Cinema 2* (1992), and *A Critical Cinema 3* (forthcoming)--a volume of essays on landmark independent films--*Avant-Garde Film/Motion Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), and is editor of a collection of texts and scripts from independent films, *Screen Writings* (California, 1995). He teaches film studies and American studies at Utica College and Hamilton College.

Notes

1. Marc Reisner, "Introduction" to Eliot Porter, *The Place No One Knew: Glen Canyon on the Colorado*, ed. David Brower (New York: Sierra Club and Ballentine Books, 1968).
2. Richard D. Altick's *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978) is a remarkable history of various forms of precinematic spectacle presented in London from 1600 to the 1850s. Chapter 10, "The Panorama in Leicester Square," discusses the history of Robert Barker's popular panorama of the city of London.
3. Both films are available at the Library of Congress, and in "American Memory," a program of early films about New York City, available at the Early Motion Pictures home page: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/papr/mpixhome.html>. The latter is the subject of a recent Ken Jacobs "Nervous System" performance (in various versions since 1992): Jacobs uses two analytic projectors and a propeller of his own design to tease a wide range of effects from the original Edison film.
4. See Jan-Christopher Horak's discussion of *Manhatta*, "Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's *Manhatta*," in Horak, ed., *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde 1919-1945* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 267-86. A longer version of this discussion, including a shot-by-shot breakdown of the film, appeared in *Afterimage* vol. 15, no. 4 (November 1987): 8-15. See also Horak, *Making Images Move: Photographers and Avant-Garde Cinema* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 79-98.

- [5.](#) For a discussion of the New York city symphonies of the thirties, see William Uricchio, "The City Viewed: The Films of Leyda Browning and Weinberg," in Jan-Christopher Horak, ed., *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde 1919-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin in Press, 1995), 267-86. I discuss Burckhardt's city films and more recent New York City films in "The City As the Country: The New York City Symphony from Rudy Burckhardt to Spike Lee," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 51, no. 1 (Winter 1997).
- [6.](#) Photographed in 1878, Muybridge's panorama is available as a fold-out (along with a photographic panorama taken from the same spot in 1990 by Mark Klett) in *One City/Two Visions* (San Francisco: Bedford Arts, 1990).
- [7.](#) See Frank Stauffacher, ed., *Art in Cinema* (New York: Arno, 1968) for more information about Art in Cinema; and Scott MacDonald, ed., "Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society," a special issue of *Wide Angle*, vol. 19, nos. 1,2 (January/June 1997) for information about Cinema 16.
- [8.](#) Stauffacher makes clear the importance of the soundtrack for Sausalito in a letter to Amos Vogel written on August 7, 1949: "There are a lot of local films in production.... I myself have one about half finished, a kind of personal documentary of a place. I intend having it finished by the fall. It is held up by lack of money for a soundtrack. The track will be a rather important factor in the whole, and so I'm waiting till I can scrape enough together. It will be called SAUSALITO." Letter reprinted in MacDonald, ed., "Cinema 16," 144.
- [9.](#) See letter to Amos Vogel from Frank Stauffacher, 1/6/51, in MacDonald, ed., "Cinema 16," 174.
- [10.](#) De la Mare, *The Complete Poems of Walter de la Mare* (New York: Knopf, 1970), 135. The second stanza (of two): "But beauty vanishes; beauty passes;/However rare it be;/And when I crumble, who will remember/This lady of the West Country?" "An Epitaph" was the second-to-last poem in the 1912 collection, *The Listeners and Other Poems*.
- [11.](#) *City of Contrasts* is the title of an earlier, New York city symphony by Irving Browning. For a (very generous) discussion of Browning's film, see William Uricchio, "The City Viewed."
- [12.](#) Stevenson's "San Francisco" is collected in *Robert Louis Stevenson, From Scotland to Silverado*, ed., James D. Hart (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 179-87.
- [13.](#) See the library of Congress "American Memory" program of films about San Francisco, available at the Early Motion Pictures Home Page: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/papr/mpixhome.html>.
- [14.](#) The focus in Jordan's film is the way in which the reflective surfaces so common to modern urban construction shatter our sense of continuous space. People on the street

and vehicles are seen in various forms of reflection (some of them reminiscent of the widely-known New York city symphony, *N.Y., N.Y.*, made the same year by Francis Thompson). The surreal quality of many of Jordan's compositions is enhanced by the music track.

Like Stauffacher, Angerame's contributions to independent filmmaking go beyond the production of his own films: he is director of Canyon Cinema in San Francisco, which is the most dependable distributor of avant-garde film in the United States. In a recent phone conversation (on April 9, 1997), Angerame indicated his admiration of Frank Stauffacher and his familiarity with *Notes of the Port of St. Francis*. At the time of our conversation, Angerame had not seen *Sausalito*.

[15.](#) The two-story Embarcadero Freeway was forced upon an unwilling San Francisco, who viewed it as an eyesore that blocked prime views of the Bay. It was originally supposed to connect up with the Golden Gate Bridge, but public outcry stymied that action. Now the earthquake has created a condition necessitating the demolition of the remainder of the structure.

[16.](#) Since completing *Water and Power*, O'Neill has completed *Trouble in the Image* (1996), which is at least as complex as the earlier film.

[17.](#) I spoke with O'Neill on June 19, 1996. According to O'Neill, the Owens Valley was the inspiration for Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) with which *Water and Power* shares a general visual tonality. "Notes for *Water and Power*" is included in *Millennium Film Journal*, No. 25 (1991): 42-49.

Muse	Search	Journals	This Journal	Contents	Top
----------------------	------------------------	--------------------------	------------------------------	--------------------------	---------------------