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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

A Field Guide to *Exit Zero*: Urban Landscape Essay Films, 1921 till Now

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

FILM & DIGITAL MEDIA

by

S Topiary Landberg

March 2020

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2020

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ABSTRACT

A FIELD GUIDE TO *EXIT ZERO*: URBAN LANDSCAPE ESSAY FILMS, 1921 TILL NOW

S. Topiary Landberg

This hybrid theory-practice dissertation advocates for a landscape mode of documentary media-making. Providing case studies from the history of non-narrative city filmmaking, this work breaks new ground by locating this form in the context of environmentalist and social justice concerns. Having been guided by two central questions: what is the subjectivity of a landscape, and what does it mean to say that a landscape has subjectivity?, this research provides an historical overview of non-narrative methodologies for representing urban nature as a collective subject and a collaborative agent. Foregrounding the function of musical and temporal structures, the use of improvisational techniques, and highlights queer strategies of representation, this dissertation expands considerations of the city symphony genre to attend to jazz, feminist, postmodern and environmentalist developments of form. It also considers the lyric role of the acousmatic (off-screen) voice in relationship to the visual landscape and explores how the spoken word inspires productive forms of identification and *dis*-identification with the visual environment. The practice-based component of the research is *Exit Zero: An Atlas of One City Block through Time*, is an interactive documentary of a single city block located in central San Francisco.

This web-based media artwork presents a long-view of the processes of gentrification and urban transformation. As a synecdoche for the hyper-gentrification of San Francisco, *Exit Zero* provides a poetic framework in which to explore the multiple dramatic metamorphoses of the city block made famous by Hayes Valley Farm, the temporary community garden built on top of a former freeway exit. Using the interaction metaphors of the compass and the timeline, this work juxtaposes the impacts of government policy and public infrastructure against the forces of anti-freeway activism and community social practice. Visitors are rewarded for their curiosity and encouraged to explore the various states of development and transformation of this block in a non-linear fashion, enacting a collaborative and improvisational relationship to the project's content and enabling the discovery of uncanny interconnections and poetic rhymes between seemingly disparate time periods. In arguing for the urgency of validating a landscape mode of media-making that instigates collective forms of identification, this practice-theory dissertation catalyzes a new understanding of landscape as both a collective subject and an collaborative orientation to media-making.

Dedication

This dissertation reflects my allegiances to both sides of the Hudson River:

To New York City, the land where my father was born,
and where so much of my own adult life has been lived,
and to New Jersey, the place where I was first formed,
And from where I trace my Bohemian side.

I dedicate this work to the memory of my father, George E. Landberg
the person who taught me how to look at the world askance
and have confidence in my own particular ways of seeing things,
and to my mother Barbara L. Stern Landberg
who continues to model participation and persistence
in the most beautiful and generous ways.

And to EKR,
who has acted as both my anchor and my sail
over the entire river of this journey.

Acknowledgements

As Jodi Dean has observed: “Writing is solitary. Thinking is collective.”¹ During my time at UC Santa Cruz, I was truly blessed to be in the midst of a vibrant intellectual milieu and benefitted from being in the cross-currents of a number of inspiring intellectual forefronts, most notably the environmental anthropology and feminist science and technology studies. I was especially lucky to take part in Miriam Greenberg’s gentrification reading group with Kristin Miller, Erin McElroy and Rebecca Gourevitch, an experience that has deeply informed my understanding of the topic. Above all, I have greatly benefitted from the remarkable strength of the Film and Digital Media department, particularly in the realms of documentary, nontheatrical and experimental media practices and I am especially grateful for the generosity, commitment and intellectual fellowship of both faculty and fellow graduate students, especially Anita Chang, Christina Corfield, Sharon Daniel, Anna Friz, Jennifer Gonzalez, Irene Gustafson, Fabiola Hanna, Jenny Horne, Alex Johnson, Brett Kashmere, Chip Lord, Irene Lusztig, Stephanie Moore, Marc Francis Newman, LuLing Osofsky, B. Ruby Rich, Francesca Romeo, Benjamin Schultz- Figueroa, Warren Sack, Abram Aphid Stern, Andrea Steves and Gustavo Vasquez.

My research benefited from access to archives at the Carnegie Museum of Art archives, the Museum of Modern Art Film Study Center, the Prelinger Library, the Internet Archive, the San Francisco Public Library History Center, the Bancroft Library, the David Rumsey Map Center at Stanford University and the friends of Diane Bonder who lovingly crowd-sourced materials for me: Liss Platt, Felice Shays, Shannon Johnson, Mary Feaster, Cynthia Madansky, Terri-Lee Burger, Kathy High and Joanna Raczynska. I am grateful to EE Miller who first introduced me to Diane’s work and who co-curated the program “Are You Together?” with me at the MIX/NY Festival in 2006, from which the concept of Chapter four arose and to Jenni Olson. I also benefitted from relationships forged at Visible Evidence and SCMS, and I am particularly grateful to Anthony Kinik and Erica Stein for their work and friendship.

¹ Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (London and New York: Verso), 7.

There is a whole raft of folks to thank for their participation and support with *Exit Zero*. I am grateful to all of my interview subjects including Bill Issel, David Johnson, Dave Glass, Jason Henderson, Margaretha Houghwout, Madeline Behrens-Brigham and Robin Levitt for welcoming us into their homes and particularly to Robin and Madeline for lending me the use of their personal materials. I am grateful to Anna Friz, Kadet Kuhne and Ryder Cooley for allowing me to use their sounds and especially to Zoey Kroll, my dear friend and the original inspiration for the project, for her on-going participation in the project, her cheerleading, support and friendship. Michael Kahan and Peggy Phelan invited me to participate in the Stanford Creative Cities Working Group and gave me a couple of platforms to speak about the work. They and all of the members of that group and particularly Aku Ammah-Tagoe shared valuable brilliant ideas and critical insights. The Prelinger Library provided an expansive playground in which to source materials and Rick has been a stalwart source of support and inspiration.

Of course, Jonathan Kahana, my advisor, was the biggest intellectual influence on this work. Despite my intention to follow Gertrude Stein's famous ethic to write for oneself and strangers, I admit that I wrote much of this dissertation buoyed by the thought of Jonathan reading and responding to it. So strong was my desire to engage with his depth of commitment to the intersection between the poetics and the politics of documentary film, that it is his work and ideas that have most shaped and inspired my research for the written portion of this work. I am forever grateful for the grace of Jonathan's mind, his boundlessly insightful comments, his brilliant ideas and his close reads. I am especially cognizant of the cost of his attention at those times when he most needed rest. His sudden and untimely death is a tragedy that I never allowed myself to imagine and certainly not happening before I could benefit from his comments on the draft I so longed for him to read. I hope that in some small way this work will honor Jonathan's memory and be a tribute to the quality and depth of scholarship that he modeled to me.

Endless appreciation to my brilliant dissertation committee: Jennifer Peterson, Miriam Greenberg, Sharon Daniel, Scott MacDonald and Rick Prelinger whose questions and comments will continue to guide whatever the future directions of this

work. I am particularly grateful to Shelley Stamp for stepping in and reading an early draft of one of my chapters when Jonathan was out on medical leave and more generally for being such a model of professionalism, leadership and wisdom. As DGS, Peter Limbrick has been an incredibly kind and steady support and guide in how to continue on after Jonathan's sudden and untimely passing and I am indebted to him for all of his care and attention in the preparation for the defense. I am also indebted to Liz Miller and Nick Gamso for their comments and suggestion on various pieces of this work and more importantly for their on-going academic fellowship and especially friendship. Extra special thanks to Miguel Gutierrez, my sister in the struggle, who stepped up when I most needed support and proof-read the entire draft, making extra sure to curb my outrageous use of the run-on sentence. And finally, I am indebted to Rick Prelinger, for not only for stepping in and taking on the role of co-chair and helping me to cross the finish line, but for being such an inspiration and a model of community-oriented practice and creating new paradigms of archival access that affirm "the right to the image of the city."

My friends and support network outside of the university structure have been another important source of emotional support during these years and I am particularly grateful to Julie Wyman, Debra Schaffner, Chaim Gingold, Emily Harris, David Benjamin Cohen, Dunya Alwan, Sarah Nighswander, David Boyer, Marin Sander-Holzman, Anna Azrieli, Mim Tewksbury, Abby Crain and my friends at the Oakland Museum of California, Rhonda Pagnozzi and Lisa Silberstein in particular. To my family, Judy and Ken Peskin for their financial as well as emotional support, to my awesome cousins, my brother and especially to my mother, Barbara Landberg, who has always been my champion. The two people to whom I owe the most debt of gratitude are without a doubt Isabelle Carbonell and Liz Rubin, both of whom contributed cinematography as well as many hours of conversation, on-going feedback and so much love and support during these years.

“Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.”²

— Jane Jacobs

² Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (London: Penguin Books, 1962), 238.

0

ON RAMP

Land Acknowledgement

I welcome you to this dissertation by acknowledging that I have researched, written and created the media for this dissertation on the ancestral home and unceded territories of the Ohlone (Costanoan) peoples including the Awaswas-speaking Uypi Tribe as well as speakers of Ramaytush and Chochenyo languages. This land was stolen by Catholic Spanish, Mexican, and then United States profiteers through acts of forced servitude, genocide, and deceit. The present-day Muwekma Ohlone Tribe is comprised of all of the known surviving American Indian lineages aboriginal to the San Francisco Bay region who trace their ancestry through the Missions Dolores, Santa Clara and San Jose and who were also members of the historic Federally Recognized Verona Band of Alameda County.¹ The Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, comprised of the descendants of indigenous people taken to missions Santa Cruz and San Juan Bautista during Spanish colonization of the Central Coast, is today working hard to restore traditional stewardship practices on these lands and heal from historical trauma. With this dissertation, I seek to understand my own place within the long-standing history that has brought me here to reside. I welcome the spirits of the ancestors into this work and I honor the life-giving power of the mighty redwoods that shade and seed the incomparably majestic lands bordering the Pacific Ocean. I honor this place that is a gathering point for a diverse eco-system of thought traditions, languages and peoples which have come from lands both near and far to find home.

¹ "Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area," Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, accessed 11/17/2019, <http://www.muwekma.org/tribalhistory/historicaloverview.html>.

Orientation

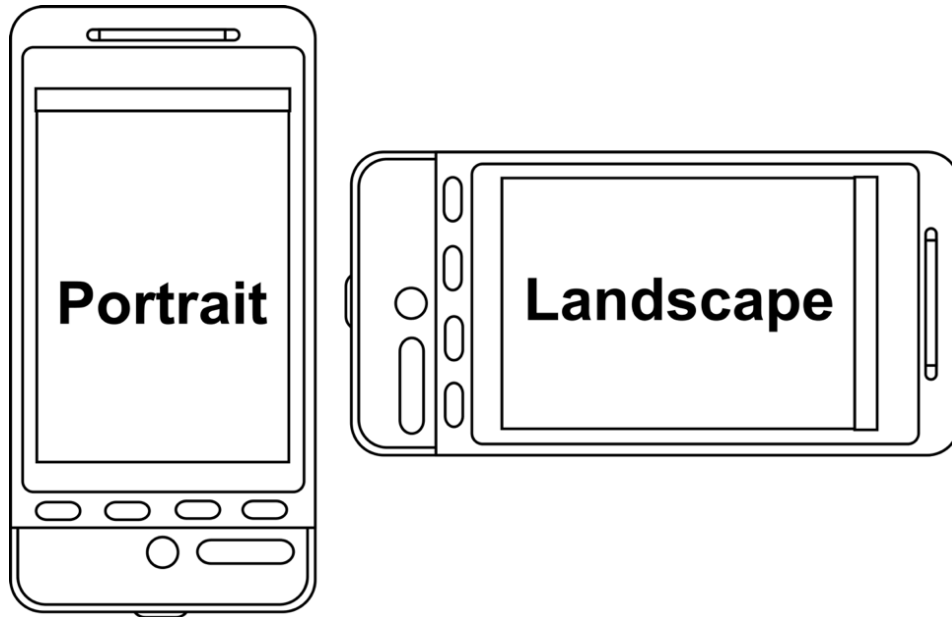


Figure 0.

The seeds of this dissertation were planted in the early stages of a non-linear documentary project I began making the year before I began my doctoral work. At that time, I was committed to creating media that documented collective environmental social actions taking place in the city. Having been inspired by my friend Zoey Kroll's involvement with Hayes Valley Farm, I was intrigued by the temporary nature of this urban permaculture project. And yet, when I began my PhD in September 2013, I was faced with a problem: now that the farm had closed and the project was over, I was unsure about its relevance or how to think about its impact. I was fascinated by the project and in admiration of the successes the Hayes Valley Farmers had achieved in transforming the former freeway exit ramps site into a

flourishing public garden. But, I also wondered if somehow, the project had unwittingly contributed to the hyper-gentrification of the area or how Hayes Valley Farm might fit into the larger context of the dramatic urban transformations of the entire region.

As I began to research how and why this temporary collective garden project had been granted permission by the city to “activate” a “blighted” central San Francisco city block, I learned about the history of the San Francisco freeway revolts of the 1960s and the the “Second Freeway Revolt” of the 1990s, in which the Hayes Valley Neighborhood Association organized to ultimately force the city to remove the freeway ramps and build needed housing. I also began to learn about the history of the surrounding Fillmore neighborhood and the larger historical context of San Francisco’s troubling racist urban redevelopment period. It seemed clear to me that this mid-twentieth century history also reverberated with the city’s earlier histories of genocidal violence and destruction unleashed during the Spanish Mission and Gold Rush periods. In my desire to place the history of this block and the issue of San Francisco’s urban development and gentrification in relationship to its important history of collective social action and protest, I sought an appropriate documentary methodology to capture these complexities. My practice-based research took place alongside of and was directly informed by my growing interest in the history of documentary films about gentrification, urban transformation and landscape filmmaking more generally. As my knowledge of landscape essay film history grew, I

was increasingly drawn to analyze the history of city filmmaking and specifically to the genre of city symphony and related non-narrative forms that configured the city as a collective subject.

* * * *

Practically every day we are confronted with the idea of “landscape” as an orientation—one of two choices of an inescapable binary—the portrait vs. the landscape mode. This binary conception of framing is encoded into our everyday relationships with our technological handmaidens such as the cellphone camera and the tablet. In this dissertation, I use the figure of a “landscape orientation” as a metaphor for a set of ethical and aesthetic positions informed by environmental and social and spatial justice convictions. In recent years, film studies has begun to join other humanities discourses in theorizing a cultural paradigm shift that is informed by the new realities brought about by climate disruption. Paula Willoquet-Maricondi describes this shift as how “we regard the place and function of humans on the planet and the way we value ecosystems.”² Informed by New Materialist theoretical work in the environmental humanities and social sciences that are helping scholars to reframe assumptions about the material world and the concepts of agency and object-ness,³

² Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, ed., *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 45.

³ Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, (Duke University Press, 2010); Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Picador, 2014); Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

my research has evolved out of a desire to apply eco-materialist and permaculture philosophical ideas to documentary film practice.

As a North American filmmaker, my understanding of drama, story and character have been indelibly shaped by the individualistic values of Western Anglo-American culture. From an early age, I was inculcated with the idea that moving image storytelling—whether fiction or nonfiction—must provide its viewers with experiences of emotional identification with individual characters they can directly identify with in order to capture and maintain interest in a subject. And, yet in my own media-making work, I have long resisted the limitations of story-telling predicated on conflict and individual action. In *The Poetics of Cinema*, Raúl Ruiz critiques what he terms as the “central conflict theory” of Hollywood filmmaking in which “someone wants something and someone else doesn’t want them to have it.”⁴ For Ruiz, this approach to film is oriented around the logics of capitalist competition and consumption, and as a result, marginalizes or excludes film experiences that offer experiences that might not be relevant directly moving a storyline forward. Ruiz writes: “To say that a story can only take place if it is connected to a central conflict forces us to eliminate all stories which do not include confrontation and to leave aside all those events which require only indifference or detached curiosity, like a landscape, a distant storm, or a dinner with friends...”⁵ Applying Ruiz’s insights to

⁴ Raúl Ruiz, *The Poetics of Cinema*, (Éditions Dis Voir, 1995), 11.

⁵ Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema*, 11.

the documentary context, it is clear that the dominance of individualized perspectives and the emphasis of action defined through the motivations of a particular individual's will often leaves under-acknowledged and under-represented subjects and experiences not directly connected a main character's direct impact on a film's subject or "story." Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow recently gathered a chorus of documentary filmmakers who question and critique the dominance of this form of storytelling in commercial documentary. They argue that individual character story-structures tend to ignore or sideline the role and importance of collective actions and cooperation, as well as important experiences that are not directly engaged in a structure of conflict.⁶ To this call, I add that the commercial approach to storytelling also tends to leave un-represented forms of agency not directly ascribable to particular people or to humans at all. This dissertation answers the call to articulate and elevate alternative methodologies for socially and environmentally engaged documentary representation.

In *Crowds and Party*, Jodi Dean describes the essential paradox of the ways in which "capitalist processes simultaneously promote the individual as the primary unit of capitalism and at the same time "unravel the institutions of solidaristic support on which this unit depends."⁷ In counter-logic to how individuality and progressive, social justice oriented identity politics have often been narrated—with individual

⁶ Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow, "Beyond Story: an Online, Community-Based Manifesto," *World Records* 2 (Fall 2018), <https://vols.worldrecordsjournal.org/02/03>.

⁷ Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (London and New York: Verso, 2016), 25.

liberty and expression as a core of American progressive values—Dean argues “just as the commodity is a form for value, so is the individual a form for subjectivity.”⁸ Arguing that, in the political context, the individual is a form that impedes collective political subjectivity, Dean ties the disenfranchisement of progressive and left wing politics in the United States and beyond to the ways that subjectivity has been captured and enclosed by an ideology of individuality designed to serve capitalism.⁹ And, just as American politics has not always been fed by a neo-liberal agenda that promotes individualism at the expense of collective interest, documentary film has also undergone similar ideological transformations. Dean’s contention about the capture of political subjectivity can also apply to film subjectivity—particularly in the case of documentary film history. Writing about postmodern documentary in the 1990s, documentary scholars Bill Nichols and Michael Renov both write about the shift in interest of documentary film, beginning in the late 1960s, away from the representation of social movements and towards a personal is political ethos in which “truth” was framed as personal, contingent and subjective.¹⁰ In “emphasiz[ing] the subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker’s own involvement with a subject,” Nichols notices the tendency in postmodern documentary films to increasingly challenge the seemingly objective and authoritative postures previously associated

⁸ Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 50.

⁹ Dean, “Enclosing the Subject,” in *Crowds and Party*, 50-74.

¹⁰ Renov, Michael, ed. *Theorizing Documentary* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 7.

with documentary.¹¹ Paul Arthur attributes this shifting interest in documentary as inspired by a newfound interest in the contingent and subjective nature of “truth” as typified by a popular documentaries including *Roger and Me* (dir. Michael Moore, 1989) and *The Thin Blue Line* (dir. Errol Morris, 1990). Arthur describes those key period films as articulating an “aesthetics of failure” designed to guarantee non-omniscience and the inscription of “slippery ambivalence in which the instrument of cinema is a necessarily visible but confoundingly inadequate mediator.”¹²

Since the development of performative and reflexive modes of postmodern documentary, there has been a marked increase in the use of narrative story structures and the “casting” of charismatic individuals to embody or guide viewers in their understanding of documentary subjects. The dictates of *storytelling* and the necessity of single-character arcs and the three-act structure have increasingly infected documentary labs, editing workshops and commercial, foundation and public-funding grant structures over the past decade or more. Funders who are increasingly concerned with supporting films that deliver socially relevant content tend to believe that issues must be presented through the personal and lived experience of individuals who either serve as guides for the audience or central characters and who can provide visceral and emotionally effective experiences (and catharsis) of a chosen nonfiction

¹¹ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd ed., (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 1, 32.

¹² Paul Arthur, “Jargons of Authenticity (Three American Moments),” in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), 134.

topic.¹³ While this pragmatic and commercial form of documentary storytelling can certainly be powerful and effective for raising consciousness about social and political issues, it often cannot address more complex situations or topics that involve many different actors, forms of agency, entanglements and temporalities that go beyond the purview of individual humans. This type of documentary film is also contingent on the charisma and quality of “performance” of its central character(s). Jodi Dean describes our contemporary moment as an “era of communicative capitalism” and “commanded individuality.”¹⁴ Writing that “we construe political collectivity as nostalgia for the impossible solidarities of a different era,” she argues that the “second-wave feminist idea that the ‘personal is political’ has become twisted into the presumption that the political is personal: how does this affect *me*?”¹⁵ More to the point, Dean asserts that “the celebration of autonomous individuality prevents us from foregrounding our commonality and organizing ourselves politically.”¹⁶

One indication of the first glimmers of a rebalancing shift in documentary film back towards a common or shared collective sense of truth and actuality is noted by Charles Musser, who detected a twenty-first century shift in the politics of the term “truth” in the environmental documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth* (dir. Davis

¹³ Juhasz and Lebow, “Beyond Story.”

¹⁴ Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 25.

¹⁵ Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 25.

¹⁶ Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 10.

Guggenheim, 2006). Musser writes that, in response to the George W. Bush administration's denial of climate science, Vice President Al Gore takes the position of rhetorically asserting truth and reality over state-sanctioned Republican fictions.¹⁷ In this way, Musser sees an ironic overturning of what had been traditionally a leftist position of postmodernist, poststructuralist epistemology—now being upended by Gore and environmentalists who seek to overturn the rhetoric of the contingency of truth in the face of overwhelming environmental issues that re-assert the relevancy of “objective” scientific findings. Musser's insight highlights a central documentary question for our time: how do we reconcile the materialist, realist needs we have for documentary to represent collective social and environmental problems without abandoning valid poststructuralist critiques of science and technology? Is it possible to regard scientific and social forms of observation and analysis as not authoritative absolutism, but rather as *common* sense (*sensus communis*) derived through community consensus and that places the emphasis for meaning beyond individual verifiability?¹⁸

My turn towards a “landscape orientation” is not only an attempt to highlight structures of representation that are interested in collectives, eco-systems and non-human forms of agency, but it is also an attempt to challenge the commercial

¹⁷ Charles Musser, “Trauma, Truth and the Environmental Documentary,” in *Eco-Trauma Cinema*, ed. Anil Narine (New York: Routledge, 2015), 57.

¹⁸ Joshua Malitsky, “A Certain Explicitness: Objectivity, History, and the Documentary Self,” *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 29.

ideology that moving image subjectivity is solely the property of individuals. In metaphorically turning the frame away from the representation of individuals, I am advocating for a more radical and politically engaged understanding of the landscape as an orientation toward collective social and environmental subjectivities: an alternative experience to cinema than what we in the United States are trained to expect and predisposed to want in our capitalist society. I view this as an alternative understanding of subjectivity itself—one that is ever more pressing, given the grave need for humans to collaborate and cooperate on scales larger than we have ever been able to collaborate. With such a lofty goal informing my orientation to the landscape, this work proposes a different way of thinking about attention, not as a precious commodity to be exploited and mined, but rather as shared forms of consciousness, a commons to be cultivated and stewarded.

While there is a robust history of non-narrative experimental film and media practices to draw inspiration from, there exists very little theoretical work that provides alternative understandings of collective and public forms of “film subjectivity.” In researching the history of film and digital media that configure place as the subject and not simply the setting of moving image documentary, I discovered that my interest in media-making about cities and urban nature brought me up against the bias in film theory towards, not only narrative, but also to the individual human as that which defines subject and subjectivity. By exploring film forms that take the city as subject, this work expands Martin Lefebvre’s articulation of “autonomous” film

landscapes that are freed from service to story.¹⁹ In so doing, this work proposes a new framework for understanding film subjectivity to include collective and public forms of film subjects that represent place-based forms of shared, collaborative and collective forms of identification. In this work, collective subjectivity refers to subjectivity as relates to three different but related respects: 1) the subject of the film is a collectively constructed entity such as a city or an urban environment, 2) the filmmakers “collaborate” and improvise with a profilmic environment that they do not author or control and 3) the subjective experience of reception predicated on an identification with that visual landscape as a public and shared view. This understanding of subjectivity asserts an alternative conception of film subjectivity as the property of individuals. My focus on cityscapes, and urban landscapes more generally, is an act of looking another way: of turning my frame away from the “portrait mode” of individualized experience and perspective. This dissertation asks how the act of creating and viewing media can not only articulate—but also instigate what Lauren Berlant calls the *sensus communis*—“a sense of the common attached to common sense.”²⁰

In exploring the history of city and urban landscape filmmaking, I have chosen to focus on film practices in which urban *nature* is configured as collective, shared, contingent, improvisational. Seeking a counter-history to film subjectivity that

¹⁹ Martin Lefebvre, ed., *Landscape and Film*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 20-28.

²⁰ Lauren Berlant, “The commons: Infrastructure for troubling times,” *D Society and Space* 34, No. 3, (2016): 397.

resists notions of ownership and property, I discovered a history of filmmaking methodologies which draw from the history of non-narrative essay filmmaking that take the city and urban nature as their subject. This is an alternative filmmaking tradition from one that views film as a story-delivery vehicle. Instead, these non-narrative, experimental documentary film practices adopt experimental or “queer” (in the sense of non-normative, outside of mainstream conventions) methodologies in order to advocate for a representation of the commons—experiences and ideas of place that are shared by their audiences. I am using the idea of the commons to include not only a film’s literal subject, but also the methodologies by which it is constructed. My orientation toward the commons as a topic and a methodology is directly inspired by my growing conviction that we humans must urgently orient ourselves toward a paradigm of cooperation and collective stewardship for all organic forms of life on Earth given our situation in this time of accelerating crises related to anthropogenic climate disruption. As such, my research aspires to be relevant to the fields of environmental humanities, urban studies, queer studies and geography as well as for environmental documentary film and visual studies.

In unearthing a counter-history of film subjectivity, this field guide to essayistic urban landscape filmmaking presents a trio of film methodologies to frame collective, social and public landscapes. Beginning with one of the earliest film genres of *autonomous* city landscape, the city symphony, this dissertation takes a cross-sectional approach to film history: slicing through film history to highlight a

number of collective or collaborative methodologies used throughout the past century in order to represent the everyday urban landscape. The marginal status of most of the films that I write about, and of the filmmaking practices used, point to their tendency toward utopianism. As forms of filmmaking situated between categories of realism and formal experimentation and geared toward “public expression,” the films I analyze all share the attributes that Corrigan and Alter use to define the essay film: they blend fact and fiction, mix art and documentary styles, focus on public life, provide a tension between aural and visual discourses, and stage dialogic encounters with their viewers.²¹ Yet, as much as I agree with most of Corrigan and Alter’s characterizations of the essay film, I take issue with their description of city symphony as foregrounding “a personal or subjective point of view.”²² In this dissertation, I will demonstrate ways that a subjective point of view does not only or exclusively imply the personal, but instead offers a radical challenge to that traditional and limited understanding of film subjectivity.

Landscape Subjectivity

J. B. Jackson notes that, when the word landscape was “first introduced (or reintroduced) into English it did not mean the view itself, it meant a *picture* of it, an

²¹ Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan, eds. *Essays on the Essay Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 3.

²² Alter and Corrigan, *Essays on the Essay Film*, 3.

artist's interpretation."²³ In *Landscape and Power*, Mitchell suggests that looking at landscape is "to look at looking itself—to engage in a kind of conscious apperception of space as it unfolds itself in a particular place."²⁴ His point is that the representation of landscape facilitates an awareness of the human act of perception. Drawing the viewer's attention to the frame has historically been an experimental film technique to set one's film apart from commercial conventions in which viewers expect to have their own subjectivity sutured to the subjectivity of the film's main characters in order to 'forget themselves.'²⁵ Describing his students' responses to watching experimental landscape films without any human characters or action, Scott MacDonald reports reactions of disorientation, boredom and frustration accompanying screenings of films such as *Fogline* (dir. Larry Gottheim, USA, 1970). MacDonald writes: "Without overt human characterization and plot, contemporary film viewers are virtually blind to imagery and issues that fascinated artists and audiences alike during the nineteenth century."²⁶ He explains *Fogline*'s impact as raising consciousness of the upper and lower horizontal 'lines' of the film frame," that "foregrounds not simply natural landscape, but the *intersection* of natural processes and human technological

²³ John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 3.

²⁴ Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, viii.

²⁵ Jean-Louis Baudry and Alan Williams, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (Winter, 1974-1975): 39-47.

²⁶ Scott MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 7.

development.”²⁷ In this way, the landscape represents “nature” that is not separate and apart from the human nor is it separate from the act of perception.

Invoking the binary portrait vs. landscape orientation figure from earlier (Figure 0), I want to posit the idea of the landscape orientation as an “objective” approach to representation—an orientation toward representing external reality, context or environment. I view the landscape orientation or the landscape mode for documentary as an orientation toward the representation of experiences that are public, shared, contextual and external to the self. In this binary and metaphorical configuration, I view this mode of representation as the opposite of a portrait mode of personal, self-reflective filmmaking that seeks to frame a single individual’s embodied viewpoint and singularity. As a utopian orientation toward representing otherness: the landscape orientation represents the world from an external position that, while literally impossible, is an orientation that aspires to remove or eschew the “subjective” self or at least looks towards that horizon of possibility. And, while I am using the portrait-landscape—or the subjective-objective dynamic—as a binary, I do not mean to suggest that I think representation is all one thing or all another. I am merely using this metaphorical binary figure to highlight a dichotomy built into the apparatus of filmmaking: representation oriented to the self or an individual (the subjective “I”) versus media oriented toward otherness, groups, collective action, place, environment and ecosystem.

²⁷ MacDonald, *Garden in the Machine*, 10.

Writing about the ways that orientations affect and shape how we understand our selves in relationship to the world, queer phenomenologist Sara Ahmed describes orientation as having both intellectual and emotional aspects as well as physical and spatial ones. In her essay “Orientations Matter,” Ahmed articulates a position relevant for both queer feminist film theory and for eco-cinema: that orientation, one’s physical position as well as psychological disposition matters for meaning-making. Orientation has an effect on the ways we interact with the material world.²⁸ Because we are used to thinking about perspective and subjectivity as a visual and a mental phenomenon, Ahmed’s insights about orientation help us to consider the spatial, material and phenomenological aspects of subjectivity and perspective in political terms. In the context of media-making, I see Ahmed’s notion of orientation as helping us to identify a media-maker’s intention while shooting/editing along with understanding the dynamics of media reception. With a portrait orientation, media orients itself towards the subjectivity of an individual. This orientation can occur at the level of the shot, an edit, a sequence or holistically at the level of the whole film.

A landscape orientation orients the viewer toward others—representational experiences of viewpoints that are constructed through relationships, montage, aerial views, time-lapse and other types of experiences that cannot be defined or expressed solely through one individual’s experience, but instead articulate the view,

²⁸ Sara Ahmed, “Orientations Matter,” in *New Materialisms*, ed. Diana Coole (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 234-257.

perspective, environment, context from which we might be distanced or adopt a “disinterested” stance, or in authorship claims that are shared or distributed. Whereas a portrait orientation is most often expressed with the close-up and takes a “narrow” view of subject, the landscape orientation promotes a wide or broad view, taken from a physical and/or emotional distance that is inclusive and dispersed, leaving the viewer to find their own experience and point(s) of interest in the frame. As Jennifer Peterson points out, “the surrealists were among the first to realize that art can be found not only in the artwork itself but also in the viewer’s point of view.”²⁹ Films that are oriented toward creating a dialogue with their viewers, rather imposing a set experiences for them, are films which create the space for viewers to have not only their own intellectual experiences but allow for the possibility of film to provide the type of experience normally ascribed to the purview of music and poetry. These are film experiences that invite dialogue with viewers and with the experience of viewing, with perception itself.

Over the past two plus decades, queer theory has continued some of the work begun by feminist film theorists to complicate the universalizing tendency of earlier film reception theories about spectatorship. Eve Sedgwick’s idea about paranoid and reparative forms of reception³⁰ and José Esteban Muñoz’s notion of “dis-

²⁹ Peterson, *Education*, xvii.

³⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-151.

identification”³¹ are two theories that both, building on Barthes, affirm diversity of audience subjectivities, and orient ideas about reception with practices of “reading” against the grain.³² Despite universalizing attempts to characterize “collective experience” as homogeneous, I distinguish between media produced in order to provide prescribed collective effects and meanings designed with mainstream audiences in mind (mass-media collectivity as homogeneity) from works that assert a subjective audience experience in which there is no single or “right” interpretation—a collective experience of interpretive agency. The urban landscape essay film practices that I analyze promote *both* an intellectual experience of sharing in the “authorship” of their experience and of subjectivity of public or collective perspectives, views owned by no one and belonging to everyone. Ironically, urban landscape essay films orient their viewers towards intellectual freedom of interpretation, toward the viewer’s own individual subjectivity. So, unlike the audience of a Hollywood genre film in which one becomes part of the collective experience of carefully designed emotional response, sutured into the diegesis of the film, the attention of the audience of a landscape film is free to roam about the film experience, as individuals and groups invited into the commons of the film.

In fiction film in particular, but really in all media-making, “subjectivity” is a

³¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

³² Roland Barthes, “Death of the Author” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142-148.

topic that is often framed as relevant for understanding how camera shots function as part of a film grammar that constructs coherence for spectators. Bordwell and Thompson describe the “subjective shot” in film as providing a cinematographic analog for an individual’s experience or viewpoint.³³ The “POV” or point of view of a shot is also relevant for documentary, providing a window onto the feelings or perspective of a particular subject, including the journalist or the filmmaker narrator in relationship to their subject(s). Within film grammar, close-up shots, details and low or oblique angles are often coded as subjective shots that most efficiently affect or reveal emotions. These shots are designed to not only elicit subjective feelings in spectators, but are often useful for creating an emotional alignment with a subject or on-screen narrator. The development of the concept of film subjectivity was heavily influenced by modernist theories of the individual, such as psychology and phenomenology. The influence of psychoanalytic theory is especially evident in the film theory of the 1920s (Kracauer, Belázs, Bazin) and re-emerges in the 1970s (Baudry, Metz, Mulvey, Silverman) when ideas about subjectivity and spectatorship drawing upon Freudian and Lacanian theories are used to explain how film affects spectators at the unconscious level.³⁴ In this model of film theory, subjectivity has three distinct yet contiguous contexts:

³³ David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 6th ed, (New York: McGraw Hill, 2001), 247-8.

³⁴ Susan Haywood, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2001), 2, 343.

- 1) the subjectivity of film characters,³⁵
- 2) the subjectivity of the spectator,³⁶
- 3) the subjectivity or “voice” of the film by its auteur.³⁷

Like the figure-ground relationship in two-dimensional art, subjectivity has its equal and opposite complement. The subjectivity-objectivity dialectic is an essential dialectic at the core of all moving image experience. Just as subjectivity refers to the self, objectivity refers to that which is outside of or beyond the self.³⁸ And while subjectivity and objectivity are often presented as diametrically opposed approaches to representation, in actuality, these concepts cannot be separated from each other. One is defined by the other. Historians of objectivity Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison note that, despite variations in the meanings of objectivity and subjectivity over the course of five hundred years, these are concepts that have always been paired.³⁹ “One cannot be understood, even conceived without the other...

³⁵ Ken Dancyger, *The Technique of Film and Video Editing: History, Theory, and Practice* (New York: Focal Press, 2002), 5; Karl Reisz and Gavin Millar, *The Technique of Film Editing*, (New York: Focal Press, 2010); Ralph Rosenblum, *When the Shooting Stops... The Cutting Begins: A Film Editor's Story* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1979). The history of film editing is usually narrated as beginning with Edwin Porter and D.W. Griffith's “invention” of the close-up and their uses of point of view camera angles to symbolize a character's individual point of view, tying the notion of subjectivity in film to an individual character's perspective and experience.

³⁶ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, eds. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 117-127.

³⁷ Haywood, *Cinema Studies: Key Concepts*, 375-378.

³⁸ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2007), 37.

³⁹ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 37.

Objectivity and subjectivity define each other, like left and right or up and down.”⁴⁰ When film theorist, André Bazin describes cinema as “objectivity in time,” he is theorizing that cinema’s representation of time passing is one of the sources of cinema’s ontological realism.⁴¹ For Bazin, realism or “objectivity” in film is conveyed by the effect of a recorded moving image that, according to Bazin, matches the experience of time passing in the world that exists outside of cinematic experience. In other words, according to Bazin, time passing is an objective “truth” represented in the cinematic medium. Despite the fact that many conventions of film editing and non-linear shooting mean that cinematic time is usually a highly compressed, non-naturalistic rendering of time, Bazin’s notion of film “objectivity in time” is relevant for our understanding of the concept of objectivity in film more generally. Bazin locates objectivity in a mechanical production technique that separates film from other types of representational visual art. He views the mechanization of the recording of time as an objective aspect of the medium’s expression: a representation of the perception of time that is shared collectively among the audience with the diegesis of the film.

Despite the mutual dependence that subjectivity and objectivity have on each other, in film theory traditionally there has not been the same kind of attention placed upon understanding objectivity as a technique and an affect as there has been on

⁴⁰ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 37.

⁴¹ André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Vol. 1* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 14-15.

subjectivity. Certainly, the ideological infrastructures that fuel Hollywood, with its orientation toward individualism with the construction of the star system and its emphasis on fulfilling the commercial entertainment dictates on the audience experience of “losing one’s self” in the movies (suturing the spectator’s subjectivity to that of a film’s main character), has meant that film subjectivity has often been theorized as the property of individuals. But, even within documentary film studies, a field once described by Bill Nichols as galvanized by an aim to transmit “the knowability of the visible world, and the power to view it from a disinterested position of objectivity,”⁴² one can find many scholars who expound at length upon the important role that subjectivity plays while ignoring its shadow side: objectivity.⁴³ For example, in *The Subject of Documentary*, Michael Renov describes the documentary form as a domain “typically fueled by a concern for objectivity,” yet notes “[g]iven the waning of objectivity as a compelling social narrative, there appears to be ample grounds for a more sustained examination of the diverse expressions of subjectivity produced in nonfiction texts.”⁴⁴ In fact, over the course of the past more than two decades, one might argue that the popularity of documentary studies has been fueled by a “subjectivity turn” in which the field has focused a great deal of attention on the subjective, self-reflective and performative aspects of

⁴² Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 63.

⁴³ Malitsky, "A Certain Explicitness," 30.

⁴⁴ Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xvii.

nonfiction film production. Joshua Malitsky theorizes that many scholars whose work centered on the subjective aspects of nonfiction film were motivated by a desire to move documentary “beyond its traditional association with a white, male Western public imaginary.”⁴⁵ And yet, despite this understandable shift, in the past, my contention is that it is time to more closely examine the other side of this subjective-objective equation. In wanting to disentangle the “suspect political, ethical, and epistemological claims associated with pure objectivity,”⁴⁶ I seek a more holistic understanding of the concept of objectivity itself—one that allows for the consideration of different kinds of human and non-human perspectives.

In the same way that film subjectivity has three contiguous contexts, documentary objectivity might be understood in a similarly tri-partite framework:

- 1) objectivity represented within the film: authoritative pronouncements by the acousmatic voice-over narration, statements of “facts” in both inter-titles and as delivered in “expert” testimonies; wide-shots and overview shots that present a collective, disembodied or general view;
- 2) objectivity of the spectator, or promotion of objective feelings for spectators: a neutral relationship to the film subject, disinterestedness or lack of emotional connection with the material, imperviousness to emotional manipulation, neutrality to or indifference to film’s subject;
- 3) the objectivity of the film overall; an overall neutral or balanced approach to subject matter.

Describing the historical development of objectivity, Daston and Galison write:

⁴⁵ Malitsky, “Certain Explicitness,” 31.

⁴⁶ Malitsky, “Certain Explicitness,” 29.

“objectivity is first and foremost, the suppression of some aspect of the self, the countering of subjectivity.”⁴⁷ This idea, that objectivity is the result of a suppression of the self, is evident in the way that objectivity is discussed in undergraduate documentary studies texts such as *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and Meaning*:

...most documentaries are concerned with trying to capture or preserve the authentic. And to do this they often attempt to (or pretend to) eliminate subjectivity, ‘a stance in which one stands at a distance from one’s own experience and from one’s emotions’ (Gabriel, 78).⁴⁸

For documentary media-makers with the goal of making truth claims about the world, “objective” evidence and testimony are often viewed as that which does not have the taint of bias of individual belief and is not tainted by emotion or personal investment: distance is a physical, emotional and intellectual goal. In her article “Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective,” Daston traces the desire for an *aperspectival* position as one of the fundamental and distinct roots of scientific objectivity from eighteenth century moral and aesthetic philosophy traditions.⁴⁹ Daston defines “the essence of aperspectival objectivity” as communicability, narrowing the range of genuine knowledge to coincide with that of public knowledge.”⁵⁰ One of the primary manners in which aperspectival objectivity

⁴⁷ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 36.

⁴⁸ Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro, *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and Meaning* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 98.

⁴⁹ Lorraine Daston, "Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective," *Social Studies of Science*, 22, no. 4, (1992): 597- 618.

⁵⁰ Daston, “Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective,” 600.

achieved such aims was through reliance on a scientific community that would cancel individual errors.⁵¹ It is unfortunate that documentary history was so thoroughly dominated by a certain embodiment of the western white male authority presuming the role of representative of public knowledge that, by the post-modern era, other potential forms of “objectivity” might have been obscured or mistaken for something else. But, what has been under-theorized in documentary film is the relationship between other approaches to objectivity, such as crowd sourcing, group subjects, data visualization and other modes of representation that offer experiences of collective and “public” forms of knowledge with full recognition of contingency. My research makes some in-roads into this direction, although

In the early 1990s, Bill Nichols argued that what differentiated documentary from fiction film is that “documentary is a form with a social purpose.”⁵² Nichols described fiction as that which “attends to unconscious desires and latent meanings,” whereas documentary is that which “attends to social issues of which we are consciously aware.”⁵³ In *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary Film and Culture*, Jonathan Kahana defines documentary as one articulation of what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls a “social imaginary.”⁵⁴ Highlighting the public

⁵¹ Malitsky, “Certain Explicitness,” 36.

⁵² Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 4.

⁵³ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 4.

⁵⁴ Kahana, *Intelligence Work*, 1.

and political dimension of the form, Kahana argues that documentary “helps us envision the collective consequences of our thoughts and actions” and provides a “common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.”⁵⁵ Both Malitsky and Kahana point toward a desire to re-conceive of the concept of documentary objectivity as strategies that coincide with forms of public knowledge, or in Kahana’s case, “public subjectivity,” rather than offering some stable and authoritative notion of “truth.”⁵⁶ My research into the history of landscape documentary film forms offers a path towards this re-conception. In conceiving of a landscape orientation toward media-making, I offer an approach toward a new way of understanding the subjectivity-objectivity dichotomy in moving image representation.

Urban Nature

It is an often repeated insight that late 19th century and early 20th modernism, industrialism, urbanization and cinema all arose roughly simultaneously.⁵⁷ In *The Culture of Cities*, the urban social theorist Lewis Mumford, describes the city as “a collective work of art.”⁵⁸ He, like many urbanists, was interested in the ways that the city, as a physical, social and cultural environment, conditioned perception:

⁵⁵ Kahana, *Intelligence Work*, 1-2.

⁵⁶ Kahana, *Intelligence Work*, 23; Malitsky, “Certain Explicitness,” 29.

⁵⁷ Lucy Fischer, “Modernism and Film,” *Cinema and Media Studies Oxford Bibliographies*, Oxford University Press, last modified March 30, 2015, DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780199791286-0162.

⁵⁸ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1938), 5-6.

The city is a fact in nature...But it is also a conscious work of art, and it holds within its communal framework many simpler and more personal forms of art. Mind *takes form* in the city; and in turn, urban forms condition mind.⁵⁹

Mumford's point is that the city as an environment shapes specific kinds of thinking and types of perception. One of the innovations of modernism which expresses this urbanism was montage—a technique of the juxtaposition of found elements used in a number of different modernist art forms including literature and collage, as well as film. Montage is an artistic technique to express multiplicity and simultaneity as well as to demonstrate a desire to collaborate with elements found in the environment.

Novel aspects of the modern city environment also inspired novel forms of perception. For example, tall buildings allowed modernist filmmakers to record views of the city seen from high above, showing view many activities as tiny details all happening independently and simultaneously. Whizzing through city streets on a streetcar or in an automobile can allows us to experience buildings and city bridges and people as a blur, sometimes too fast to perceive the features of individuals but which create a different kind of impression of space and place. These perspectives also inspire different relationships to our sense of humanity and the individuals place within it. Mumford must have been thinking about one or more city symphony films from the 1920s, when he wrote:

Through its complex orchestration of time and space, no less than through the social division of labor, life in the city takes on the

⁵⁹ Mumford, *Culture of Cities*, 5.

character of a symphony: specialized human aptitudes, specialized instruments, give rise to sonorous results which, neither in volume nor in quality, could be achieved by any single piece.⁶⁰

Arguing for a counter-history of film as simply a narrative medium, Tom Gunning reports that in 1922, Fernand Léger proclaimed that the radical potential of cinema as an art lay not in “imitating the movements of nature” or in “the mistaken path” of its resemblance to theater but in “making images seen.”⁶¹ He describes how early modernists (Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists), along with Léger, displayed enthusiasm for the possibilities of the new medium of film alongside of “disappointment at the way it has already developed, its enslavement to traditional art forms, particularly theater and literature.”⁶² Gunning argues against the received wisdom that cinema had evolved toward narrative editing by describing the relationship to spectators created by early cinema pioneers such as Lumière, Méliès, F. Percy Smith and Edwin Porter as fundamentally different “from the primary spectator relations set up by narrative film after 1906.”⁶³ Gunning names this alternative cinematic relationship to the spectator as a “cinema of attraction” that celebrates its ability to *show* something, and suggests that it:

does not disappear with the dominance of narrative, but rather goes underground, both into certain avant-garde practices and as a

⁶⁰ Mumford, *Culture of Cities*, 4.

⁶¹ Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” *Wide Angle* 8, no. 3-4 (1986): 63.

⁶² Gunning, “Cinema of Attraction,” 64.

⁶³ Gunning, “Cinema of Attraction,” 64.

component of narrative films, more evident in some genres (e.g. the musical) than in others.⁶⁴

Gunning explains that one of the main differences between these models of cinema is the relationship that is constructed with its spectators. Gunning argues that it was precisely the exhibitionist quality of turn-of-the-century popular art: both the freedom from having to create a diegesis and its accent on direct stimulation, that made it attractive to the avant-garde.⁶⁵ Gunning highlights two important aspects in the early cinema of attractions which are valid for my analysis of urban landscape essay film: the role that direct address to spectators evident in the variety theater/vaudeville context in which early cinema was presented, and the context of attractions presented in a non-narrative format: “mass of unrelated acts.”⁶⁶

While the landscape form has a history of being portrayed as a form of “nature” separate and apart from that which is human, sometimes referred to as a nature/culture divide, Mumford emphasized the contrary: “Cities are a product of the earth... every phase of life in the countryside contributes to the existence of cities.”⁶⁷ Modernist film, like modernist cities, provided spectators with opportunities to experience the urban environment as a type of “natural” phenomenon or “nature” that includes the human, the social formation of civilization along with the

⁶⁴ Gunning, “Cinema of Attraction,” 64.

⁶⁵ Gunning, “Cinema of Attraction,” 67.

⁶⁶ Gunning, “Cinema of Attraction,” 67-68.

⁶⁷ Mumford, *Culture of Cities*, 3.

transformations of nature brought about by industrialization, electrification, urbanization, technological advance.⁶⁸ In writing a history of independent landscape filmmaking, Scott MacDonald describes how the nineteenth century American landscape fascination with the pastoral in “wilderness” and “nature” settings was supplanted by an early twentieth century modernist focus on the cityscape and city life. This shift continues in postmodernism with a fascination of sites that overlay the countryside with the city.⁶⁹ This trajectory is borne out in my research of different kinds of urban landscape essay filmmaking. In each method of representation, human “nature” is part of what constitutes the environmental subject of the film. The city is not separate from nature, but instead a type of nature that is indistinguishable from culture. In these works, the urban landscape represents a body of experiences and perspectives that exceeds the individual point of view.

Chapter Descriptions:

This dissertation takes a cross-sectional approach to film history: slicing through film history to highlight the collective and collaborative methodologies used throughout the past century that represent everyday urban landscapes. While the majority of the chapters in this dissertation concern forms of city symphony filmmaking, categorized more generally as visual music filmmaking, I employ the

⁶⁸ Lucy Fisher, “Modernism and Film,” *Oxford Bibliographies Online* (Oxford University Press, last reviewed: May 5, 2017, last modified March 30, 2015), DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780199791286-0162.

⁶⁹ MacDonald, *Garden in the Machine*, 3.

term “urban landscape essay film” as an umbrella term that unites the different types of media work under consideration in this dissertation. Although the term “essay film” is not always applied to city symphony, I am compelled by recent theorizations of the essay film that define it as a form “less about entertainment and more about the dissemination of information and ideas.”⁷⁰ As forms of filmmaking situated between categories of realism and formal experimentation and geared toward public expression, the films I analyze all share the attributes that Corrigan and Alter use to define the essay film: they blend fact and fiction, mix art and documentary styles, focus on public life, provide a tension between aural and visual discourses, and stage dialogic encounters with their viewers and provide a “vehicle for a public subjectivity in the process of thinking.”⁷¹ And while I agree with most of Corrigan and Alter’s characterizations of the essay film, I take issue with their description of city symphony as foregrounding “a personal or subjective point of view.”⁷² In this dissertation, I will demonstrate ways that a subjective point of view does not only or exclusively imply the personal, but instead offers a radical challenge to that traditional and limited conception of film subjectivity.

As a field guide to urban landscape essay filmmaking, this dissertation provides a hybrid theory-practice comprised of four written chapters and one

⁷⁰ Alter and Corrigan, *Essays on the Essay Film*, 2.

⁷¹ Alter and Corrigan, *Essays on the Essay Film*, 3.

⁷² Alter and Corrigan, *Essays on the Essay Film*, 3.

interactive documentary. This work is organized into three parts, each of models a different methodological approach for representing collective landscape subjectivities. Part One, “The City as Visual Music,” concerns the generic form of classical city symphony films and the use of cross-sectional and synecdochic approaches to city representation. Part Two, “Spoken Word Landscapes,” focuses on filmmaking practices in which acousmatic (off-screen) voices create a dialectical relationship to the urban landscapes of the visual field.⁷³ Part Three, “City Cartography,” explores the concept of temporal mapping to represent the city as a collective entity.

The first part, “The City as Visual Music,” contains two written chapters that center on the genre and tradition of city symphony filmmaking. Chapter One defines and contextualizes the generic components of classical city symphony filmmaking while expanding scholarly definitions of the form to highlight the innovative use of the day-in-the-life and cross-sectional montage structural techniques and decentering Eurocentric assumptions about the development of the form. Emphasizing the central influences of American modernism and German *Querschnittfilme* on the form, this chapter argues that the everyday and the cross-section function as microcosmic metaphors that established generic strategies for representing the modern city as a collectively defined character. As a non-narrative form of silent filmmaking, the city

⁷³ Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

represents everyone and no one in particular, an actuality framed as a collaborator in the film and expressing an inclusive place-based identity. Chapter Two, “Infrastructure *Études*,” expands on this genre of city symphony to include an experimental off-shoot of this form of visual music city filmmaking akin to musical *études*. As experimental films focused exclusively on specific types of city infrastructures, the works described in this chapter all employ a synecdochic approach to representation—using one key element of a city selected to provide both symbolic resonance and an improvisational site for physical exploration. This chapter argues that jazz and improvisation play key roles in the methodology for the representation for this form of practice-validating filmmaking.

The second part, Spoken Word Landscapes, considers the lyric role of acousmatic (off-screen) voices in relationship to visual music urban landscapes. Chapter Three provides an in-depth case study of a single film, a postmodern version of the city symphony, *Organism* (dir. Hilary Harris, 1975), comprised exclusively of time-lapse footage of New York City recorded over a fifteen year period. My analysis considers how postmodern aesthetics translate to the city symphony form. It analyzes the role that the film’s soundtrack plays in presenting the city as a complex biological organism. Placing the film in its historical and political context of New York of the 1970s, the chapter explores how the film expresses a zeitgeist of both urban crisis and burgeoning environmental consciousness. Chapter Four introduces the concept of queer landscape essay filmmaking in which the acousmatic voice evokes an affective

dysphoric relationship to the visual environment. It explores aesthetic expressions of formal queerness as expressed through a clash between the highly personal, individual subjectivity of an acousmatic voice and the visual field of depopulated urban landscapes. Comparing a suite of films created by queer filmmakers, the chapter analyzes how narration creates a productive form of *dis*-identification with the depopulated visual field. It argues that this type of formal dysphoria between visual and audio tracks offer spectators opportunities for oppositional forms of collective identification.

The third section of the dissertation is the practice-based component of the research: *Exit Zero: An Atlas of One City Block through Time*, an interactive documentary atlas about a single city block located in central San Francisco. This web-based documentary is a multi-linear view of the processes of gentrification and urban transformation. In this work, the single city block functions as a synecdoche for the city as a whole—the smallest unit of city as defined by both planners and residents. As a synecdoche for the hyper-gentrification of San Francisco, *Exit Zero* provides a poetic framework in which to explore the multiple dramatic metamorphoses of a single city block made famous by a temporary community garden when it replaced a former freeway exit. This micro-geography integrates a variety of digital mapping strategies. Using the interaction metaphors of the compass and the timeline, this work juxtaposes the impacts of government policy and public infrastructure against the forces of anti-freeway activism and community social

practice. Visitors are rewarded for their curiosity and encouraged to explore the various states of development and transformation of this block in a non-linear fashion, enacting a collaborative and improvisational relationship to the project's content and enabling the discovery of uncanny interconnections and poetic rhymes between seemingly disparate time periods.

In arguing for the urgency of validating a landscape mode of media-making that instigates collective forms of identification, this practice-theory dissertation catalyzes a new understanding of landscape as both a subject and a mode of media-making. Validating indeterminacy and orienting both the maker and the spectator towards collective forms of identification with place, the landscape orientation of this dissertation foregrounds the values of cooperation and inclusion: to advocate for identification with the environment.

Part I

The City as Visual Music

“You understand that I am speaking of a film in which New York is the central character, not a picture in which individuals are portrayed, which would make New York merely the background for a story. I am talking about the picture in which New York is the story.”¹ -Robert Flaherty

The City as Visual Music

In this first section, I will explore the phenomenon of the city symphony, a form of experimental documentary filmmaking that aspires to be a form of “visual music” and takes the city as its subject. While the first chapter analyzes some of the formal characteristics and political motivations undergirding the city symphony as a generic form, the second chapter reconciles a type of filmmaking that has been awkwardly included in the general category of city symphony yet diverges in significant ways from the classical generic pattern. Both chapters seek to re-position the role that explicitly American forms of modernism have played in the development of this visual music form of filmmaking. Throughout this section of the dissertation, many of the films appear to be engaging in a dialogue with each other, highlighting tensions and dialectics between the values of local identity while also participating in a global imaginary of urban modernism that co-mingle American and European ideas about modern and democratic forms of representation and place-based identity.

¹ Quote appears at the beginning of *Twenty-Four Dollar Island*, directed by Robert Flaherty (1927; *Unseen Cinema: Picturing New York*, Anthology Film Archives, 2005), DVD.

Chapter 1

Classical City Symphony and *Querschnitt* Montage

“In his study of new media, Lev Manovich credits the city symphony—in this case Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera*—with having anticipated the ‘database’ logic of digital media: the tendency—visible in computer art... to emphasize paradigmatic over syntagmatic relations, presenting the world as an inventory of possible choices rather than a causal chain of narrative events.”¹

- Michael Cowan

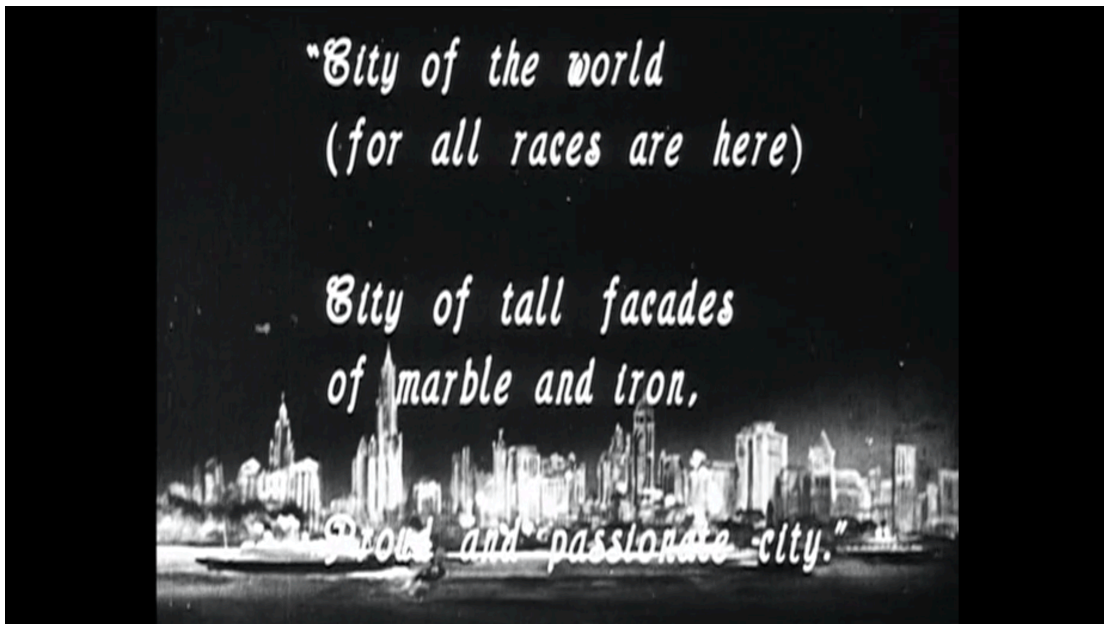


Figure 1: Still from *Manhatta*, dirs. Charles Sheeler, Paul Strand (USA, 1921, 10 min)

¹ Michael Cowan, *Walter Ruttmann and the Cinema of Multiplicity: Avant-Garde—Advertising—Modernity* (Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 60.

Genre of Modernism

Let's begin with a definition. City symphony is a form of urban landscape experimental documentary filmmaking that aspires to be a form of “visual music” or a “melody of pictures.”² It is structured as a cross-sectional montage of a day-in-the-life of a modernist city. And while there are a number of significant exceptions or deviations to these basic precepts, classical city symphony can be characterized by the use of four formal conventions:

- 1) a non-narrative, lyrical or poetic visual composition that provide a cinematic experience akin to music;
- 2) in which the city (and not individual characters) is the film's subject;
- 3) presented as a progressive experience a representative everyday, classically divided into five acts, defining its progressive phases as: i) waking up and morning-time getting to work and working, ii) noon-time lunch, iii) afternoon pursuits, iv) after work and evening, and v) nighttime;
- 4) using a cross-sectional montage approach that implies an inclusive representation eschewing individual characters.

City symphonies in their classical generic form are structured as a dawn-to-dark cross section of a single everyday of a single city (with a few notable exceptions that will be discussed below). This temporal framework—representing selected moments that proceeds progressively through the main sections of a single day is a structure which

² Siegfried Kracauer “Montage,” in *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton University Press, 1947), 182. Kracauer reports that Carl Mayer, who wrote the original treatment for *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (dir. Walther Ruttmann, Germany, 1927), envisioned a “melody of pictures” inspired by the experience of standing amid whirling traffic.

some might interpret as following a “narrative” structure.³ However, as an explicitly experimental form of filmmaking, many filmmakers, such as Flaherty and Vertov viewed their films as adopting formal strategies that resisted narrative, theatrical filmmaking conventions. The editors of *The City Symphony Phenomenon* describe city symphony as a form in which the city, instead of serving as a “mere backdrop for a story” is “the protagonist of the film—it is its primary focus, its impetus, the very material of which the film is fashioned.”⁴

As an experimental form, city symphony is comprised entirely of what Martin Lefebvre defines as *autonomous landscapes*: sovereign entities that are subjects of interest in and of themselves, not rationalized by the film as a backdrop or location for a story about particular individuals.⁵ Although the city as a collective entity is the subject (or protagonist) of these films, people figure prominently in them. Generally, the people who appear are represented by the roles they play in that environment. For example, train conductors, waiters, shopkeepers, shoppers, streetcar riders and factory workers are not defined film characters whose trajectories the films follow over time. In city symphony (with a few very notable exceptions) people appear in one sequence and do not reappear in the rest of the film. Informed by a variety of modernist art

³ Erica Stein, “Abstract Space, Microcosmic Narrative, and the Disavowal of Modernity in Berlin: Symphony of a Great City,” *Journal of Film and Video* 65, no. 4 (Winter 2013), 3-16, for example.

⁴ Steven Jacobs, Anthony Kinik and Eva Hielscher, eds. *The City Symphony Phenomenon: Cinema, Art, and Urban Modernity Between the Wars* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 3.

⁵ Martin Lefebvre, “On Landscape in Narrative Cinema,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 63. Lefebvre defines “autonomous landscape” as “the depiction of natural space freed from any emphasis on the representation of human figures and eventhood.”

forms and ethics, city symphony employs a cross-sectional approach to montage in order to represent the variety of industrial, commercial, infrastructural and cultural actualities of a particular city. They juxtapose a diversity of everyday forms of mobility, labor and leisure practiced by a wide range of local inhabitants.⁶

Most accounts of city symphony consider *Berlin: Die Sinfonia der Großstadt* (*Berlin, Symphony of a Great City*, dir. Walter Ruttmann, Germany, 1927, 97m) and *Chelovek s Kinoapparatom* (*Man with a Movie Camera*, dir. Dziga Vertov, USSR, 1929, 80m) as the two great exemplars of the form.⁷ Although it is easy to assume that *Berlin* was the inspiration for the city symphony genre based on its title and the date of its release, Erik Barnouw points out that Berlin “was by no means the first film about a great city”⁸ and points to *New York 1911* (dir. Julius Jaenzon, Sweden, 1911) and *Manhatta* (dirs. Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand, USA, 1921, 10m) as significant precursors to the genre.⁹ Scott MacDonald agrees with Barnouw but also regards the Lumière brothers late nineteenth century urban landscape actuality films as a nascent form of city symphony.¹⁰ Richard Barsam includes Bauhaus artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy’s script of the unrealized film *Dynamics of a Metropolis* (1922) as

⁶ Cowen, Michael, “Cutting through the Archive: *Querschnitt* Montage and Images of the World in Weimar Visual Culture,” *New German Critique* 120, 40, no. 3 (Fall 2013), 1-2.

⁷ In Russian, the film’s title is *Chelovek s Konapparatom* can also be translated as ‘Person with Movie Camera’ or ‘Human with movie camera.’

⁸ Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, 2nd ed., (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 73.

⁹ Barnouw, *Documentary*, 73.

¹⁰ MacDonald, *Garden in the Machine*, 151. MacDonald credits this idea to Gunning.

another important predecessor to the form.¹¹ Indeed many film scholars, from Kracauer onward, have surmised and pontificated about the origins of this curiously popular and international form of experimental filmmaking. The classical period of this phenomenon is considered to be the decades of the 1920s and 1930s, until roughly the start of the Second World War, during the most active four year period, from 1926-1930, there were at least nine different full-length city films (running 45 minutes or longer) and many more short *ciné*-song and city poem films representing a wide array of modern cities around the world including: Amsterdam, Belgrade, the Bronx, Brussels, Buenos Aires, Chicago, Dusseldorf, Helsinki, Kiev, Lisbon, Marseille, Milan, Montgomery (Alabama), Montreal, Moscow, New York, Nice, Odessa, Prague, Rotterdam, Santa Fe (New Mexico), São Paulo, Shanghai, Stockholm, Stuttgart, Tokyo, Toronto, Vancouver and Vienna.¹² This film genre, in its many guises and variations, persisted throughout the twentieth century and continues to this day with its wide-ranging influence evident in everything from mainstream television commercials, mainstream and experimental cinema, art installation and new media forms such as interactive documentary. In articulating “an aesthetics of simultaneity,” the city symphony form is a precursor to what Lev Manovich has coined “database aesthetics.”¹³

¹¹ Richard Meran Barsam, *Nonfiction: A Critical History*, Revised and Expanded (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1992), 59.

¹² Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher, *City Symphony Phenomenon*, 211-322. See also Mediography in this dissertation.

¹³ Cowen, “Cutting through the Archive,” 1-2, 31.

At the 2014 City Symphony Film Symposium in Ghent called “Beyond Ruttmann and Vertov: Minor City Symphonies,” symposium scholars discussed whether one should talk about the many “city symphonies” that appeared in the wake of *Berlin* and *Man With the Movie Camera* as a cycle or a genre.¹⁴ Given their diversity, symposium participants report difficulties in comfortably fitting all of the films screened into a single form. One comment describes the films as: “*bricolages*, impure and heterogeneous attempts to turn the city into a character.”¹⁵ Jan-Christopher Horak reports that scholars drew the distinction between city symphony and travelogues by clarifying that unlike tourist views, city symphonies are “attempts by local filmmakers to document their own environments.”¹⁶ Unlike travelogue films created during this time period that followed from an illustrated lecture tradition,¹⁷ city symphonies are not framed by the experiences of specific narrating individuals, but instead present the city itself as an entity that speaks for itself through montage.¹⁸ The obvious exception to this ‘rule’ is with the case of *Man With A Movie Camera*, which it could be argued positions the anonymous cameraperson of the film’s title as a central protagonist. I will explore this and other paradoxes of *Man with A Movie*

¹⁴ Jan-Christopher Horak, “Minor City Symphonies,” *Archival Spaces*, blog, posted on December 19, 2014, <https://www.cinema.ucla.edu/blogs/archival-spaces/2014/12/19/minor-city-symphonies>.

¹⁵ Horak, “Minor City Symphonies.”

¹⁶ Horak, “Minor City Symphonies.”

¹⁷ Peterson, *Education in the School of Dreams*.

¹⁸ The obvious exception to this ‘rule’ is with the case of *Man With A Movie Camera*, which it could be argued positions the anonymous cameraperson of the film’s title as a central protagonist. I will explore this and other paradoxes of *Man with A Movie Camera* later in the chapter.

Camera later in the chapter.

In most cases, city symphony films were not created to serve either a commercial or an educational purpose such as advertising a place for the purpose of encouraging tourism or providing specific geographic information. Instead, they were designed to be formal experiments with the city that explored the kinetic relationship between contemporary city life and the novel forms of vision made possible by the moving image camera and the novel art of montage. The question of whether “city symphony” can be considered a “genre” or is better described as “a cycle” or “a mode” has also been the subject of recent discussions¹⁹ and depends upon whether you adhere strictly to traditional concepts of film genre as relating exclusively to industry formulation, or you take a more pragmatic, contemporary view of film genre as works that share a common syntax and semantics.²⁰ While Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher acknowledge that “the cycle of city symphonies is not easy to demarcate,” they make a strong case for understanding city symphony filmmaking as a “full-fledged genre,” listing over eighty films created between 1920 and 1940 about cities located on four different continents.²¹ Given the wide range of films, Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher use the term “city symphony phenomenon” as a way to include the

¹⁹ For example, at length in the seminar: “Expanding and Reconsidering the City Symphony,” led by Erica Stein and S Topiary Landberg, Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Seattle, WA, March 17, 2019.

²⁰ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 15.

²¹ Jacobs, Kinik, Hielscher, 14-15 and “Part Three: Survey of City Symphonies, 1920-40,” 211-323. See also, Appendix A, section “Classical City Symphonies” for my own list.

diversity of shorter “city films,” and “city poems” into their analysis.²² Leaning on Altman’s analysis of genre theory, the editors also convincingly demonstrate that both the form and the content (the syntax and the semantics) of city symphony validate its status as a genre of urban modernity. “The city symphony is not only a film *about* the modern metropolis; its formal and structural organization is also the perfect embodiment of metropolitan modernity.”²³

Malcolm Turvey, among a number of scholars, argue that the work of Dziga Vertov and the Kinoks in the USSR as having had the most direct influence on Ruttmann’s *Berlin* and on the city symphony more generally, even though *Movie Camera* was released two year after *Berlin*.²⁴ Describing Dziga Vertov as “the Reporter,” Barnouw discusses how, following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the Ukrainian Jewish filmmaker from Bialystock, along with his brother, cameraman Mikhail Kaufman, and wife, the film editor Yelizaveta Svilova (a trio known as “the Council of Three” also referred to as the Kinoks), developed theories about a new form of documentary vision called *kino-eye*, inspired by the new affordances of the moving image camera.²⁵ Their direct influence on, not only Ruttmann, but also on Joris Ivens and many other experimental city filmmakers of the day, had far reaching

²² Jacobs, Kinik, and Hielscher, *City Symphony Phenomenon*, 3.

²³ Jacobs, Kinik, and Hielscher, *City Symphony Phenomenon*, 15.

²⁴ Malcolm Turvey, “Kaufman and Kopalín’s Moscow,” in *The City Symphony Phenomenon*, eds. Jacobs, Kinik, and Hielscher, 76-85.

²⁵ Barnouw, *Documentary*, 58.

implications for development of city symphony filmmaking.²⁶ Not the least of which is the origin of the dawn-to-dark city symphony format. Yuri Tsivian reports that Vertov claimed his brother's film *Moscow* (dirs. Mikhail Kaufman, Ilya Kopalín, USSR, 1926, 60m) employed the dawn to dark technique before Ruttmann conceptualized his own film.²⁷ And both Barnouw and Kracauer credit Vertov and the Kinoks as having originating the concept of a cross-sectional, lyric film which takes city life as its subject.²⁸ Other influences on the form that are mentioned with regularity are Italian and French Futurist interdisciplinary art movements, as well as the poetry of Walt Whitman on the young sound artist Dziga Vertov, as well as the influence of *Ballet Mécanique* (dirs. Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy, France/USA, 1924-5) and the science fiction film *Paris Qui Dort* (dir. René Clair, France, 1924, 35m) on the development of the form.²⁹

In counterpoint, Anthony Kinik and Horak both situate the beginnings of city filmmaking in the collaborative film experiment *Manhatta* by American modern visual artists—photographer Paul Strand and painter Charles Sheeler.³⁰ Horak

²⁶Thomas Waugh, *The Conscience of Cinema: The Films of Joris Ivens 1912-1989* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

²⁷Yuri Tsivian, "Audio Commentary," *Man with the Movie Camera*, directed by Dziga Vertov (1929; Image Entertainment, 1996), DVD.

²⁸Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 101. In a letter written from Berlin, Vertov claims that many of the visual ideas and techniques, such as the quick editing, the close-ups of machinery, the store window displays and shots typewriter keyboards had been developed and employed by him in his Kino-Pravda newsreels and documentaries "for the last ten years, all of which predate Berlin."

²⁹Barnouw, *Documentary*, 72.

³⁰Anthony Kinik, "Dynamic of the Metropolis: The City Film and the Spaces of Modernity," PhD diss., McGill University, 2008, 4; Horak, "Minor City Symphonies."

describes *Manhatta* as “the first consciously produced avant-garde U.S. film and a model for subsequent ‘city films,’ despite it having been released in a New York ‘scenic’ of lower Manhattan.”³¹ Yet despite the significant influence of American modernism on the form, many film scholars have tended to view the city symphony as a European form par excellence. MacDonald’s eloquent introduction suggests as much when he writes:

few forms encode the ideals of European thinking and cultural evolution more thoroughly than the symphony and the symphony orchestra.³²

Perhaps for this reason, as well as because of the film’s title, Ruttmann’s *Berlin* is most often portrayed as having invented not only the term “city symphony,” but the form and the concept of city symphony more generally. For example:

The general critical consensus is that Cavalcanti’s *Nothing But the Hours*, Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Big City*, and Vertov’s *The Man with a Movie Camera* remain the exemplary instances of the form, though Ruttmann’s evocation of Berlin not only named the city symphony form, but provided a most typical instance of it.³³

The idea that city symphony should be defined as a European film form suggests a familiar tendency to denigrate or discount American and other non-European films when compared to their European counterparts. For example, William Uricchio refers

³¹ Jan-Christopher Horak, “Modernist Perspectives and Romantic Desire: Manhatta” *Afterimage* 15, no. 4 (November 1987): 8-15.

³² MacDonald, *Garden in the Machine*, 152.

³³ Scott MacDonald, “The City as the Country: The New York City Symphony from Rudy Burekhardt to Spike Lee,” *Film Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (Winter, 1997-1998), 3.

to a suite of short New York city films by Leyda, Browning, Weinberg and Jacobs as “minor” city films, describing them as “indebted to the continental ‘city symphonies’ in specific ways” while explaining that “they construct the city as a dynamic physical and social experience rather than simply as a space to be described and documented...”³⁴ In *The Garden in the Machine* MacDonald follows Urrichio’s lead, writing: “If the 1920s and 1930s produced no American city symphony as accomplished as those by Cavalcanti, Ruttmann, and Vertov, the period did see the formation of a history of attempts to represent New York.”³⁵ Revising the Eurocentrism evident in much of the previous literature on city symphony, Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher complicate the notion of *Berlin* as a simply European cultural product.

Strikingly, even though Berlin had no skyscrapers at the time, aside from its recently completed radio tower, when it came to creating the posters and advertising materials for *Berlin*, Ruttmann used photomontages to do so, and he populated these images with New York skyscrapers, providing a particularly odd but notable example of the so-called “Americanism” of the European avant-garde.³⁶

And in his dissertation, Kinik mounts a persuasive case for revising these Eurocentric accounts of the city film by emphasizing the importance and wide-reaching influence of *Manhatta* and the work of other American modernists such as photographer and

³⁴ William Uricchio, “The City Viewed: The Films of Leyda, Browning, and Weinberg,” in *Lovers of Cinema: the first American avant-garde, 1919-1945*, ed. Jan-Christopher Horak (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 289.

³⁵ MacDonald, *Garden in the Machine*, 153.

³⁶ Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher, *City Symphony Phenomenon*, 16-17.

impresario Alfred Stieglitz on representations of the modern city.³⁷ Rather than perceiving “minor” American city films playing second fiddle to European progenitors, Kinik stresses on the importance of *Manhatta*, in combination with influence of the Kinoks, to argue for a more complicated and internationally entangled picture of the development of the genre, in contrast to previous tendencies to oversimplify the history and refer to *Berlin* as the “first” city symphony. Yet, despite many scholars’ ambivalence about Ruttmann, given his subsequent complicity as a filmmaker who worked for the Nazi party and the Italian fascists,³⁸ Barnouw (and John Grierson) would have us convinced that no film “has spurred so many imitations” as *Berlin*.³⁹ By the close of the city film’s classical period, there were at least eighty different films spanning four continents that have been identified as city symphony or some version of the city symphony phenomenon.⁴⁰

One of the striking paradoxes of the genre is that these films, while centered on a specific city or urban locale, express modern urbanism as an international phenomenon. This is paradoxical because, while each film represents the local actualities of their chosen city, the generic structure and the thematic repetitions across the films assert a commonality of modern urban experiences across geography.

³⁷ Kinik, “Dynamic of the Metropolis,” 13.

³⁸ Cowan, *Walter Ruttmann and the Cinema of Multiplicity*, 9.

³⁹ Barnouw, *Documentary*, 73. For a discussion of Ruttmann as an ambivalent figure of Weimar Germany, see Cowan, *Walter Ruttmann and the Cinema of Multiplicity*; John Grierson, “First Principles of Documentary,” in Kahana, ed. *The Documentary Film Reader*, 221.

⁴⁰ See Mediography, culled from Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher, *City Symphony Phenomenon* and input of participants of the SCMS 2019 “City Symphony seminar,” Seattle, WA.

This is in part due to the way that many city symphony films appear to quote each other, trying out their own version of similar approaches to shooting and in using similar editing patterns and techniques as well as similar subjects and types of scenes. For example many city symphonies include sequences shot from moving streetcars and automobiles, views of crowded streets shot from high vantage points, shop window displays, people working in factories, close-up shots of factory machinery seeming to move on their own, people dining in restaurants, traffic cops directing traffic at busy intersections, disorienting experiences of riding on a merry-go-round or other amusement park rides, people drinking and dancing in bars and dancehalls, and the spectacles of illuminated signs at night. Because many of these films were screened at and shared through amateur film clubs, the city symphony form might be understood as suggesting a kind of dialogue with each other and taking part in a film camaraderie that articulates a sense of collective endeavor across national and cultural boundaries, even as the films document the specificities of their chosen cities. Barnouw makes the point that visual artists became increasingly interested in using film as a result of their involvement in cine-clubs as “in part a protest against the commercialism of cinema,” and because of their recognition of the politically influential power of cinema.⁴¹ In other words, it was a collective united by political and aesthetic interests.

⁴¹ Barnouw, *Documentary*, 74.

Objectivity as Utopia

Classical city symphony is often described as synonymous with modern art and modernism itself.⁴² For example, in the introduction to *The City Symphony Phenomenon*, the editors describe city symphonies as “help[ing] to invent the avant-garde nonfiction film by handling documentary footage of the modern city in ways that could be abstract, poetic, metaphorical, and rhythmic.”⁴³ They write:

The city symphony recognizes the city as an emblem of modernity (perhaps *the* ultimate emblem of modernity), and its modernist form represents an attempt on the part of the filmmakers to use the rapidly expanding language of cinema to capture what László Moholy-Nagy once called “the dynamic of the metropolis.”⁴⁴

As a form of documentary modernism, city symphonies are invested in the idea of *aesthetic* progress designed to capture, as Jonathan Kahana has written: “a world that was in the process of modernizing—of changing, many hoped, for the better.”⁴⁵ Kahana argues that “new collective forms of social and political activity might all stand for the progress that modernization could bring” and “of greatest interest were those innovations that would harness the energies of the new masses and working classes.”⁴⁶ In city symphony, filmmakers around the world used the new technologies

⁴² For example: Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher, *City Symphony Phenomenon*, 3-4; Kahana, 135-137; Cowan, *Walter Ruttmann and the Cinema of Multiplicity*, 9; McQuire, *Media City*; Barnouw, *Documentary*, 73-74. Barnouw likens Ruttmann’s Berlin as well as other city films to painting, emphasizing the film’s kinship with older forms of visual art.

⁴³ Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher, *City Symphony Phenomenon*, 3-4.

⁴⁴ Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher, *City Symphony Phenomenon*, 3-4.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Kahana, ed., *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 136.

⁴⁶ Kahana, *Documentary Film Reader*, 136.

of cinema—montage juxtapositions and superimpositions in concert with novel approaches to camerawork, such as filming from moving trains or views positioned on top of tall buildings—to capture the city as a collective form of being. The interest in expanding the capacity to depict the new forms of consciousness created by modern city life also extended to “new” ideas about metropolitan consciousness that included working-class subjectivities, the paradoxes of urban solitude and alienation in the crowded modern metropolis, the experience of crowds, electricity and the diversity of forms of mobility powered by steam engine, internal combustion and electricity. Prodding us to revise our notion of modernist documentary history, Kahana suggests that it has been unjustly represented as “a story in which in the central drama is that of the individual: drifting in a world blown apart by violent change.”⁴⁷ Asking us to put the “drama of individual consciousness in the proper perspective,” he argues:

...documentary modernism looks less like a requiem for the individual than a series of games, experiments, pranks, or celebrations, trying out alternatives to a society of the self.⁴⁸

City symphony is an exemplary form of modernism that offered an alternative to positioning the individual at the center of film subjectivity. As a cross-sectional representation, classical city symphonies were experiments, and often, though not always, celebrations of the city as an inclusive collectivity.

⁴⁷ Kahana, *Documentary Film Reader*, 137.

⁴⁸ Kahana, *Documentary Film Reader*, 137.

In *Media City: Media, Architecture and Urban Space*, Scott McQuire suggests that the source of the “day-in-the-life” conceit was “a device borrowed from modern literature” as typified by James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.⁴⁹ McQuire also suggests Baudelaire’s *flâneur* figure was a source of inspiration for the city symphony form, noting that “a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness” is a perfect analogy for the figure of the camera eye or person with a movie camera.⁵⁰ Strikingly, a number of city symphony films feature literal kaleidoscopic lens effects, notably *Rien Que Les Heures*, *Movie Camera* and *Berlin*, elements which make the idea of a Baudelairean literary allusion compelling. But, as metaphors for modernist structures of subjectivity, both the kaleidoscope and the cross-section suggest a filmic subjectivity that is fractured and multiple. Yet, while the kaleidoscope presents a world cut up and reassembled in ways that are novel and artful, the concept of cross-section is a more accurate analogy that points to the socio-political ramifications of such a procedure of slicing and selection. With the intention of seeing differently, cross-sectional montage provides an inclusive orientation toward identity. The use of cross-sectional montage in city symphony orients the viewer toward the multiple types and people that comprise a city, it is an orientation towards equity, diversity and inclusion as identity of place. Cross-sectional montage defines city as a horizontal selection of the many. Motivated by the goal of creating *aesthetic* progress by expanding the capacity to depict and

⁴⁹ Scott McQuire, *Media City: Media, Architecture and Urban Space* (New York: Sage Publications, 2008), 59.

⁵⁰ McQuire, *Media City*, 59.

perceive reality,⁵¹ city symphonies, like other forms of contemporaneous modern art works, embrace formal experimentation in order to transform linear development into a mode of simultaneous spatialized montage.”⁵²

Charles Wolfe describes “the varied but congruent” cluster of modernist artistic movements as all “emphasiz[ing] the material properties of the medium employed, the precision and economy of mechanical processes, and the utility of mass-produced forms.”⁵³ He argues that modernist “commitments to social observation, abstraction, and rhythmic and conceptual montage” converge in the city symphony film form and he describes *Berlin* and *Movie Camera* as knitting together the values of realism and objectivism.⁵⁴ Wolfe cites Fernand Léger’s 1926 article “A New Realism—The Object (Its Plastic and Cinematographic Value),” as one example, in which he extolls “the graphic and dramatic beauty of objects as objects as well as the unprecedented power of cinema to isolate, fragment, enlarge, mobilize and juxtapose objects so as to heighten the viewer’s contemplation of their shape and form.”⁵⁵ City symphony embodies modernist *objectivity* in a number of ways. The first is a focus on the object-ness of the city, an entity that is represented through

⁵¹ Kahana, *Documentary Film Reader*, 136.

⁵² Cowan, *Walter Ruttmann*, 2. Cowan is referring to the influence of modernist projects by Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg.

⁵³ Charles Wolfe, “Straight Shots and Crooked Plots: Social Documentary and the Avant-Garde in the 1930s,” in *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde 1919-1945*, ed. Jan-Christopher Horak (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 237.

⁵⁴ Wolfe, “Straight Shots,” 238.

⁵⁵ Wolfe, “Straight Shots,” 237.

fragmentation, enlargement, juxtaposition and mobilization as a construction that is larger than any one element or part. Like the modern art technique of cubism, city symphony uses the methodology of montage to construct a multi-faceted vision of a city as a single, unified and intentionally disorienting composition. The application of a scientific methodology—the cross-section—demonstrates the commitment to an “objective” and structural method of representation to capture the complexity and multiplicity of the city. In this way, the city symphony form creates an experience of a “subjectivity” beyond what can be known or experienced by any single individual. Even in the case of *Movie Camera*, with its titular focus on a singular cameraperson, the film demonstrates over and over that it is a result of the labor of more than just that one cameraperson’s work—not only is *the cameraperson* somehow being filmed doing *his* work, but in highlighting the work of the film editor as well as the experience of the film viewers—*Movie Camera* demonstrates that the work of a single cameraperson filming is only one part of what makes up the whole film.

Modern art’s embrace of “objectivity” and object-ness arises as conscious attempts to distinguish itself from forms of romanticism that had dominated western art practices of the nineteenth century. For example, William Uricchio asserts that the city films “in their address of concrete living and working conditions, of specific physical, social, and economic environments...emblemized the shift from an essentially romantic tradition of self-expression to a socially engaged and often

critical aesthetic.”⁵⁶ The many *isms* of modernism: from Impressionism, Pointillism, French Purism, Cubism, Dadaism, Suprematism, American Precisionism, Italian Futurism, Russian Constructivism, German New Objectivity or *Neue Sachlichkeit*—were each, in their own way, rejecting aspects of the romantic sentimentality associated with aristocratic forms and uses of art. Modernist interests in new and scientifically informed ideas about perception, in the object and in object-ness were often expressed as an engagement with inanimate objects and machines as modes of “realism.” Although using film techniques to appear to “animate” machines might seem to our contemporary view to be the opposite of “realism,” one way to understand the conflation between using non-naturalistic film techniques such as animation, superimposition and time-lapse and the “realism” of artistic movements as Constructivism and *Neue Sachlichkeit* is in the interest of elucidating the “consciousness” or perspective of some object outside of an individual’s experience or perspective.

Wolfe makes the point that objectivity tied to the idea of scientific recording and data filled “a need for a popular, nonhierarchical, reproducible art.”⁵⁷ Sometimes film techniques developed to serve scientific visualization purposes, such as the time-lapse techniques developed by F. Percy Smith, e.g. *The Birth of a Flower* (dir. F. Percy Smith, UK, 1910), seemed to suggest a form of non-human agency captured

⁵⁶ Uricchio, “The City Viewed,” 291-2.

⁵⁷ Wolfe, “Straight Shots,” 237-8.

“objectively” by way of a form of mechanical seeing. A similarly “objective” form of seeing and non-human agency is in evidence in city symphony films—with sequences in which machines and inanimate objects seem to move on their own. This is dramatically exemplified in *Movie Camera* when the mannequin seems to be riding the bicycle in a shopwindow display or when the theater seats appear to lower on their own. But many city symphonies include factory scenes, street traffic signs, mechanical streetcars, amusement park rides and electric lights in which the mechanical and rhythmic elements of machines are emphasized and appear to move without aid or intervention of humans and without recourse to cinematographic or editing tricks—simply by framing mechanical objects moving through space, such as a large traffic signal shifting from up to down in *Berlin* or the draw bridge rising into the sky and lowering back down in *De Brug*. Additionally, the inclusion of animals, shop-window mannequins and even large posters, such as the one in *Movie Camera* that appears to be telling the young woman “Shhh!” are all examples of an interest in the potential of non-human forms of “agency” to either create the appearance of affecting or that literally affect the behavior of human individuals.

As an anti-romantic, anti-aristocratic cultural orientation, modernism was invested in an elevation of the everyday and the everyone—the mass as distinguished from art and culture as both representing and being made for the privilege for the few. While many modernist social critics, such as Benjamin and Kracauer, wrote about the development of the Hollywood starlet and the elevation of a type of individuality

which is produced and amplified in the age of mass communications and mass production, modernity also brought about forms of mass and collective subjectivity: urban anonymity, experiences of being amongst crowds and, according to Paul Arthur, in the case of Soviet cinema, a concern with “the mass hero.”⁵⁸ In *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, Kracauer describes an aesthetics of conformity that is informed by assembly-line labor and production, describing the 1920s as an age which expressed itself in “mass ornaments” such as the Tiller Girls, performing a kind of amalgamation of a many bodied spectacle of synchronicity.⁵⁹

Michael Cowen expands on Siegfried Kracauer’s description of *Berlin* as the prototype of all true German cross-section films,⁶⁰ by explaining that Weimar *Querschnittfilme* was a type of filmmaking that developed during the 1920s in Germany inspired by a form of photomontage widely practiced by graphic and visual artists and typified by the popular Weimar magazine *Querschnitt*.⁶¹ (*Querschnitt* is a German word that combines *quer* —the word that the English word “queer” comes from—literally meaning crossways, diagonally or at right angles⁶² and *schnitt* meaning cut.) Contextualizing *Querschnitt* as a visual strategy informed by modern scientific and sociological epistemological methods such as those adopted by modern

⁵⁸ Arthur, “Aesthetics of Failure,” 114.

⁵⁹ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

⁶⁰ Kracauer, “Montage,” 182.

⁶¹ Cowen, “Cutting through the Archive.”

⁶² “Quer,” *Cambridge German-English Dictionary*, online: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/german-english/quer>, accessed 9/4/2019.

biologists, architects and sociologists, he emphasizes the use of cross-section as a metaphor in the work of Georg Simmel and for the development of the new modern science of sociology, “where this term came to designate statistical as opposed to historical forms of social analysis.”⁶³

Around the turn of the twentieth century, sociologists distinguished “longitudinal” methods, analyzing the change of forms over time, from “cross-sectional” studies, which focused on social relations at a given moment... With this importation into the new statistical science of sociology, the old scientific *Querschnitt* came to function as a metaphor for a new conception of social epistemology related to the emergence of mass society.⁶⁴

As an expression of “an aesthetics of simultaneity,”⁶⁵ Cowan relates Kracauer’s analysis of Simmel’s method as a preference for synchronic over historical modes of analysis. Kracauer argued that his “antisystematic approach constituted an attempt to restore a sense of “interwovenness” to all things as a response to “the increasing fragmentation of intellectual labor in late capitalism.”⁶⁶

Cowan connects the practices of *querschnitt* to modernist “archival” explorations, such as Walter Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk* and Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, which “sought to transform linear development” into a mode of “simultaneous spatialized montage.”⁶⁷ The interest in finding, collecting and making

⁶³ Cowan, “Cutting through the Archive,” 12.

⁶⁴ Cowen, “Cutting through the Archive,” 12-13.

⁶⁵ Cowen, “Cutting through the Archive,” 31.

⁶⁶ Cowan, “Cutting through the Archive,” 13-14.

⁶⁷ Cowan, “Cutting through the Archive,” 2. I would add to these two examples, the work of Esfir Shub, archival compilation films which collapse history into new meanings that emerge in the present.

meaning from ready-made and mass-produced imagery is evident in the use of modern art techniques such as collage and *bricolage*. Cowan also describes *querschnitt* as designating “the exploration of relations between simultaneous phenomena rather than the cause-and-effect links between contiguous events.”⁶⁸ Citing Mary Ann Doane’s work on the early twentieth century toward new epistemological models of analysis, such as inductive sampling and the use of probabilities to represent a world without pre-given order or totality,⁶⁹ Cowan views cross-sectional montage, and the aesthetics of simultaneity more generally, as a response to a sense of lost totality and to “the so-called *Bilderflut*, or flood of images that increasingly characterized the experience of mass media in the 1920s.”⁷⁰ He contextualizes *Berlin* along with other *Querschnittfilme* as attempts to produce a cosmic impression rendered through fragments in which there is no defining single element. In other words, the cross-section functions as a randomized or chance sample. The knowledge of the whole can only be gained through the experience of looking at a slice of the many, across diurnal time and space. At the level of film grammar, cross-section montage resists commercial narrative film editing logics by providing paradigmatic relationships between disparate phenomenon instead of the more usual syntagmatic relationship between shots. Examples and fragments of actual city life are juxtaposed each other as alike but not connected through causal relations.

⁶⁸ Cowan, “Cutting through the Archive,” 2.

⁶⁹ Cowan, “Cutting through the Archive,” 20-22.

⁷⁰ Cowan, “Cutting through the Archive,” 18.

In this way, at the level of film grammar, the cross-sectional montage provides an alternative to commercial film editing dictates of its cause and effect logic (one thing happens, then another thing happens which leads to a third thing, each element must be experienced in a particular sequence in order to create an intended and prescribed meaning.)

In his discussion of documentary modernism, Charles Wolfe uses the term “supraindividual” to describe how causality is presented in politically engaged, social documentaries in which the spectator is invited to “become one with a broader community the film posits and privileges.”⁷¹ While he was not specifically referring to city symphony with this description, the idea of supraindividuality is useful for thinking about how city symphony functions, both in terms of its subject and as a spectatorial experience. Using cross-sectional montage, the city symphony represents a supraindividual subject: the city as a composite of many different people, places and activities. This form also provides a spectatorial experience which asks viewers to align themselves with a collective form of subjectivity: an amalgamation of many viewpoints and perspectives and physical experiences that do not allow the spectator to remain inside of any individual view or experience.

Another aspect of supraindividuality is the collaborative nature of the development of the form itself, as well as the often collaborative nature of its authorship, whether explicit or implied. In the case of *Movie Camera*, as with

⁷¹ Wolfe, “Straight Shots,” 249-250.

Manhatta (dirs. Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler), *Moscow* (dirs. Mikhail Kaufman and Ilya Kopalín) and *Regen* (*Rain*, dirs. Joris Ivens and Mannus Franken), to name a few, the films are literally created with conditions of collective authorship. In terms of the development of the genre more generally, as “a phenomenon” that includes over 80 films in its classical phase alone,⁷² city symphony appear to function as an artistic proving ground, a genre with which various filmmakers compare themselves with one another or attempting to demonstrating their unique approach to this codified form of representation. There is an implied collectivist authorship specifically evident in the echos and quotes from one film to another. Noteworthy moments of echo occur in the typewriting sections in both *Berlin* and *Movie Camera*, and in the train arriving at the beginning of *Berlin* and *De Brug*, or in the case of the opening images of the cameraman turning to face the screen at the beginning of both *De Brug* and *Movie Camera*, to name but a few noteworthy examples.

Finally, the realist orientation of city symphony films implies yet another mode of collectivity with the material world. Vertov articulates this ‘death of the author’ idea in the opening credits of *Movie Camera*, Vertov credits himself as the “Author-supervisor experimenter” of the film, emphasizing the role that “real events” play in the film-making process in which the cameraman uses various techniques to create “life-caught-unawares.” By focusing on “real events,” Vertov asserts the idea that both the camera (mechanical machine) and the cameraperson (human operator)

⁷² Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher, *City Symphony Phenomenon*, 9.

are collaborators with the everyday, quotidian occurrences, sights, activities and people: the “subjects.” In highlighting the role of indeterminacy and chance, the collaborative orientation of city symphony filmmaking echoes other modernist art practices such Dadaism with their embrace of the ready-made (as a collaboration with the world as it already exists). Capturing pre-existing (profilmic) scenes of actuality predicates one’s work on chance occurrences and the indeterminacy of actuality. For example, in *Manhatta*, the only people represented are small groups of figures, crowds moving along the street, usually photographed from high vantage points. Despite the fact that the film endeavored to rephotograph compositions that Strand had shot previously as still images, the filmmakers are not placing the subjects or hiring actors. They are instead hoping to capture a scene in a particular location at a particular time when they will chance upon the imagery they hope to find.⁷³ This sense of collaboration with chance and indeterminacy is most acute in moments centering on non-human subjects such as smoke wafting from chimneys or cats walking in an alleyway. It is also particularly evident in sequences with “uncontrollable elements” such as children and animals. For example, the scene with the children watching and reacting to a street magician in *Movie Camera* is a moment that Vertov/Svilova emphasize by slowing down and stilling the frames of their reactions, as if to say, ‘we filmmakers can make magic with the film itself, but aren’t in control of what they do.’ The film celebrates the methods that the filmmakers use

⁷³ Kinik, “Dynamic of the Metropolis,” 74.

to be able to capture the sights which occur whether or not the camera is present. Indeed, Kaufmann was renowned for his various hidden camera techniques so that regular people (untrained 'actors') would not become shy or self-conscious in front of a camera.⁷⁴ This improvisational ethic asserts an ethos of not only collective filmmaking but a perspective of inclusive place-making—the idea that place is defined by the activities and inhabitants which coalesce there. It is a political aesthetics of commonality and inclusion: a representational form of commoning, of displacing “ownership” and asserting a right-to-the-city ethos.⁷⁵

This supraindividual, collective ethos is also expressed by city symphony with its the emphases on the public aspects of city life. As a film without individual characters, the city symphony, emphasizes the life of the city as experienced on the street and as constituted in its public life. Some of the films do this through juxtaposing snippets of a private realm with public ones. For example, in *Movie Camera*, scenes of a woman waking up and getting dressed in her private bedroom, are intercut with scenes of the activities on the street metaphorically waking up, as if to say, waking up is something that happens in private and public, to living beings and nonliving entities, like shops. Other films, such as *Berlin* and *Manhatta* do not include any domestic scenes or interiors, as if to say: a city is comprised solely by what goes on in public. One more facet of the supraindividualist orientation of city

⁷⁴ Tsivian, “Audio Commentary,” *Man With the Movie Camera*, DVD.

⁷⁵ The “right-to-the-city” concept was first proposed by Henri Lefebvre in *Le Droit à la ville* (1968) which espouses the right to participate in shaping the city as a co-created space.

symphony is the relationship that the people on the screen have both to each other and to the audience. For the most part, the people we see on screen are represented as strangers to each other, such as conductors conducting traffic and crowds passing each other or as waiters serving patrons. Even in certain workplaces, like a coal mine or a factory, we are not introduced to the people we see, but rather are invited to view them as passersby, as the undifferentiated variety of folk who belong in a particular place at a particular time. We are used to thinking about these type of figures in film as “extras,” but in city symphony, they are the “actors” who literally act to constitute the city as supraindividual subject. This inclusive ethos at work suggests that anyone and everyone is an instrument in the orchestra of the city symphony.

Movie Camera also suggests one more form of modernist supraindividuality. In representing an amalgamation of footage shot in four different Soviet cities: Odessa, Moscow, Kiev and Kharkov, Vertov creates a *bricolage* of modern Soviet revolutionary life—a construction that is represented, not by the example of a single Soviet city, but rather a supraindividual “city.”⁷⁶ This geographic supraindividuality rhythms with the collective nature of filmmaking as a construction created from many fragments interwoven to construct a symbolic, unified whole. In contrast to this constructed modernist “city” of *Movie Camera*, Erica Stein argues that, despite its seeming modernist sensibility, *Berlin* betrays modernity by presenting the space of the city in continuity with what Henri Lefebvre’s defines as “the Renaissance

⁷⁶ McQuire, *Media City*, 70.

supercode” of spatial logics (the pre-modern organization of public space around a central authority as typified by the cathedral’s position at the center of town and of life).⁷⁷ In opening *Berlin* with a train barreling through the countryside and arriving into Berlin’s *Hauptbahnhof*, (central train station) and into the heart of the city, Stein argues that *Berlin* represents a pre-modern sense of spatial coherence and narrative logic.⁷⁸ In contrast, *Movie Camera* provides a modernist spatiality that shatters this Renaissance supercode and representing a spatial incoherence. By constructing a new revolutionary cinematic city that conflates together footage from four different cities (Odessa, Moscow, Kiev and Kharkov), *Movie Camera* offers us a constructed “city” that only exists in film, a place in which there is no actual embodied spatial coherence, only a resplendent shattering of the supercode. *Movie Camera*’s construction of a modern revolutionary Soviet urban everyday undermines any attempt at representing the kind of spatial coherence that *Berlin* offers. The “city” of *Movie Camera* is not a single city at all, but rather a state of modern urban living.

Music and Time (The Music of Temporality)

The question of how film can be a form of “music” has been raised by a number of scholars as well as producers of classical city symphony. Grierson described the “symphonic form” as “concerned with the orchestration of

⁷⁷ Erica Stein, “An Island Off The Coast Of America: New York City Symphonies as Productions of Space and Narrative,” PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2011, 11.

⁷⁸ Stein, “Island Off The Coast Of America,” 11.

movement.”⁷⁹ Kracauer describes Vertov as interested in composing “optical music” and used the term “lyric documentary” to describe *Movie Camera*.⁸⁰ As a form of filmmaking in active rebellion against the strictures of narrative commercial film, *Man With the Movie Camera* proclaims itself:

an experiment in cinematic communication of real events
Without the help of intertitles
Without the help of a story
Without the help of theater.⁸¹

This anti-narrative filmmaking manifesto implied by these opening titles declares film to be a “truly international language of cinema based on its absolute separation from the language of theater and literature.”⁸² As a “universal language,” music is an apt analogy to use for a film that aspires to appeal to revolutionary citizens across the linguistically and ethnically diverse, new unified nation of the Soviet Union. Yuri Tsivian describes *Movie Camera* as “visual Esperanto,”⁸³ a metaphor which also expresses this idea that a film might aspire to be a new language that can bridge linguistic and cultural divides in the interest of universality.

As with music, time and tempo are the primary organizing principles of the city symphony film. The visual rhythms of quotidian activity form “the music” of

⁷⁹ John Grierson, “First Principles of Documentary (1932-34),” in *The Documentary Reader: History, Theory, Criticism*, ed. Jonathan Kahana (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 222.

⁸⁰ Kracauer, “Montage,” 183, 185.

⁸¹ *Man with the Movie Camera*, directed by Dziga Vertov (1929; Image Entertainment, 1996), DVD.

⁸² Tsivian, “Audio Commentary,” *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929; Image Entertainment, 1996), DVD. Tsivian refers to the film as a “manifesto.”

⁸³ Tsivian, “Audio Commentary,” *Man with the Movie Camera*, DVD. Tsivian uses the phrase “visual Esperanto” to describe *Man with the Movie Camera*.

each act or section of the everyday work-a-day day of modern city life. And yet, there is a paradox: the implied cyclical nature of everyday time is caught in a dialectic with the film's innate linearity defined by its clear beginning and end points. Not only does the "natural" (sun-based) sense of everyday time conflict with the linear, modernist time depicted in the film form and dictated to humans by machines, but the film, looped onto a circular reel holds a linear experience on a circular form that, even as it turns over and over in a circle, runs the film in one direction from beginning until its end. In *city symphony*, the film's time pretends to a cyclical "natural" time of the everyday, an abstraction of the real everyday, which is usually only ever particularity. In *city symphony*, film time implies both linear and cyclical time. The conflict between these two different types of time is particularly palpable in *Movie Camera*, which starts out in the early morning and proceeds through the day, all the while seeming to continue to accelerate and wind up faster and faster, until the final sequence of the film, which is not so much a scene of night-time "winding down" as in *Berlin* and other city symphonies, but instead continues to accelerate until the film seems to crash drunkenly into its ending. In the case of *Rien Que Les Heures* (Cavalcanti, 1926), the film is fixated on both the visual iconography of time, represented by repeated close-ups on clock faces with minute and hour hands striking 12 and 24, and the idea of time as a metaphor as suggested by the film's title, which translates as "nothing but time." The film suggests that it is nothing but time, literally and structurally, emphasizing difficult aspects of Parisian life for people and animals

who seem to have nothing but time, living without pleasure as the underclass, destitute and homeless people along with the mice and cats who roam the streets.

The everyday implied by the day-in-the-life structure of city symphony is an “objective” strategy of representation applied to temporality: an abstraction of lived time that is anti-spectacular, generalizable to many, and that breaks with the traditions of narrative dramatic time defined significant events that impact an individual’s experience distinguished from their everyday. The modernist everyday is a structure of time that has been rendered mechanical by clocks, with its punchcard factory time, standardization for train time, and the sense of city time as distinct from time defined by changing seasons, agricultural rhythms and the slower rhythms of the country and animal-body enabled mobility.⁸⁴ City symphony frames “the everyday” as the temporal context of the city symphony that is relevant for everyone in the city, including working class, poor and bourgeoisie. Everyday life functions as a shorthand for the mundane, the anti-spectacular, the vernacular. Everydayness also implies commonness *and* commonality. City symphony films such as *Berlin* use the aesthetics of everyday by filming the everyday city and everyday people: handheld camera experiences on trains and other forms of transportation out in the open with people who are anonymous and unnamed. The people in the films are non-actors: ordinary, regular folk. Centering on everyday life and everyday people are also strategies employed by socially-minded documentaries to differentiate themselves from

⁸⁴ Ben Highmore, ed., *Everyday Life Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

commercial narrative filmmaking.

The everyday temporality of city symphony offers a temporality of the always present. As an “everyday” dawn-to-dark structure, the films present an experience of daily-ness, *common* occurrence, presenting events that presumably occur “everyday” and any day. The dawn-to-dark structure suggests a nonhierarchical experience of time, a cross-section of the day in which all the phases of the day have their role and are each given their due. No part of the day is more important than another—each section is part of the function of the whole. This approach contrasts with the way that dramatic time functions in narrative filmmaking—where the dramatization is predicated on an event that becomes situated in a past which effects a diegetic present unfolding throughout the film’s duration. In city symphony films, the time frame suggests an always present-tense condition: a time and place that has no recourse to past events. It is the film equivalent of writing exclusively in the present tense. There is no sense of meaning construction out of an event that happens in the first act influencing events later in the film. Whereas narrative structure depends upon a hierarchical dynamic in which some moments are more significant than others (often represented by dramatic story or character arc graphs with an x and a y axis with peaks and valleys), the city symphony films provide an experience of time as an ever-present cycle of daily life, on-going now, in which all moments are equally important, and equally worthy of attention and representation. As an analogical method of representation, the cross-sectional montage suggests comparison between elements,

whether individual sequences or various times of day, without any implicit judgement or hierarchy.⁸⁵ No section is more significant than another.

There are a few notable exceptions to the city symphony expression as an exclusively present tense representation. Robert Flaherty's city symphony *Twenty-four Dollar Island* (1927) is named for and begins with the eponymous myth of the sale of Manhattan Island by Leni Lenape Indians to Pieter Stuyvesant in 1624 for the equivalent of twenty-four dollars. In Flaherty's hands, that foundational legend serves as a poetic introduction and a foundational myth for the rest of the film. It is presented and then disappears, a montage clash or energetic juxtaposition to the rest of the film composed of a defiantly industrialized, modern Manhattan of 1927. In this way, Flaherty poses a kind of a dialectical relationship between the present tense of the industrialized now and the idea of the city defined by the myth of its imagined past. Likewise, Cavalcanti's *Rien Que Les Heures* also opens with imaginary renderings of Paris from paintings and postcards. Yet, in Cavalcanti's case, the desired effect is not so much to allude to a perceived history of the city from the past, but rather to suggest that his subject, Paris, has representational baggage in the form of the many imagined versions of Paris in paintings and postcards, which he contrasts to his own present and moving image rendering of his own present-day modern imaginary. In both films, the present-day footage overtakes and far exceeds their introductory sections, implying that these present day film representations exceed any

⁸⁵ Cowan, "Cutting through the Archive," 26.

past attempt to capture or codify their chosen cities. In the case of *Movie Camera*, the linearity of the film subverts the cyclical structure of the day with its frenzied acceleration that seems to hijack the day-in-the-life structure towards the ending, careening headlong into the ending. And yet, after this crash, the film also seems to return full circle to the film's opening moments, with a close up of that same camera aperture-eye, now closing onto its end.

Smoke

Lest we think of city symphonies as only representations of human interactions with the urban physical built environment: street scenes and tall buildings, trains and factories, restaurants, electric lights and dance halls—there is one important element that often goes un-acknowledged in scholarship about city symphony. The ephemeral effluence of industrialism—smoke—is one of the least discussed, yet most intrinsic elements of the city symphony. In many of the films, the significant presence of smoke suggests both an interest in the unique properties of this ephemeral element, and a desire to highlight its symbolic importance for producing and enshrining the city as a locus of industry and industrial power. For example, the opening sequence of *Berlin* emphasizes the smoke billowing from a speeding train. It blows over the tree tops, following alongside the train, and then, for a split second overtakes the film screen entirely, obscuring any vision of the city. The smoke that fills the frame suggests that with the train's arrival, the city will be obscured

momentarily, only to re-emerge from the bright gray haze as a stark set of dormant silhouettes of a trio of looming factory smokestacks. This sequence is followed by wispy puffs of cigarette smoke emanating from a worker's cigarette and wafting over the heads of a crowd of morning workers converging toward the factory entrance.

As an ephemeral, yet omnipresent element of the modern industrial city, smoke is an index of realism. It suggests pollution as the immaterial materiality of industrialism. As an "object" without material form, smoke has an uncontrollable will of its own. Its independence from human control would make a natural locus of interest for Vertov, who commands the Kinoks to respect the independence of whatever element was captured on film.⁸⁶ And yet, if we are tempted to think that the modern artists employed smoke in the service of symbol, Paul Strand would have us believe otherwise. His was a "belief that the optics of the camera offered a new metaphor for visual perception that was precise, uncluttered, focused upon the contours and textures of commonplace objects, viewed not as symbols but as things."⁸⁷ In this way, smoke, despite its ephemerality, affirms itself as a thing: an element with its own will and logic that is neither physically nor symbolically under the control of artists. The filmmaker can improvise with this element of the environment, much as they improvise with other human and nonhuman elements: animals, streetcars, crowds, shadows, passersby, street magicians, children. Yet, just

⁸⁶ Barnouw, *Documentary*, 61.

⁸⁷ Wolfe, "Straight Shots," 239.

with so many other elements of city symphony, the omnipresence of smoke points to the challenge (and success) of city filmmakers to capture the uncontrollable elements of the city in the camera.

Defining smoke as one of the signature motifs in *Manhatta*, Anthony Kinik discusses a sequence featuring “tightly cropped, high-angle views of the architecture, and especially the rooftops, of Lower Manhattan, composed in such a way that the buildings involved are almost completely unrecognizable, any direct sign of humanity has been all but edited out, and the only movement comes from the many smokestacks pumping smoke into the sky.”⁸⁸ Kinik’s description emphasizes ways that smoke disrupts the otherwise “rigid geometry of the city buildings,” an important aspect of Sheeler and Strand’s developing machine aesthetic.⁸⁹ Illustrating the importance of smoke in that film, he adds the interesting historical note that Marcel Duchamp, former kingpin of the New York Dada scene, was responsible for bringing the film to Paris for a screening in 1923 under French title *La Fumée de New York* (*The Smoke of New York*).⁹⁰ In another sequence, juxtaposing the qualitative differences between smoke, a lone cloud in the sky and the stark angularity of the city’s skyline, Strand and Sheeler emphasize the qualitative and abstract differences in the coexistence of nature and industry.

As Andreas Malm points out in *Fossil Capital*, smoke has an “odd quality of

⁸⁸ Kinik, “Dynamic of the Metropolis,” 66.

⁸⁹ Kinik, “Dynamic of the Metropolis,” 67.

⁹⁰ Kinik, “Dynamic of the Metropolis,” 28.

detachment from environmental repercussions.”⁹¹ While the smoke is always white in *Manhatta*, in *Man with a Movie Camera* the blackest of black smoke billows from the top of an immense brick smokestack, diagonally framed so as to emphasize its impressive height. Two shots later, when the cameraman scales this same smokestack, viewers are invited to consider not only the sorts of physical feats and danger the cameraman places himself in but also to viscerally sense the danger of his increasing proximity to the noxious smoke emanating from this tower. Vertov emphasizes the material aspect of this black smoke by juxtaposing it, first to the whirring of factory machines, and then to the blackened faces and bodies of the coal miners we meet, toiling underground. The emphasis on smoke, along with factories and labor, in many of the city films attests to the central role of industry and its costs as well as its benefits for the people of the modern city. Many city films seek to balance the representation of both industrial labor with other forms of work and alongside of metropolitan forms of culture and leisure, even making the point that day labor yields to or enables the pleasures which can be found and enjoyed in the evening hours of the cities.

Neutrality and Non-indifference

City symphonies have sometimes been criticized for espousing a politically neutral, or non-critical take on modern, metropolitan life. This is especially true in the

⁹¹ Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London and New York: Verso, 2016), 5.

case of Grierson and Kracauer who both single out *Berlin* for similar criticism. Kracauer, who describes *Berlin* as having inaugurated “the vogue of cross-section, or ‘montage’ films,” describes city symphony as able to be “produced at low cost while offering a gratifying opportunity to show much and reveal nothing”.⁹² He accuses Ruttmann’s film of expressing an “ambiguous neutrality” that avoids offering “any critical comment on the reality with which he is faced.”⁹³ While Grierson locates the problem more specifically as an insufficient care for the plight of labor:

By uses of tempo and rhythm, and by the large-scale integration of single effects, [city symphonies] capture the eye and impress the mind in the same way a military parade might do. But by their concentration on mass and movement, they tend to avoid the larger creative job. What more attractive (for a man of visual taste) than to swing wheels and pistons about in ding-dong description of a machine, when he has little to say about the man who tends it? And what more comfortable if, in one’s heart, there is avoidance of the issue of underpaid labor and meaningless production? For this reason I hold the symphony tradition of cinema for a danger and *Berlin* for the most dangerous of all film models to follow.⁹⁴

Kracauer reports that Carl Mayer (the author of *Berlin*’s original film treatment) was disappointed in Ruttmann’s “surface approach” to his original concept, a criticism that Kracauer interprets as indicative of the film’s emphasis on pure patterns of movement and its reliance on the formal qualities of the objects rather than on their meanings.⁹⁵ He describes *Berlin* as “yielding an impression of chaos” through the use

⁹² Kracauer, “Montage,” 188.

⁹³ Kracauer, “Montage,” 187.

⁹⁴ John Grierson, “First Principles of Documentary,” 222.

⁹⁵ Kracauer, “Montage,” 184.

of well chosen symbols: the roller coaster, a rotating spiral in a shop window, and a revolving door, presented as simply a record of facts without critique or reaction.⁹⁶ Describing German cross-section montage films as the “purest expression of New Objectivity on the screen,” Kracauer surmises that “neutrality,” implying an acceptance of social inequities under capitalism, was a logical result of “the cross-section principle itself,” writing: “their such-is-life mood overwhelmed whatever socialist sentiments played about in them.”⁹⁷ “The many prostitutes among the passers-by,” he argues “indicate that society has lost its balance. But no one any longer reacts vigorously against its chaotic condition.”⁹⁸ In “the formalization of social contrasts” Kracauer infers “everybody” in the film is “indifferent to his fellow men.”⁹⁹

In contrast to Ruttmann’s seeming acceptance of Weimar social realities, *Rien Que Les Heures* provides a strong sense of social critique of capitalist inequity and metropolitan inhumanity. Cavalcanti’s leftist political sympathies can be gleaned throughout *Rien Que Les Heures*—particularly in his choice of juxtapositions that emphasize inequality and cruelty. For example, in one sequence, a wealthy man eating a steak in a fancy restaurant is intercut with the callous slaughter of a cow. His social critique, however, gains its fully emotional power towards the final third of the

⁹⁶ Kracauer, “Montage,” 186.

⁹⁷ Kracauer, “Montage,” 181.

⁹⁸ Kracauer, “Montage,” 186.

⁹⁹ Kracauer, “Montage,” 186.

film when all of a sudden narrative elements strangely intrude into a previously non-narrative city symphony structure. At this late point in the film, the introduction of clearly staged sequences and characters played by actors who perform for the camera, diverges from the “pure” city symphony generic form, even though the few named characters (indicated by inter-title cards) function more as social types rather than the fully realized characters of a narrative. A young woman, identified by inter-title card as “La Fille” (the girl), meets a soldier on the street and they begin a romantic tryst. This event introduces a whiff of dramatic intrigue, providing an air of theatricality which pollutes the otherwise dispassionate “objectivity” of the cross-sectional approach taken during the first two-thirds of the film. His shift toward the individualized “subjectivity” of the characters narrows the viewers’ attention onto the plight of an unnamed woman who is shown being beaten by a man and then back onto *La Fille*, who witnesses this beating but fails to intervene to help her. Through this episode that takes place in the language of narrative cinema, Cavalcanti constructs an experience in which spectators can at first identify with *La Fille* and then experience their own subjective, disapproving judgement of her failure to help this other woman. The film directs its viewers to feel disapproval and even disgust for *La Fille*’s indifference to the plight of the woman being beaten. With this dramatic interlude, *Les Heures* abandons the cross-sectional montage approach to city representation and delivers its most forceful critique of Paris as a city of alienation and callousness by way of an individual example. In this way, Cavalcanti’s use of

narrative convention overshadows the power of the cross-sectional montage.

Kracauer's supposition, that the cross-section principle is responsible for its implicit neutrality, is belied by his description of Vertov's cross sections as "permeated with communist ideas' even when they picture only the beauty of abstract movements."¹⁰⁰ How is it possible that Vertov can stress "formal rhythms but without seeming indifferent to content"?¹⁰¹ Kracauer argues that Ruttmann uses social contrasts as formal expedients: "Like visual analogies, they serve to build up the cross section, and their structural function overshadows whatever significance they may convey."¹⁰² But he views the difference between Ruttmann's approach and Vertov's as a difference of attitude and involvement:

Vertov's continued survey of everyday life rests upon his unqualified acceptance of Soviet actuality. He himself is part of a revolutionary process which arouses passions and hopes.¹⁰³

In comparing *Berlin to Movie Camera*, Kracauer notes that, even as Ruttmann seems to have been influenced by Vertov and the "Kino-eye" group, and despite the two films' aesthetic similarities, their difference originates in "a difference of given conditions: the two artists apply similar aesthetic principles to the rendering of dissimilar worlds."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Kracauer, "Montage," 187.

¹⁰¹ Kracauer, "Montage," 187.

¹⁰² Kracauer, "Montage," 185.

¹⁰³ Kracauer, "Montage," 187.

¹⁰⁴ Kracauer, "Montage," 185.

[Vertov] is the son of a victorious revolution, and the life his camera surprises is Soviet life—a reality quivering with revolutionary energies that penetrate its every element.¹⁰⁵

In one sense, the difference between them can be understood as a difference of political context. Ruttmann's context is Weimar German society "which has managed to evade revolution and now, under the stabilized Republic, is nothing but an unsubstantial conglomeration of parties and ideals."¹⁰⁶ Ruttmann treats his subject as objects, an agglomeration of details that "bury meaning in an abundance of facts."¹⁰⁷ These "objects" have no innate integrity and are thus used as abstract elements, divorced from historical and contemporary context. In contrast, Vertov's "revolutionary convictions" and his allegiance to Lenin's ideas and visions for revolutionary Soviet society pervade not just his film but his very approach to filmmaking.¹⁰⁸ In *Movie Camera*, the apparatus of vision, the film camera, is a machine inextricable from its human operator. The film is about society *and* about filmmaking and film watching as an essential part of the construction of revolutionary society. *Movie Camera* implicates its makers (and its viewers) in the construction. We, people who watch the film, and the people in the film watching the film (e.g. movie-goers entering the theater and watching the film, children watching the

¹⁰⁵ Kracauer, "Montage," 185.

¹⁰⁶ Kracauer, 185-6.

¹⁰⁷ This is Belázs's critique of the silent film *Menschen am Sonntag* (*People on Sunday*), directed by Billy Wilder, Eugen Shüfftan, Robert Siodmak, et al. Quoted in Kracauer, "Montage," 189.

¹⁰⁸ Kracauer, "Montage," 187; also Annette Michelson, "The Man with the Movie Camera: From Magician to Epistemologist," *Art Forum* (March, 1972): 60-72.

magician), along with the cameraperson and the film editor, are all part of the film. Spectatorship and filmmaking are two among the many forms of collectivity and collaboration represented. Vertov renders visible these types of film “labor” and intercuts them with the many other types of labor taking place in the “city” (e.g. miners, shopkeepers, homemakers, streetcar conductors, factory workers, etc.). In comparison with *Movie Camera*’s inclusive revolutionary Constructivist approach, Kracauer describes Ruttmann as simply celebrating the movement and rhythm of machines devoid of any human figures seen to be interacting with or controlling them.

Kracauer’s critique of the German aesthetic of cross-section montage films seems to be motivated by an understandable and retrospective (post-World War II, Jewish) desire to cast aspersions upon Ruttmann and a form that might have previously been viewed as apolitical. But, in suggesting that Ruttmann’s cross-sectional approach betrays proto-Nazi sympathies despite its use of an aesthetics inspired by the Kinoks and the Soviet constructivists more generally, Kracauer’s critique of *Berlin*, and of *Querschnittfilme* more generally, opens the question of whether cross-sectional montage as a form is fundamentally “neutral” and laissez-faire (e.g. complicit with the status quo). And yet, so many of the experimental filmmakers who took up the city symphony film form in Europe, North America and South America, from avowed communists such as Vertov, Ivens and Strand to socialists in bourgeois European and American contexts such as Cavalcanti, Léger,

Vigo, Moholy-Nagy and Burckhardt, sought to use the mechanical objectivity of photography, cinematography and montage to animate socially progressive ideas about the modern city. The use of montage to construct a day-in-the-life temporal and social cross-section of a city as a structure for social inclusion, might imply that everyone is needed to create the dynamic music of the city. The emphasis on objective contrasts over analytic meaning, on physical and visceral effects (e.g. hand-held experiences of moving streetcars and merry-go-rounds) in many of the films might serve as a methodology of inclusion for the audience to see and feel themselves as a part of the city. But, in cases where the “power of the machine” prevails, and where human labor is not embodied, as in *Berlin*, the structure of montage seems instead to serve a form of film illusionism whose effects are not as different from Hollywood capitalist ethics of invisible editing and passive reception as they might at first seem. Kracauer’s critique of *Berlin* suggests that he viewed Ruttmann’s embrace of formalism and mechanical illusionism as revealing a bourgeois indifference to (or even exploitation of) the plight of human labor.

In his essay “The music of landscape and the fate of montage counterpoint at a new stage,” Sergei Eisenstein, the great film theorist and antagonist to Vertov, theorizes about the analogous roles played by landscape and music in film. While the essay might naturally be assumed to include an analysis of city symphony, the form and Vertov’s work generally is never mentioned. His analysis remains strictly within the own purview of his own films of historically informed Soviet narrative re-

enactments such as *Battleship Potemkin* (1927). Eisenstein focuses solely on “the *emotional effect* of landscape... especially in its musical effect” suggesting that landscape should be regarded as “nonindifferent nature” “when the emotional effect is achieved not only by a set of representational elements of nature but especially and mainly by the musical development and composition of what is represented.”¹⁰⁹ In other words, Eisenstein believes that the landscape’s role is to provide an emotional and “nonindifferent” representation, similar to how Western Art viewed the landscape in visual art: as a romantic metaphor serving to reflect or express the emotions of a film’s content and characters, and by extension those of its filmmaker and viewers. Eisenstein’s theories are instructive when considering the role which landscape has been consigned in the context of western film theory. The view that film landscape is best used as a mirror to reflect human emotions is the predominant way most narrative film genres employ film landscape (e.g. the Westerns, Film Noir, and the Road Movie). It is thus especially ironic, that Vertov, who spearheaded such a radically different approach to landscape and music, who pioneered an approach to landscape as an explicitly non-narrative mode of representing a collective subjectivity, should have been the figure ousted by his Soviet peers for work that supposedly presented “formalism without politics.”¹¹⁰ Annette Michelson describes the aesthetic rivalry between Vertov and Eisenstein, as two of the small coterie of

¹⁰⁹ Eisenstein, *Nonindifferent Nature*, 226.

¹¹⁰ Michelson, “From Magician to Epistemologist,” 64.

great revolutionary Soviet film theorists, that seemed to take on a life or death quality among the Soviets, with distinct winners (Eisenstein) and losers (Vertov, disgraced and ousted from the Soviet film establishment). I say ironic, because while Eisenstein is figured as the victor in the Soviet context, it is his ideas (along with Kuleshov) that have been most assimilated into Western commercial filmmaking contexts. If Eisenstein was truly the loyal Leninist communist, it seems strange that his ideas should so easily have been assimilated into a form of filmmaking designed to serve capitalism. Given the depth of Vertov's revolutionary commitments and how he translated those politics into aesthetic commitments, it is also ironic that Eisenstein's view of landscape as a cypher for "non-indifference" orients one toward an individualized subjective experience. In contrast, Vertov's city symphony, his constructivist landscape is fully engaged with the goals of collective labor.

Acceleration

Karl Marx wrote that speed was the metric of circulation, measured through the movement of ideas, information, money or materials.¹¹¹ If speed is experienced through circulation, both of bodies and of goods, then the experience of time is intensified. The intensified the experience of time, or acceleration, has classically been used to characterize the effects of urbanization and modernization: an expression that is one of the main themes at the heart of many city symphonies. *Berlin*, for

¹¹¹ Mike Crang, "The calculus of speed: Accelerated worlds, worlds of acceleration," *Time and Society* 19, no. 3 (Nov. 30, 2010), 404.

example, opens with a speeding train rushing headlong toward the city. *Rien Que Les Heures* culminates in a whirling, disorientating experience of speed. And in *Movie Camera*, not only does the viewer experience embodied moments of frenetic, disorientation as with many of the other city symphony films, but the experience of acceleration itself overtakes and replaces the structure of the diurnal framework. Vertov suggests that it is vision itself which accelerates in the *kino-eye*, as the film's finale presents a frenetic kaleidoscopic montage; a split-second fusion of previously seen moments from throughout the film that ultimately culminating in an iconographic closeup of the *kino-eye* camera aperture closing.

In contrast to Vertov's kaleidoscopic acceleration of vision, *Berlin* concludes with a whirling fireworks display exploding over the Berlin night sky which then darkens to reveal an ominous radio tower in the distance, topped by a shining singular beam moving across the dark landscape. Unlike in *Movie Camera*, *Berlin*'s final image suggests a disembodied panoptic form of vision shining into and across the frame, blinding us for just a split second, before the film credits roll. Where Vertov's film concludes with a human eye-camera aperture hybrid form of machine and human embodiment, Ruttmann's closing image is a stark sense of ominous, distant authority—portraying a vision of consolidated and disembodied power as a totemic symbol, fueled by electrical power and enabling the radio tower to “see” everywhere in the dark. These two very different endings are yet another expression of the two films' divergent politics of seeing: Vertov's vision is embodiment and synthesis, while

Ruttmann's vision points literally towards a dark future illuminated by a power concentrated in a disembodied symbol of fascist singularity.

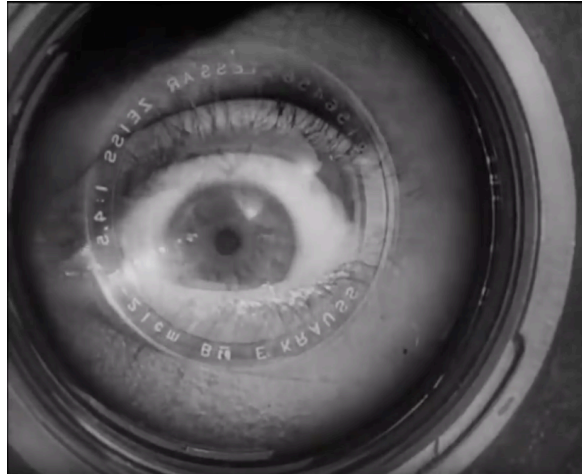


Figure 1.1: Still from *Man with a Movie Camera*, dir. Dziga Vertov (1929, USSR)



Figure 1.2.: Still from *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City*, dir. Walter Ruttmann (1927, Germany)

In a sense, *Movie Camera* is as much about the experience of modernism and acceleration as it is about “the city.” We first experience speed in *Movie Camera* as a negative: the languorous opening of the film provides an extreme experience of suspension, quiet, stillness, silence and the lack of action, an overture in which the orchestra is getting ready to play but does not yet strike. This pregnant anti-musical

overture is juxtaposed to the silence of the dawn and then accompanied by the ever so slow awakening of the city as a visceral suspension of animation. This first act of the symphony seems to last an interminably long time, building up pregnant expectation, with a number of different moments of withheld action: a sleeping girl who fails to wake, the stillness of cinema poster with figures hushing its viewers to silence... And then, suddenly, a train, a speeding demon, explodes from multiple perspectives, seeming to barrel into and then over our heads, surely crushing the human and the camera capturing this shocking spectacle. It is as if the opening of *Movie Camera* has been like the winding of a top, continuously building until it finally explodes into the film's first whirling action sequence. And before we viewers even have time to register what is occurring, the film reveals its cameraperson safely retrieving the camera from its refuge in a hole between the train tracks. The experience of accelerating speed ebbs and reappears at various junctures throughout the film until its culminating section, "Act V," when *Movie Camera* crescendos into a frenetic kaleidoscope of pulsing *kino-eye* vision. By the end of the film, it is clear that *Movie Camera's* structure is not a full dawn-to-dark experience of the city symphony pattern, but rather a shocking and enthusiastically embodied experience of urban acceleration itself. In its departure from the day-in-life of a city form that *Berlin* and *Les Heures* codified, *Movie Camera* transforms the seemingly strict temporality of a dawn-to-dark natural cycle, into a symphony of acceleration.

Chapter 2

Infrastructure *Études*

“By its nature, the metropolis provides what otherwise could be given only by traveling; namely, the strange.”¹ —Jane Jacobs

“The esthetics of jazz demand that a musician play with complete originality, with an assertion of his own musical individuality. . . . At the same time jazz requires that musicians be able to merge their unique voices in the totalizing, collective improvisations of polyphony and heterophony. The implications of this esthetic are profound and more than vaguely threatening, for no political system has yet been devised with social principles which reward maximal individualism within the framework of spontaneous egalitarian interaction.”² —John Szwed



Figure 2: Still from *Bridges-go-round*, dir. Shirley Clarke (USA, 1958)

¹ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (London: Penguin Books, 1962).

² George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), xi-xii.

The Étude

Whereas a symphony is a composition designed to demonstrate a particular composer's ability to create harmony and emotion from the strategic blending and balancing of many different instruments, the *étude* has an entirely different goal. The *étude* is a short musical composition, typically written to be played on a single instrument, for the purpose of learning and practicing technique. And yet, the endurance of so many musical *études* in the Classical Western music canon suggests that there is a long tradition of appreciation for the artistic value of this musical genre. Composed and played as an exercise for gaining and/or maintaining practice technical prowess, *études* often instigate players to explore the lexicon of what a particular instrument can do. *Études* coax their players toward virtuosity, or at least, into comfort and joy. They are a form of music that asserts the process of learning and practicing over, or at least alongside, any notion of perfection or final product. *Études*, unlike other forms of classical musical composition, do not cater to the assumed desires or expectations of an audience. Rather they are composed primarily for the player. In short, the *étude* is a form of art that validates the act of acquiring or practicing one's craft and of valuing process and learning over finished product.

In *The City Symphony Phenomenon*, editors Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher take an inclusive approach to the concept of "city symphony," noting that the genre "helped to invent the avant-garde nonfiction film by handling documentary footage of

the modern city in ways that could be abstract, poetic, metaphorical and rhythmic.”³

However, the diversity of films included in their designation means that, as Jan-Christopher Horak remarks in his report about the 2014 Ghent symposium “Beyond Ruttmann and Vertov: Minor City Symphonies” (organized by Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher in advance of their published collection), the films included do not always “fit comfortably into the form, given their diversity,” but rather can be viewed as “bricolages, impure and heterogeneous attempts to turn the city into a character.”⁴

Many short city films are by their very nature, ontologically, sketch-like. As a short film form, these works tend to be motivated by an experimental approach in which the spirit of exploration is facilitated by formal constraints—whether that be the limitation of a singular subject scope, or by brevity of length (duration), or both. As studies of the urban environment, film *études* often rely upon and frame the common (everyday) infrastructure of the city as subject matter: the physical elements of the city that are public, readily available and easy to access and film. Short city films, like longer and more formal city symphonies, focus on the materiality of commonness — not so much universality, but common everydayness—expressed by the visual aspects of the city that anyone and no one in particular “owns” and uses. Often created and shot improvisationally, city film *études* are generally constructed out of authentic filmic encounters with the environment of the city and expressed as embodied camera

³ Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher, *City Symphony Phenomenon*, 3.

⁴ Horak, “Minor City Symphonies.”

experiences.

While some scholars have dismissed experimental short city films for having a fragmentary nature or for being amateurish,⁵ scholars such as Patricia Zimmermann have highlighted the central role that avant-garde and experimental city filmmaking played in constructing an important amateur film movement that aided in the development of cinema as art as and as a counterpoint to the commercialism of Hollywood.⁶ For example, William Uricchio ascribes Leyda's motives for producing *A Bronx Morning* (1931, USA, 14 min) as "learning about film by making one; using the project to attract Guggenheim support and as a springboard for subsequent projects; and using the film to gain admission to Eisenstein's classes."⁷ Another example is Robert Florey, who described his film *Skyscraper Symphony* (1929) as "an architectural study of New York skyscrapers."⁸ Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher note that the "interest in avant-garde representations of the city was widespread in amateur film circles in the late 1920s and early 1930s."⁹ They acknowledge that, while the city symphony cycle became increasingly professionalized and commercialized beginning in the early 1930s, many professional filmmakers made city symphonies as personal

⁵ Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher, *City Symphony Phenomenon*, 8, 131.

⁶ Patricia Zimmermann, "Startling Angles: Amateur Film and the Early Avant-Garde," in *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Avant-Garde, 1919-1945*, ed. Jan-Christopher Horak (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 151.

⁷ Uricchio, "The City Viewed," 298.

⁸ Brian Taves, *Robert Florey: The French Expressionist* (Scarecrow Press, 1987), 98.

⁹ Jacobs, Kinik, and Hielscher, *City Symphony Phenomenon*, 8.

projects.¹⁰ They also note that amateur filmmaking magazines and *ciné-clubs* touted the city as “the perfect topic for amateur filmmakers interested in an ‘experimental approach.’”¹¹ This boosterism on the part of film clubs perhaps accounts for why there is such a plethora of eclectic short city films related to but not exactly adhering to all of the main tenants of the classical city symphony genre. And yet, these heterogenous attempts to study the city using the medium of film provide a window into the international and intergenerational aspect of experimental art film practices in many major cities in the US and Europe and that also reached to South America and as far as Asia.¹² In the first generation of city symphony, the classical period of the 1920s-30s, the interconnections and creative associations between filmmakers in the USSR, New York, France, Germany, Holland and Belgium have been well documented.¹³ After World War II, the first generation of city filmmaking directly influenced a second generation of city films, particularly those working in New York City such as Willard Van Dyke, who worked collaboratively with Shirley Clarke and D.A. Pennebaker, who in turn helped to shape a specifically jazz informed visual music city filmmaking.¹⁴

¹⁰ Jacobs, Kinik, and Hielscher, *City Symphony Phenomenon*, 7.

¹¹ Jacobs, Kinik, and Hielscher, *City Symphony Phenomenon*, 8.

¹² Jacobs, Kinik, and Hielscher, *City Symphony Phenomenon*, 7-8.

¹³ Wolfe, “Straight Shots,” 238-9; Barnouw, *Documentary*, 73-81; Waugh, *Conscience of Cinema*, 146; Michelson, “Magician,” 64.

¹⁴ Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-garde Cinema, 1943-71*, 2nd ed., (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 100; Keith Beattie, *D.A. Pennebaker* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 30.

Synecdoche as Form

A city's infrastructure is not only its sewers and electrical lines, but also the framework of that city's physical environment, whether that be its buildings or streets or the large structures that intrude upon the public commons to carry automobiles or streetcars or water or energy or waste. Infrastructure creates, not only the physical look of a city, but shapes its character and the types of culture that take seed in its soil, its temporality or rhythm and the conditions of its light. In *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*, Keller Easterling describes infrastructure as the "hidden substrate" and "the over point of contact and access between us all."¹⁵ She defines infrastructure as that which determines the rules governing the space of everyday life and she views it as having the power to encode relationships between individuals, groups, objects and places while organizing human movements through time.¹⁶ As the structural aspect of cities that directly shapes its culture and identity, a city's infrastructure can both provide and inhibit types of mobility and aspects of visibility—the vistas as well as types of vision (e.g. bird's eye, rooftop, down long avenues, blocked by tall buildings, subterranean, by foot, by train) that are possible in a place. Public infrastructure, whether types of physical buildings that shape the type of light and sense of space or the character of its city streets and sidewalks, its parks and forms of public transportation all shape how people in a city feel as well as

¹⁵ Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London and New York: Verso, 2014), 11.

¹⁶ Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*, 11.

determine the ways that different people across class, background, culture and neighborhood encounter each other. Infrastructure such as bridges and highways allows passage into and out of a city and determine the types of flow and speeds of exchange that define the temporality and rhythm of a place. Because infrastructure is a defining aspect, if not *the* defining aspect of urban life, it might also be thought of as a physical manifestation or symbol of commonality.

In this chapter, I will analyze a subset of “city symphony” films that I call “infrastructure *études*.” Infrastructure *études* are by their nature about urban physicality, whether that be defined by the seemingly inanimate structures of the built environment, such as bridges, buildings and roads or elements of the city that facilitate mobility and create ephemeral experiences that shape rhythm, affect and movement through space, including electric lights and elevated trains. As inherently “synecdochic” films—infrastructure *études* limit their purview to one particular environmental element: providing a cinematographic metonym for their chosen city. The infrastructure of these films may account for particular types of visual experiences or provide the framework for certain kinds of sociality, affect, type of movement or interaction and exchange. This subset of visual music city films deviate from the classical city symphony panoramic approach to representation. Instead of presenting a microcosmic cross-section of the city by juxtaposing the different types of activities and people in a dawn-to-dark format, infrastructure *études* are experiments in portraiture of a singular and particular environmental element of

public city life. This singular focus can be described as a “synecdochic” approach to representation—in which the film’s subject serves as a symbol or shorthand for that city’s identity and character. For example, the Eiffel Tower is often used as a synecdoche for Paris, the Golden Gate Bridge and the cable car commonly function as signifiers for San Francisco, and the Brooklyn Bridge, one or more of its most iconic skyscrapers and by the city’s distinctive 19th century elevated trains serves as icons of New York City. There are many clusters of films portraying the same subject matter (see Appendix A). Well-represented topics include: city bridges, skyscrapers, city trains, the city street—whether an iconic or famous street, some particular and well-known attribute of that street (e.g. the lights of Broadway) or the literal physical pavement (*Blacktop*, dirs. Ray & Charles Eames, 1952) and street signs (*Zorn’s Lemma*, dir. Hollis Frampton, 1970) and manhole covers (*Bop Scotch*, dir. Jordan Belson, 1952) found there. In this way, infrastructure *études* are a mode of filmic portraiture in which a specific city structural element serves as a symbol of, or a short-hand for, that city’s identity.¹⁷ In choosing the term “infrastructure *étude*,” I am advocating for a view of these films as a distinct subcategory of experimental city film practice about the city’s physical commons. As with city symphony films more generally, infrastructure *études* do not center on individual human characters, but are instead concerned with the poetics and musicality of the city environment.¹⁸

¹⁷ In other words: this is the portrait mode of landscape filmmaking.

¹⁸ There are some exceptions to this — for example, I will explore Thomas Waugh’s argument that *De Brug* has an underlying narrative structure.

Unlike city symphonies, infrastructure *études* do not primarily focus on or feature the human figure or human centered activities for subject matter. Instead these works center on the physical and public experience of the urban environment. And while the films do not focus on the human figure or human subjects, infrastructure *études* are invested in the very human questions of affect and civic identity. While Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher explore many different attributes and types of films in their collection, the editors do not differentiate between the panoramic approach of most well-known city symphonies and the films that deviate from the representational goal of inclusive holism. In describing the trio of Rudy Burckhardt's early New York City films *Up and Down the Waterfront* (1946), *The Climate of New York* (1948) and *Under the Brooklyn Bridge* (1953), MacDonald invokes the idea of a synecdochic approach. He writes:

...less involved in attempting to capture the quintessential realities of the modern city than in observing specific aspects of New York... Burckhardt is repeatedly drawn to particular architectural achievements—the Flatiron Building, the Empire State Building, the Brooklyn Bridge—and areas where a wide variety of people congregate—Central Park and Fourteenth Street, most frequently. These sites are presented as synecdochic representations of New York's immensity and social complexity.¹⁹

For MacDonald, Burckhardt's synecdochic approach is expressed in his choice of locale and subject matter. The filmmaker presents specific locations that carry iconographic value or contain the possibility of representing the diversity and social

¹⁹ MacDonald, *Garden in the Machine*, 155.

complexity of the city as a whole in a single location. This approach departs from a cross-sectional *montage* strategy of juxtaposition in which the diversity is constructed through juxtaposition and accretion. While many city symphonies including *Berlin* and *Movie Camera* demonstrate diversity in single locales, the overall effect of inclusive diversity in cross-sectional montage is built through contrasts and difference in the editing. Comparing his films to the European city symphonies, MacDonald writes: “Burckhardt films seem, at least at first, to have no polemical agenda. They seem strictly observational.”²⁰ It is significant that MacDonald interprets Burckhardt’s camerawork, rather than the film’s editing or structure, as expressing the democratic ideals of equality and diversity. In taking an observational approach, it is significant that Burckhardt is interested in how his film camera can capture the actualities of diversity and equality flourishing in a single locale. By eschewing the usual city symphony montage structured approach, Burckhardt’s films elevates the actualities of diversity in a single locale over his ability to construct a notion of diversity by way of juxtaposition and aggregation. In other words, Burckhardt structures his films so that the observational footage takes precedence over the imposition of meaning constructed through editing. This is not to say that his films do not rely on editing, however, his work opens the possibility for symbolism to reside in a single element or place on its own rather than solely how it participates in a meaning that can only emerge in montage.

²⁰ MacDonald, *Garden in the Machine*, 158.

Erica Stein, another city symphony scholar, draws a distinction between “symphonies of the center” and “symphonies of the margins” that she defines as “single-location symphonies... [that] chronicle the activities of marginal populations in peripheral areas.”²¹ Focusing on mid-century New York city films, Stein contrasts city symphony films such as *N.Y., N.Y.* (dir. Francis Thompson, USA, 1957) in which “the center is a text-product,” with films such as *A Bronx Morning* (dir. Jay Leyda, USA, 1931) that portray “areas deliberately and thoroughly erased from the visual field of late modernity,”²² *A Bronx Morning* focuses exclusively on a non-central (outer borough) neighborhood of New York City. Symphonies of the margins contain the idea that immigrant and working class areas and neighborhoods have their own integrity without needing to be compared and contextualized to other areas by way of montage, as they are in city symphonies, such as in *Rien Que Les Heures*. Thus, rather than taking the cross-sectional montage approach that sews together a quilt or patchwork of seemingly unrelated areas and activities into a holistic and universalizing coherent container, the synecdochic approach selects a singular element for sustained attention and asserts the significance of the singular subject as a meaningful representation.

In some cases, the synecdochic approach is combined with a cross-sectional montage strategy. This is the case with *Regen (Rain)* (dirs. Joris Ivens and Mannus

²¹ Stein, “Island Off The Coast Of America,” 12.

²² Stein, “Island Off The Coast Of America,” 12.

Franken, Holland, 1929), which represents Amsterdam by using one of that city's primary characteristics as being a rainy city. Transposing the dawn-to-dark pattern of the city symphony, *Regen* portrays Amsterdam using the structure of a single rainstorm from first droplets to downpour to eventual sky clearing. This approach suggests both a synecdochic approach that focuses on a singular, significant characteristic to carry both literal and symbolic meaning while also relying upon a cross-sectional montage structure that creates a panorama of Amsterdam life in the rain.

Other approaches to synecdochic cross-sections are organized around a variety of instances of one particular type of infrastructure and create a musical film study of a city's multiple iterations of that chosen subject. *Skyscraper Symphony* (dir. Robert Florey, USA, 1929, 9 min.), *Bridges-go-round* (dir. Shirley Clarke, 1958, 4 min.) and *Highway* (dir. Hilary Harris, 1958, 10 min.) are all examples of this this approach—using assembling footage recorded in multiple locations of various iterations of a particular infrastructural element without regard to geographic actuality. For example, in *Skyscraper Symphony*, Robert Florey juxtaposes sequences that present many different tall building façades found in non-contiguous areas of Manhattan. Instead of a day-in-the-life of the city as a whole, the film moves from the oppressive New York Presbyterian Hospital complex uptown to more familiar New York skyscrapers that were the hallmarks of lower Manhattan, such as the Woolworth Building (1913),

presented alongside other well-known tall midtown behemoths.²³ This film is a montage of tall building varieties, presented as abstracted shapes defined in contrast to the varying shapes of sky and animated by the film's predominantly low angles.

In her analysis of Florey's film, Merrill Schleier makes the point that, unlike *Manhatta* and *Twenty-four Dollar Island* (dir. Robert Flaherty, USA, 1927), Florey's film "overlooks Manhattan's traditional status as a bustling commercial seaport with its skyline serving as an image of progress" to instead focus "almost solely on the city's tall buildings as modernity's dystopian ciphers."²⁴ Schleier applies the term synecdoche in her analysis in two distinct ways. First, she describes the ending of the film portraying "the gaping hole of a construction site," as "a synecdoche for the relentless rebuilding in New York."²⁵ This use of synecdoche implies a metonymic meaning in which the activity of the pictured bulldozer is indicative of a more general condition of constant construction in the city. Secondly, Schleier describes the "attention paid to the entrapping effects of an uptown skyscraper hospital complex devoid of urban inhabitants, which acts as a synecdoche for metropolitan life."²⁶ Writing that Florey's representation of the uptown New York Presbyterian Hospital complex is a "shorthand for the city's urban congestion and its pervasive

²³ Merrill Schleier, "Skyscraper Symphony," in *The City Symphony Phenomenon*, eds. Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher, 92-93.

²⁴ Schleier, "Skyscraper Symphony," 86-87, 261.

²⁵ Schleier, "Skyscraper Symphony," 93.

²⁶ Schleier, "Skyscraper Symphony," 261.

modernity,”²⁷ Schleier implies that that the synecdoche is one of affect, symbolizing the feeling of disquiet produced by New York’s architectural modernism. Describing *Skyscraper Symphony* as an ambivalent city film—“a symphony and an elegy to Manhattan modernity by a Parisian in New York,” she emphasizes a contrast between Florey’s approach and the predominantly exuberant, celebratory representations of modernity associated with *Berlin, Movie Camera* and other city symphonies of the time.²⁸

If Florey’s film is a demonstration of a synecdochic approach to skyscrapers as its singular focus, other skyscraper city films, such as *La Tour* (dir. René Clair, France, 1928), *Skyscraper* (dirs. Willard Van Dyke and Shirley Clarke, USA, 1959, 21 min.) and *Empire* (dir. Andy Warhol, USA, 1963, 8 hours) focus on a single and iconographically significant building. With *Empire*, Warhol not only focuses on a single building but takes the idea of a skyscraper synecdoche to a cinematic extreme—perhaps befitting a conceptual treatment of the world’s tallest building.²⁹

Converting the concept of visual music into what might be considered a conceptual or ironic prank, *Empire* presents a filmed recording of singular camera view of the Empire State Building for an uninterrupted for eight hours. Projected as an eight hour film presentation of the recording in “real time,” *Empire* offers what might perhaps be

²⁷ Schleier, “Skyscraper Symphony,” 92.

²⁸ Schleier, “Skyscraper Symphony,” 91.

²⁹ The Empire State Building was the tallest building in the world from its completion in 1931 until 1970, when the World Trade Center overtook that designation.

the most extreme case of film synecdoche: a single viewpoint of a singular subject. As one of the most iconic symbols of mid-twentieth century New York City—and of American modernism more generally—the Empire State Building has often signified, not only New York City and the state of New York (with its motto “the Empire State”), but might also be said to epitomize the dominion of mid-century twentieth century American cultural, commercial and economic power. *Empire* offers viewers an excess of attention in which symbolic meaning overtakes the mundane experience of watching a moving image that contains essentially no movement (save for the movement of time passing and the literal film frames moving through the projector). Likely the first conceptual city symphony film, *Empire* is an infrastructure *étude* in which the music is sculptural and ambient—a neo-Dadaist or John Cage-inspired concept film approach to visual music filmmaking—that queers the trope of the city film to ironize the semiotics of the Empire State Building: a building whose name rhymes with its iconography. As a word, Empire signifies an all-encompassing power and as the tallest building in the most economically and culturally powerful city in what many referred to as “the American century,” the Empire State Building embodies the concept of American empire. With the film *Empire*, Warhol offers viewers a radically selfish cinema that turns away from the commercial purpose of film as a form of popular and widely accessible entertainment. It is a confounding film experience: a film that becomes almost invisible by being visible for well-past what is practical to expect an audience to view in an uninterrupted fashion. It is a film

that behaves more like a mirror or ice: a cold experience of a “moving” photograph that resists practically everything that film normally offers. Replacing the expectation for character and story and action or even just movement, *Empire* offers its viewers nothing and everything—a microcosm for city (in)attention and inanimate celebrity.

In organizing types of infrastructure *études* by subject matter, what becomes evident is the range of structural approaches taken to this type of filmmaking—from a narrow portrait focused on a single city element, whether a particular city bridge or a single building, to more broadly conceived synecdoches that offer a cross-section of one type of city element or structure, form of mobility or variety of signs—whether daytime or illuminated ones at night.³⁰ Categorization leads to other insights. For example, infrastructure *étude* films offer studies of types of visuality and symbolic meaning. While some films focus on immobile elements of the city, a number of films delight in the ostentatiously iconic yet ephemeral characteristics of illuminated lights such as *Jazz of Lights* (dir. Ian Hugo, 1954), *Night Lites* (dir. D.A. Pennebaker, 1958), *Broadway by Light* (dir. William Klein, 1958) and *Lights* (dir. Marie Menken, 1966). While some films focus on the very tall and ubiquitous and enduring visibility of skyscrapers, other infrastructure *études* document iconic elements of the city that will soon disappear as in the case of *Daybreak Express* (dir. D.A. Pennebaker, 1953/7), *The Wonder Ring* (dir. Stan Brakhage, 1955) and *Third Ave El* (dir. Carson Davidson, 1955) which all center on the soon-to-be demolished Third Ave “el” metropolitan

³⁰ See Mediography, Appendix A. In the infrastructure *étude* section of this dissertation’s mediography (see page 300), I document my own research into and organization of this type of filmmaking.

train line. Still other films endeavor to render visible elements of the city that might normally be overlooked and function as practically invisible. Films such as *Bop Scotch* (dir. Jordan Belson, USA, 1952, 3'), *Blacktop* (dirs. Ray & Charles Eames, USA, 1952, 11'), *Zorn's Lemma* (dir. Hollis Frampton, USA, 1970, 60') or *Side/Walk/Shuttle* (dir. Ernie Gehr, USA, 1992, 41') focus on everyday street signs or the literal pavement on the ground. Those infrastructure *études* aim to redirect our attention and to enact respect upon that which is stepped on or otherwise taken for granted. To lens the most overlooked aspects of the city with a poetic sensibility is to raise the status of the everyday to art, enacting what Anna Tsing calls "the arts of noticing." Whether attending to the particular colors of pavement, the typographic styles of signs and marquees, the color and hue of its lights, the shape and style of the architectural details of a city's highway overpass or its manhole covers or its iconic bridges, all films represent their present-day city's physicality and materiality.

In comparing and contrasting these films to each other, it is evident that many of the films were inspired by each other and have striking similarities with films that span across geography and/or time period.³¹ But, despite the variety in subject matter and formal approach, infrastructure *études* all combine an experimental film art practice with forms of auto-ethnography—a desire to represent one's own city as a form of what Franziska Bollerey and Christoph Grafe call "collective self-

³¹ Jacobs, Kinik, and Hielscher, *City Symphony Phenomenon*, 27.

portraiture.”³² In representing, playing with and manipulating seemingly inert infrastructure that constitute a city’s modern commons, infrastructure *études* enact a representational collectivity: a stewardship (rather than ownership) over their subjects, a collaboration with the environment that eschews ownership and evinces co-authorship. These films offer viewers vicarious engagements with the everyday city, a way of seeing that includes the act of viewing and of participating in the idea of who and what represents the city and what the city represents. I interpret this type of personal, non-commercial form of experimental filmmaking to express what Henri Lefebvre first coined as “the right to the city”—a call to action for all people to claim the city as a co-created space, detached from the imposition of capitalism over social interaction.³³

³² Franziska Bollerey and Christoph Grafe, eds. “City Symphonies – Film Manifestos of Urban Experiences,” *Eselsohren: Journal of History of Art, Architecture and Urbanism* II, no. 1 & 2 (June 2015), 9.

³³ Henri Lefebvre, “The right to the city,” in *Writings on cities: Henri Lefebvre*, trans., eds. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 147-159. These ideas were brought into the Anglophone world and popularized by David Harvey. See: Harvey, David. “The Right to the City,” *New Left Review* 53 (Sept-Oct 2008): 23-40.

Bridges



Figure 2.1: Video still from *Bridges-go-round*, dir. Shirley Clarke (USA, 1958).

As a form of infrastructure, bridges connect landmasses and people from different sides of a river or other body of water. Brian Hayes points out that bridges are traditionally an emblem of friendship, whereas many other large engineered structures, “such as refineries, power plants, highways and airports tend to be seen as a blot on the landscape.”³⁴ Because bridges are easily regarded with both affection and symbolic value and because most large cities have at least one distinctive and recognizable bridge, bridges have often been used as visual shorthand for a city’s identity throughout visual culture in paintings, etchings, photographs, postcards as

³⁴ Brian Hayes, *Infrastructure: A Guide to the Industrial Landscape*, Revised ed. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2014), 409.

well as in films, both documentary and fictional—a practice still very much in use today. For example, in a recent *PBS Frontline* documentary “Right to Fail” (Season 2019, Episode 9, dir. Joaquin Sapien, February 26, 2019), the episode opens with aerial footage of the Queensboro Bridge while the announcer introduces the topic of people living in New York City far from the high rise towers of Manhattan. In this example, the imagery of the Queensboro Bridge provides a metonym for public access to the outer borough of Queens, which will be the primary location of the episode’s content. The use of cinematography of iconographic bridges to both symbolize a particular city’s identity and as a metonym for literal access to that place is evident in some of the earliest city film studies ever made. The Brooklyn Bridge, which opened in 1883 and was the tallest manmade structure in North America at the time, quickly became a symbol of New York City in prints, etchings, photographs and was the subject of early film studies made by Thomas Edison’s studio. The film “New Brooklyn to New York Via Brooklyn Bridge, no. 2” (1899, 2 min.) is one such early short film study, documenting the entire trip from Brooklyn to New York via a train going across that bridge. The Brooklyn Bridge is also a prominent element of *Manhatta* (1921) in which a dramatic composition of the bridge’s iconic arches is highlighted above the crowd of people walking underneath, directly following the title card: “Shapes of the bridges, / vast frameworks, girders, arches.” In that film, as in many other New York city films, the site of crowds of pedestrians walking across the bridge or taking trains across bridges that enter or exit central city districts express

the idea that the city is an open and accessible place to many people from all walks of life and backgrounds.

De Brug

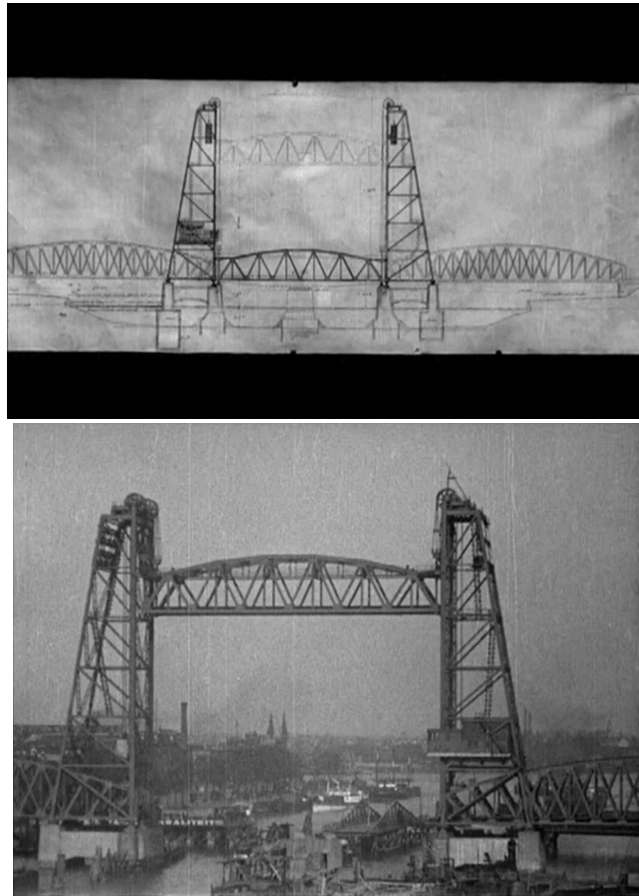


Figure 2.2 & 2.3: Stills of the opening images of *De Brug*, dir. Joris Ivens (Netherlands, 1928).

De Brug (The Bridge), the earliest completed film made by Dutch documentary film master Joris Ivens, is a synecdochic city film about De Hef, the mechanical lift bridge completed in 1927 in Rotterdam's harbor, about an iconographically significant bridge for both the city of Rotterdam and for the

Netherlands more generally.³⁵ The film is a portrait of what was, at the time, a newly significant Dutch landmark: a mechanical elevator drawbridge in the harbor of the port city of Rotterdam, the economic capital of the Netherlands. In a recollection about the making of the film, Ivens wrote of his desire to find an inanimate subject with a “wide variety of movement and shape,” explaining: “For me the bridge was a laboratory of movements, tones, shapes, contrasts, rhythms, and the relations between all these... What I wanted was to find some general rules, laws of continuity of movement” and described his choice of this bridge as a worthy subject with which to study “the ABC of movement and rhythm.”³⁶ Thomas Waugh describes Ivens’ interest in making a film study as “a validation of formal investigation as an end in itself, the basis of much modernist culture of the first half of the 20th century.”³⁷ Yet, despite the humility of his stated goal, *De Brug* transcends Ivens’ intention to simply study film grammar. The film offers a dynamic, even heroic, portrait of Dutch engineering prowess and a portrait of the successful collaboration between machine and human in operating the central engine of the city, the intersection between new and old, fast and slow, the train and the ship.

The name of the bridge, De Hef, is Dutch for the lift or the elevator and its meaning points to this bridge’s unique feature as mechanical lift bridge designed to

³⁵ Waugh, *Conscience of Cinema*, 74. Waugh argues that although *De Brug* was Ivens’ first finished film, he considers *Regen* (1929) made the following year in collaboration with Mannus Franken to have been Ivens’ first professional work.

³⁶ Waugh, *Conscience of Cinema*, 67.

³⁷ Waugh, *Conscience of Cinema*, 67.

accommodate for use by both trains and ships. This bridge was the first mechanical drawbridge of its kind in Western Europe and part of a much longer elevated rail track on the Breda-Rotterdam train line that cuts through the center of city of Rotterdam. With the help of two towers, the mechanical drawbridge lifts its main railway tracks horizontally into the air in order to accommodate large steamships passing into and out of the harbor. It opened to the public in 1927 as a long awaited replacement for an older lift bridge, the *Koningshavenbrug* (King's Harbor Bridge) which had been built in 1878. While the original *Koningshavenbrug* had at first been regarded as a technical wonder of its time, it soon came to be known as the 'Bridge of Sighs,' because of the long wait time required by the operators to open and close the bridge.³⁸ Towards the end of World War I, in 1918, the aging and overworked bridge was rammed by a German steamship and had to be taken out of use.³⁹ In 1924, the city of Rotterdam held an international competition a new bridge design, won by Pieter Joosting (1867-1942), an employee of the Dutch Railways.⁴⁰

Ivens opens his film on a hand drawn sketch of the bridge, perhaps nodding to his own film as a study or a sketch, and emphasizing the idea of the bridge as something which first was conceived and designed by an individual. The sketch is then graphically matched by footage of a wide shot of the actual bridge at the mouth

³⁸ "City of Rotterdam" website, <http://www.stadsarchief.rotterdam.nl/de-hef>, accessed on 09-03-2018.

³⁹ Holland was officially neutral during WWI, but was in a precarious geographic position, mostly surrounded by Germany with the allied French to the south of Belgium and the British across the North Sea/English Channel.

⁴⁰ "City of Rotterdam" website, <http://www.stadsarchief.rotterdam.nl/de-hef>, accessed on 09-03-2018.

of the harbor with Rotterdam just barely visible on the horizon (Figures 2.2 and 2.3), quickly followed by a closer view of the bridge, and then Ivens' own kino-eye images of the filmmaker looking through his tiny handheld Kinamo camera off to the side of the frame, and then turning this camera to face into center of the film frame (Figure 2.4).



Figure 2.4: Still from *De Brug*, dir. Joris Ivens (Netherlands, 1928).

This sequence, repeated twice, appears to be a nod to the opening of *Man With A Movie Camera*.⁴¹ Following this sequence, the film cuts to the kino-eye's point of view: a train track, dramatically framed from the rail's level, angled up, juxtaposed to a composition filmed from inside the moving train car, echoing *Berlin's* opening sequence. It becomes clear that the train is now slowly approaching the rail bridge. A view of the water, from the train's vantage point, indicates that the train is beginning

⁴¹ Waugh, *Conscience of Cinema*, 46; Barnouw, *Documentary*, 133-134. Even though *Man With A Movie Camera* wasn't released until 1929, it is probable that Ivens had seen footage or at least heard about the Kinoks' work in progress when he visited Ruttmann in Berlin in 1927 or 1928.

to cross the bridge, a subject which becomes partially obscured by the patterns of light against dark of the steel trellises and then by the train's own steam, the steam of modernity. This smoke envelops the steel girders of the bridge as if in a visual embrace that slowly climbs upward to reveal the rooftops of Rotterdam now visible in the distance. The horizontal forward movement of the trains shifts suddenly into verticality, climbing upward toward the towers of the bridge—a sequence that is both suddenly abstracting and disorienting. Are we looking up into the steel towers high above our head from a camera looking up from the roof of the train? The film does not clarify, but then cuts back to the safety of horizontality, a side shot of the bridge with the train moving to the right of the film frame.

Ivens' film balances labor and poetry—documentary actuality with abstracting visual tropes—the rivets of the steel beam is transposed temporarily into a field of polka dots, only to be intersected by the appearance of a worker, climbing up the steel tower of stairs, high above the river, precariously perched over the city. High angle shots of the cars and buses and boats far down below on the river crossing gives us the bridge engineer's (or is it just the bridge's) privileged point of view. Had Karl Marx been a film critic, he might have used 'the labor point of view' to refer to moments in a film in which the literal perspective of a worker is revealed. This is likely what Thomas Waugh meant when he describes *De Brug* as a "'realist' text continuously subvert[ing] the machine film discourse."⁴² The material realism of the

⁴² Waugh, *Conscience of Cinema*, 76.

necessary human demonstrates to us that the bridge engineer, his human labor, controls this most incredible of mechanical machines, much in the same way that *Movie Camera* counteracts the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (objectivist) celebration of the self-animating properties of the machine as in films like *Berlin* and *Ballet Mécanique* (dir. Ferdinand Léger and Dudley Murphy, France, 1924). But, this is not to say that Ivens was not closely influenced by both Ruttmann's film and Vertov's approach, as well as other city films screened by Filmliga.⁴³ *De Brug* includes details of the train's mechanisms, such as the axle connecting one train car to another, a sequence that directly echoes sequences in both *Berlin* and *Movie Camera*. Ivens also using the train's billowing smoke to build tension along with a quicker pace of cutting to build a sense of frenzy toward the impending arrival of the train to the bridge. The train signal lowers, the train slows, a hand pulls a lever, culminating in a montage of the train coming to a halt in a number of different camera angles. The switchboard is revealed. The engineer picks up the phone receiver, the train is stopped. The cable and the gears go into action. The rail track splits and slowly comes apart. The bridge is being lifted. Ivens shows first this action of coming apart and then reveals the movement of the rail bridge lifting skyward in a wider shot that allows us to see the whole lifting action in order to graphically illustrate the mechanical logic of the bridge. This is accomplished by first showing the vertical rising of the track, and then cutting to one of the bridge's counterweights, slowly lowering down inside one of the

⁴³ Floris Paalman, "Schuitema's De Maasbruggen: City and Film as a Process," in *The City Symphony Phenomenon*, eds. Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher, 130; Barnouw, *Documentary*, 133-134.

bridge's towers; allowing viewers to apperceive the impressiveness of this bridge's mechanical engineering. And then the film takes us up, up and over the rooftops of the city as if we are the rising platform itself. A tiny rowboat far down in the water below emphasizes the scale as well as the heights of this remarkable public works project.

These dramatic sequences serve to prepare the viewer for the arrival of a steamship into the mouth of the harbor. The train lies in wait, its white steam gathering around it like a veil over its barely patient torso, held in abeyance to the almighty steamship enveloped by the dark plumes of the tiny tug boat's black smoke wafting from its coal-fired engine. A tiny glance at the stalled train reminds us that each type of transport has its own temporality: the steamship moves as slowly as molasses when viewed from above, a vantage that is repeated again and again from various intriguing angles. It must be late in the day now with the sun shimmering so acutely on the water. Despite Ivens' poetic approach and the film's non-human (machine/bridge) subject matter, Waugh accuses the film of employing a conventional narrative structure, manifested graphically.⁴⁴ It is not clear whether Ivens saw his approach as either conventional or narrative, but he did view the film as a study in which he could attempt to define a logical visual grammar. At the point of making *De Brug*, Ivens considered himself a student of film language and describes the approach he takes as: "the vertical movements are dominant when the bridge is rising and

⁴⁴ Waugh, *Conscience of Cinema*, 59, 72.

lowers, and horizontal ones dominate when the boats are passing, with, however, indispensable variations.”⁴⁵ In addition to contrasting between horizontality and verticality, Ivens consciously uses suspense as a device to create visual desire for his viewers, describing:

During the passage of the boats, the film shows from time to time a train waiting. Thus the spectator doesn’t leave the subject and is anxious to see if other boats are passing, and presently he will be happy when the bridge closes again and the train is able to continue.⁴⁶

De Brug continues its use of narrative-like film techniques in the concluding sequence of the film, in which the end of the train moves away from the camera through the rail bridge then juxtaposed to a dramatic overhead shot of the train speeding through the bridge in which the line of white smoke trailing the train is visible through the archway of the bridge. A view of tiny figures and horses carrying freight can be spied underneath the massive bridge structure, providing us with yet another contrast to the speed and scale of the train. And then, yet one more contrast—a glimpse of a tiny airplane flying past the bridge and suggesting a whole other dimension of mobility. But, then, there is no time for that—and the film returns us back to the train, and we are riding on it over the bridge one more time, crossing over the water and past ships before receding.

De Maasbruggen

⁴⁵ Ivens quoted in Waugh, *Conscience of Cinema*, 72.

⁴⁶ Ivens quoted in Waugh, *Conscience of Cinema*, 72.

De Maasbruggen, Een filmstudie van Paul Schuitema (The Maas River Bridges, a film study by Paul Schuitema), (dir. Paul Schuitema, Netherlands, 1937, 14 min.) is another synecdochic bridge film about Rotterdam. Although this film is not exclusively about De Hef, Floris Paalman describes this film as an elaboration of Iven's *De Brug*, noting that Schuitema's film was shot at the same location on the river Maas and follows *De Brug*'s basic structure and interest in the city's mechanical draw bridges.⁴⁷ Unlike *De Brug* however, Schuitema's film focuses on the traffic created by halting and waiting for bridges to open and accommodate ships, emphasizing the different kinds of vehicles and people, from bicycles to cars to pedestrians and calling attention to the role played by the traffic policeman as conductor, a figure "necessary to minimize the chaos as a result of growing traffic."⁴⁸ Paalman highlights Schuitema's use of film as a tool to help him to study the problems of urban traffic in order to anticipate how design can improve this problem through automation that will make the traffic policeman superfluous.⁴⁹ As an infrastructure *étude*, *De Maasbruggen* provides an excellent example of a film created for the express purpose of study, in the case, not for the purpose of the study of filmmaking itself, but here for the purpose of studying urban dynamics and traffic patterns.⁵⁰ Differentiating his reading of the film from earlier critics which had

⁴⁷ Paalman, "Schuitema's De Maasbruggen," 127.

⁴⁸ Paalman, "Schuitema's De Maasbruggen," 130.

⁴⁹ Paalman, "Schuitema's De Maasbruggen," 130.

⁵⁰ Paalman, "Schuitema's De Maasbruggen," 134.

dismissed the work as unoriginal or even objectionably imitative of Ivens' earlier film, Paalman argues that Schuitema's work intentionally references Ivens' celebrated work in order to stage a conversation about the increasing problem of urban traffic as a symptom of the modern condition.⁵¹ Viewing the film as a result of a cross-disciplinary network between urbanists, architects and filmmakers, Paalman asserts that *De Maasbruggen* should be viewed as a film whose value is not so much as an original art work, but rather as film understood as "a study or a research project motivated by social objectives... a form that accounts for the *poiesis* of the process in which both films and urban projects find their value."⁵² In a sense, this film is a film study in two senses: a study of Ivens' film through imitation and a study of the topic of the bridges of Rotterdam as synecdoche for the problems and challenges of modern urban congestion.

Under the Brooklyn Bridge

While we are used to thinking about the bridge as a literal structure that connects the people and activities on both sides of a body of water, some people can also embody the concept of being a bridge between cultures or languages or backgrounds. "Bridge" figures can serve as informants about life on the other coast, a role sometimes played by migrants who come from elsewhere and transmit their own curiosity and enthusiasm about the newness and novelty they find in their newly

⁵¹ Paalman, "Schuitema's De Maasbruggen," 131.

⁵² Paalman, "Schuitema's De Maasbruggen," 135.

adopted land. Rudy Burckhardt might be considered one such individual: a Swiss immigrant who arrived in New York in 1935, was a documentary photographer who prolifically documented his adopted home of New York City, along with a number of other American locales he inhabited over his sixty-six year-long film career.⁵³

MacDonald builds upon this idea when he characterizes Burckhardt's work as being fascinated with New York in the way a visitor is taken with how the city looks and feels.⁵⁴ In *Under the Brooklyn Bridge* (1953), Burckhardt creates a portrait of the immigrant neighborhood and activities on the Brooklyn side of the East River in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge, the area known today as D.U.M.B.O. (an acronym which stands for "Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass"). As a "symphony of the margins," this film provides a portrait of a working class neighborhood in the shadow of two distinct bridges: the Manhattan Bridge and the Brooklyn Bridge.

Under the Brooklyn Bridge begins with a visual cataloging of the variety of architectural details of the warehouses on Water and Front Streets lining this port district. It moves from abstract details to wider views of this industrial neighborhood, defined by warehouses and stone building edifices—an appraisal of the physicality of the neighborhood. The seeming physical stability of this first section of the film is dramatically contrasted to the next section, footage of the brute force involved in workers deconstructing a large brick and stone edifice and signifying the

⁵³ Macdonald, "The City as the Country: The New York City Symphony from Rudy Burckhardt to Spike Lee," *Film Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (Winter 1997-98): 4; Rudy Burckhardt DVD booklet.

⁵⁴ MacDonald, "City as Country," 5.

transformation of what used to be a vital industrial port district. While the film is titled *Under the Brooklyn Bridge*, the film is really about the convergence of two different bridges and symbolically about two forces at play in this most picturesque and visually striking New York City neighborhoods. In this Brooklyn neighborhood on the shores of the East River, one can behold the newer steel framed Manhattan bridge standing side by side with the older, stone edifice of the Brooklyn Bridge, seemingly representing an old world New York. A photographer by training, Burckhardt shifts from film footage to a sequence of still photographs that provide a rudimentary form of silent time-lapse portraiture of the dismantling of the block. That sequence is followed by more film of the building wrecking, with sound to accompany the clouds of brick becoming rubble and dust. Like the contrast between the two bridges, the relationship between the animated still photographs and the film footage are another comparison between two types of temporal expression.

The following parts of the film follows roughly the temporal pattern of city symphonies. A second concerning lunchtime takes place at a neighborhood diner where working class men eat while other men cook and serve the food. The diner's window offers a frame for a view of the iconic Brooklyn bridge and then gives way to a scene in which a group of local boys strip naked and dive into the East River for a swim. (Is it really possible that the idea of swimming in the East River was ever not a cringe-worthy endeavor?) The next section of the film opens with a clock showing 4pm and is comprised of well-dressed women of many ethnicities walking in groups

past the empty lot where previously we witnessed the building being dismantled. Groups of people enter the York Street subway station, in view of the Manhattan Bridge, framed by so many buildings, followed by the concluding section of the film that returns to a visual consideration of the two bridges and surrounding structures—a large warehouse with double water towers, another warehouse topped by another water tower—and culminates an in evening sequence framed by a long shot of a tiny ship sailing up the East River and under the Brooklyn Bridge with Manhattan's skyline silhouette. In returning to the familiar city symphony pattern, Burckhardt offers a portrait of a marginal area that functions as a synecdochic study of working class New York caught between the two frames of its past as a vibrant industrial port and the present which suggests an as-yet-unbuilt future identity.

Jazz Nostalgia for the Future

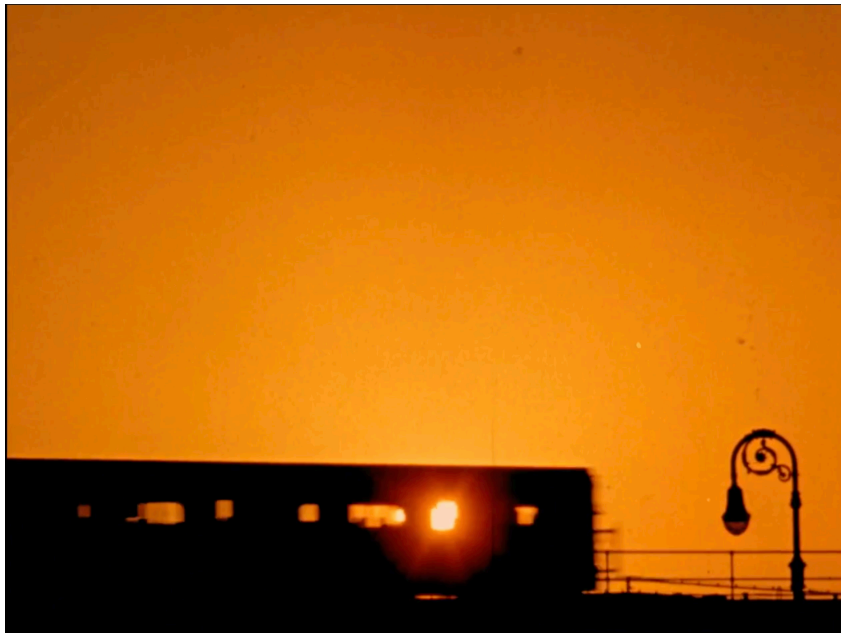


Figure 2.5: Still from Daybreak Express, dir. D.A. Pennebaker, 1953/57

Composer and historical musicologist George E. Lewis has called for historians of experimental music to recognize the multicultural, multi-ethnic base of experimentalism in music in order to not remain chroniclers of a tradition that “appropriates freely, yet furtively, from other ethnic traditions, yet cannot recognize any histories as its own other than those based in whiteness.”⁵⁵ Following Lewis’ call to reverse the erasure of African American cultural contributions in experimental music, I want to call attention to the significant role that jazz musical aesthetics (and the political commitments associated with them) has played on visual music city filmmaking, particularly among New York based mid-century filmmakers. Although none of the filmmakers discussed in this chapter are themselves African American, it

⁵⁵ Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, xiii.

is obvious that jazz concepts, aesthetics, and music have an outsized influence on not only mid-century American experimental city filmmaking but on many modernist American art forms of the twentieth century art—from modern dance to abstract expressionism in painting to assemblage and sculpture to theater performance as well as on other forms of music.⁵⁶ While the topic of cultural appropriation of African-American musical aesthetics and methodologies by non-African Americans in American culture deserves a in-depth analysis, it is unfortunately a topic outside of the scope of this dissertation. It is also important to note that the appropriation of jazz music was by no means unique to city films or to experimental film in general, and was practiced widely by Hollywood and other American entertainment industries.⁵⁷

Contextualizing “the promulgation of new cooperative, rather than competitive, relationships between artists” George E. Lewis views one of the central tenets of jazz improvisation as having been directly informed by the history of slavery and the Great Migration of African Americans.⁵⁸ Lewis cites the ways in which slave communities promulgated cooperation and communitarian institution-building in order “to inform their condition with coherence, meaning, and some measure of autonomy” and positions “the necessity of acting in concert in order to move beyond

⁵⁶ David Meeker, *Jazz on the Screen: A Jazz and Blues Filmography* (Library of Congress, 2018); Steven Johnson, *The New York Schools of Music and the Visual Arts* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012). Meeker writes about the entanglements and parallels between jazz and film in general. Many art and music history books cite the influence of jazz improvisation on the development of other American art and music forms such as Johnson.

⁵⁷ Meeker, *Jazz on Screen*.

⁵⁸ Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, xi.

simple strategies of resistance” and the development methods of cooperation in directly informing the aesthetics and development of this uniquely American form of music.⁵⁹ Lewis also notes that “the pursuit of individualism within an egalitarian frame has been central not only to the jazz moment, but also to African American music before and since that moment... in the wake of the radical physical and even mental silencing of slavery... African Americans developed an array of musical practices that encouraged all to speak... thereby providing a potential symbol for the new, utopian kind of sociopolitical system.”⁶⁰ The aspect of this topic that is most relevant to this discussion is the methodological transposition of jazz aesthetic values onto experimental filmmaking. Reading the use of “jazz aesthetics” in experimental film methodologies makes legible certain political and aesthetic commitments specific to jazz, improvisation, collectivity and social justice. As I see it, these political and aesthetic commitments were 1) to celebrate and hold space for individual expression and ‘voice’ in the context of group collaboration, 2) to develop the culture of city life and highlight city experience as a source of inspiration (participating in “ownership” over place or expressing a “right to the city” ethos in terms of participating in creating its culture), 3) to join into a conversation with others about form in order to play with, stretch and transform received musical signatures by swinging with or bending them in order to push limits and develop new forms, 4) to

⁵⁹ Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, xi.

⁶⁰ Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, xii.

be in the present moment and to consecrate spontaneity as a creative value, 5) to strive for equity in shared and collaborative authorship.

In the 1950s, many New York City based white experimental filmmakers turned to jazz aesthetics as a source of creative inspiration. Beyond simply setting their films to jazz musical scores, many infrastructure *étude* filmmakers overtly appropriated jazz aesthetics into their filmmaking practice. For example, Ian Hugo's film *Jazz of Light* (dir. Ian Hugo, USA, 1954, 16min.) makes its allegiance to jazz explicit in the film's title and expresses jazz aesthetics with clever ways to distort and bend recognizable elements of city imagery to suggest an improvisational approach to composition. Both *Bop Scotch* (dir. Jordan Belson, USA, 1952, 3 min.) and Pennebaker's *Daybreak Express* (1953/7) use specific jazz recordings in their soundtracks. In the case of *Bop Scotch*, the film is composed entirely of close-up details of street pavement textures, manhole covers and sidewalk mosaics. That film's title is a reference to the BeBop style of music, also called Bop. Belson appropriates a recording of bebop music, uncredited in the film, that provides a speedy tempo and prominent saxophone, trumpet and drum soloing that trade off with each other as structure for the fast-paced imagery.

Pennebaker's film, *Daybreak Express*, uses a Duke Ellington recording of the composition "Daybreak Express" for both the film's title and its sound track.⁶¹ A poetic and musical documentation of a soon-to-be demolished fixture of the New

⁶¹ Beattie, *Pennebaker*, 129.

York City urban landscape, the film is a portrait of the Third Avenue “el” or elevated train during sunset. The “el” as it was colloquially known, was part of the IRT and the last remaining elevated train line to operate in Manhattan that was finally demolished in 1955. As a documentation of the Third Avenue El, *Daybreak Express* extends the temporal aspect of the city symphony genre to include not only a sense of the ever present now, but introduces a sense of conditional present tense, one that anticipates a future in which this structure will no longer be present. Pennebaker’s choice of Ellington’s 1933 recording features the sounds of a train (railway not subway train) speeding down railroad tracks and provides a two-fold kind of aural nostalgia. The incorporation of sounds of a form of transportation that, in the 1950s, had largely been replaced by the automobile suggests that Pennebaker is transposing the obsolescence of railway travel to the impending removal of the Third Avenue El train. Additionally, the choice of a twenty year old Ellington big band jazz composition also registers a kind of nostalgia for listeners in 1953, since this was a style of jazz music that was no longer aesthetically current. The dynamic, striking compositional assurance of the film, shot entirely during “magic hour,” leverages the golden quality of light of the impending sunset over the city to amplify dramatic silhouettes of the train moving through the city from its elevated platforms above the street level.

Driving Across All the Bridges

Concurrent to dismantling of the elevated train in Manhattan, was the imposition of a different form of elevated infrastructure: the city highway. Two jazz infrastructure *études* created in 1958, *Highway* (dir. Hilary Harris, 1958, 10 min.) and *Bridges-go-round* (dir. Shirley Clarke, 1958, 4 min.), are both kinetic film studies of driving through the city on these elevated infrastructural expanses. As mentioned earlier, both of these films aggregate footage recorded in multiple locations, edited without any attempt at creating geographic logic. Yet, despite similarities, these two driving films offer very different affects. While Harris' black-and-white film, set to an up-tempo jazz composition by David Hollister, expresses a petro-exuberance and enthusiasm for fast driving afforded by Robert Moses' newly completed city highway system, Clarke's film, using vibrant color tints and superimpositions, offers a sense of dysphoria and unease about the experience of driving across the city's many different bridges. With the help of two different, eerie, electronic music soundtracks (one by Louis and Bebe Barron using a track from their composition for *The Forbidden Planet* and the other by experimental jazz composer Teo Macero), Clarke's film employs a feeling of physical estrangement created by the camera zooming out while driving over the city's different bridges.

Much of Harris' film appears to have been shot on the Cross Bronx Expressway, a highway project that was conceived and executed by Robert Moses, and that caused the destruction and disappearance of the neighborhood so lovingly

portrayed in *A Bronx Morning*. But, in *Highway*, there is no evidence of a lament over the loss and terrors of the high speed roadway that caused so much consternation and inspired Jane Jacobs' anti-freeway activism. *Highway* seems rather to simply celebrate the joy of speed and acceleration that the new city freeway provides. The gleeful affect of *Highway* is directly countered by Shirley Clarke's film *Bridges-go-round*, which was originally shot and edited to be one of the twenty-four or so film loops to be included in the collaborative *Brussels Loops* (1958) project exhibited as a silent looping ambient film projection in the American Pavilion of the 1958 Brussels World's Fair.⁶² However, Clarke reports to Rabinovitz that her loop of New York City bridges was rejected for the Brussels Loop project because it was too narrowly focused on New York City and thus, she re-conceived of the film as a stand-alone short set to an electronic jazz sound score.⁶³ Rabinovitz reports that in 1958, *Bridges-go-round* was not only showing at "all the local places where experimental film played," but that the film had won an award from Cinema 16 and the Creative Film Foundation and was selected to represent the United States at the 1958 International

⁶² Beattie, *Pennebaker*, 16-17; Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-garde Cinema, 1943-71*, 2nd ed., (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 100; Howard Thompson "Big Country in 'Loops,'" *The New York Times*, April 20, 1958. Rabinovitz describes 23 film loops, whereas Beattie and Thompson describe the project as 25 loops. It appears that there is no remaining definitive version of the film that was actually exhibited in Brussels and a number of the loops appear to be lost. There does not appear to be a definitive documentation or version of what was exhibited in Brussels. The Magic Box DVD set of Shirley Clarke's works released by Milestone Films in 2015 includes 16 of the films produced by Affiliated Film Producers, Willard Van Dyke and Irving Jacoby (including Bridges which was not shown) and four films produced by Trident Films, Charles F. Schwep and Guy K. Benson. There were six other loops named in the *The New York Times* article that are not included in the "Brussels Loops" chapter on that DVD and they seem not to appear in any archives, but I am still hunting.

⁶³ Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, 102.

Experimental Film Festival in Brussels.⁶⁴

The theme of city bridges for Clarke's *étude* suggests a significant symbolic choice. As a synecdoche for New York, bridges enable interaction and interconnection between the city's five different boroughs and New Jersey across the Hudson River. Clarke's choice of theme might also be read as a personal synecdoche for her own experience and interest in being a social connector across a variety of differences: across the disciplines of dance and film, across gender as one of very few female filmmakers, and particularly as a social bridge across racial identity. A second generation Jewish American, Shirley Clarke's interest in African-American subjectivity is evident throughout her film career, as well as in her personal life. Her long-time romantic partner, the African-American actor Carl Lee, was the star of her first feature film *The Connection* (1961), an adaptation of Jack Gelber's stage play about heroin-addicted jazz musicians. Lee appears in and is credited with assisting with the shooting of both *The Cool World* (1963) and *Portrait of Jason* (1967), films that center exclusively on African-American characters and subjectivity. Clarke's interest in jazz and improvisational methods bridges her background and training as a dancer with her interest and commitment to African-American representation. While *Bridges-go-round* lacks any literal portrayal of African-American subjectivity of her later films, including the feature documentary about jazz legend Ornette Coleman, *Ornette: Made in America* (1985, USA, 85m), *Bridges-go-round* can be read as an act

⁶⁴ Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, 102-8.

of metaphorical bridging. This metaphor is made palpable in the film's culminating image: a superimposition of a bridge that appears to lead directly into silhouettes of the city's iconic skyscrapers—as if enacting a bridge directly into the heart of the city as symbol.

Studying *Bridges-Go-Round* closely, the film seems to have been inspired, at least in part, by Francis Thompson's experimental jazz "symphony-of-the-center" *N.Y., N.Y.* particularly by that film's novel approaches to visual manipulation. And yet, *Bridges-go-round* tempers the overtly non-naturalistic impulses of Thompson's film by including striking moments of *vérité*, akin to the kind of naturalist cinematic bravura demonstrated by Pennebaker in *Daybreak Express*.⁶⁵ Pennebaker's landscape sensibility, especially his masterful use of dramatic lighting conditions to create striking yet naturalistic moving silhouettes, is evident in a few key moments of Clarke's film. In particular, Clarke seems to be quoting *Daybreak Express* in the driving at sunset sequence. That short moment in two-thirds of the way through the film reads like a *vérité* wink in an otherwise expressionistic treatment of the bridges as forms to be collaged, colored and manipulated with little regard for realism.

The use of the word choreography in the title of Rabinovitz's interview with Clarke ("Choreography of Cinema: An Interview with Shirley Clarke") might seem to obscure the important role of improvisation in the creating the work.⁶⁶ It should be noted that improvisation was and remains an important element of modern dance

⁶⁵ Beattie, *Pennebaker*, 16. Also interesting to note, Beattie writes that Pennebaker's "friendship with the filmmaker Francis Thompson led to a career in filmmaking."

⁶⁶ Lauren Rabinovitz, "Choreography of Cinema: An Interview with Shirley Clarke," *Afterimage*, December, 1983, 8-11.

performance technique (as it was with contemporary acting methods and music composition) at the time. But Clarke never addresses whether she considered herself an improvisational artist. In her interview with Rabinovitz, she simply describes the film as one “which simply establishes the fact that you can make dance films without using dancers.”⁶⁷ As a “dance film,” *Bridges* offers an eerie kind of kinesthetics in which the recognizable forms of the city’s most iconic river crossings become strange and even haunting. The film is purposefully disorienting. In its publicity materials for a 1971 screening of the film, the Museum of Modern Art describes *Bridges-go-round* as:

Manhattan Island becomes a maypole around which its bridges, detached from moorings and land, execute a bewitched and beguiling dance. The filmmaker has freed these formidable structures from their everyday, pedestrian functions and has magically set them dancing to two musical tracks.⁶⁸

A review in *Film Quarterly* also emphasizes the kinetic aspects of the cinematography:

One particularly striking shot in *Bridges* is a zoom backward from an automobile moving forward—so that the bridge pillars remain in place but light poles on the periphery of the screen whizz past. The shot effectively confuses one’s ordinary sense of depth perception, and creates a new kind of dynamic and realist equivalent of the stage designer’s forced perspective.⁶⁹

The film succeeds in rendering the architecture of the city numerous bridges into flattened shapes layered on top of each other and moving in contradictory directions that seem to co-mingle the East River and the Hudson and create an impossible geography in which uptown and downtown, the outer boroughs and mid-town unite.

Despite the film’s playful title, *Bridges-go-round* suggests a sense of ominous

⁶⁷ Rabinovitz, “Choreography of Cinema,” 8.

⁶⁸ “Shirley Clarke Films descriptions,” Museum of Modern Art Artist File, May 6, 1971, accessed in person at MoMA Film Study Center, NY, NY on March 29, 2018.

⁶⁹ Henry Breitrose, “Review: Films of Shirley Clarke,” *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (Summer, 1960), 57.

foreboding. The film opens with the George Washington Bridge (GWB), shot from angles that emphasize the monumentality of its large lattice towers: the grand access from the continent to northern Manhattan. This sequence is followed by the film's opening title that appears over ripples of undifferentiated water. Opening her film with images of the George Washington Bridge, before images of the much more iconic and recognizable Brooklyn Bridge (the star of so many other New York City films), introduces the film as a kind of "symphony of the margins." The next bridge to appear, the Brooklyn Bridge with its iconic stone edifices, slide across each other in two directions: both to the left and to the right of the frame simultaneously. This gesture of double directionality suggests the importance of recognizing the movement across bridges as running in two directions, with Brooklyn and Manhattan as two equal forces of gravity. Next is the Queensboro Bridge with its fancy ornate top, first rendered in a garish magenta and then bathed in pale yellow tones. The grates and patterns in lacy silhouette morph into *verité* footage of the city as seen from the lower level of an unidentifiable bridge. Then the Verrazano appears, followed by a similarly arched bridge that is suddenly recognizable as the Triborough. Disorienting zooms bring a sea of polkadot rivets into view, a criss-crossing shot reminiscent of a moment in the Ivens' film *De Brug*.

Clarke described the use of a technique she refers to as "bi-packing," a process which she tells Rabinovitz she requested despite the lab's warnings that it was

an unsafe process.⁷⁰ Clarke explains that the images were not derived from superimposing the images in the camera (rewinding already exposed film to create double-exposures) but rather as something done by the lab in order to “get the effect of layered spinning bridges.”⁷¹ The visual effect of the film, with its strong monochromatic tints strongly reminded me of Warhol silkscreens, with their bold silhouetted forms and strong, non-naturalistic colors. But, realizing that this film, made in 1958, preceded Warhols’ silkscreens by a number of years made me wonder whether one can witness a proto pop art sensibility in Clarke’s film. The desire to treat the bridges and their individualized forms as symbols to be manipulated and colored onto seems to be a similar gesture to the one of taking portraits of Hollywood stars and flattening them into colorful icons of art culture.

As an infrastructure *étude*, *Bridges-go-round* is not simply a study of city bridges and of experimental film art techniques, but is also “a study on the relationship between sound and image coloration.”⁷² The film is often presented as a double experience, with the film presented two times back to back, each time with a different soundtrack. The first version is with the original soundtrack Clarke used, a composition by Louis and Bebe Barron and the second time with a soundtrack by Teo Macero composed for the film. Clarke explains the origin of this unusual aspect of the work to Rabinovitz:

⁷⁰ Rabinovitz, “Choreography of Cinema,” 9; Breitrose, “Review.”

⁷¹ Rabinovitz, “Choreography of Cinema,” 9.

⁷² Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, 102.

My friends, Louis and Bebe Barron, were doing electronic music. They did the score for the science fiction film *Forbidden Planet* (1956). They were busy making all this new music, and we'd always go by their studio and hear what they were doing. I loved the sound of electronic music. They agreed to let me have some of the *Forbidden Planet* music for the track so I could enter *Bridges* in the 1958 Brussels Experimental Film Festival. But Louis and Bebe both really believed that MGM in those days would recognize one electronic three minutes from another. So, they said I'd have to get a new track if I wanted to release the film. I got Teo Macero (who had done the score for *A Moment in Love*) to write the score. His whole thing is taking one note and playing with it electronically. All those voices are just one sound that has been filtered electronically and mixed with jazz. For awhile, the film went out with the jazz track. Finally, about 10 years after the movie was out. Louis and Bebe came to me and said they thought it would be okay to release their music to me. I said that the Museum of Modern Art would like to release both versions of the film together. They said OK.⁷³

Clarke describes the repeated viewing of the film with two different soundtracks as:

“a wonderful way to see the film because you can see how sound changes content.”⁷⁴

In this way, the film is not simply an *étude* for its maker, but also becomes a form of study of the effects of sound in relationship to imagery for the viewer as well.

Clarke's initial choice of a haunting sound track that was composed for a science fiction film is significant. Unlike Pennebaker's loving, nostalgic view of the city's old and soon to disappear infrastructure, Clarke's choice suggests a futuristic and dystopian, forward-looking, anticipatory critical view on the city landscape, as experienced through the constantly in motion, distancing device of a moving

⁷³ Rabinovitz, “Choreography of Cinema,” 9.

⁷⁴ Rabinovitz, “Choreography of Cinema,” 9.

automobile. Rabinovitz reports that when Clarke first brought the footage home after the State Department had rejected its use for *Brussels Loops*, her eleven-year old daughter responded with fright to the images. “Clark said that Wendy’s reaction made her realize that cinematic choreography applied to such inanimate objects could deliver an emotional jolt.”⁷⁵ In *Bridges-go-round*, the familiar city landscape is made strange: an affect that is achieved in both the aural as well as the visual realm. The cinematic technique of zooming into the bridge structures as the camera is moving away from them, rhymes with implications the audio track with its suggestion of landing on a ‘forbidden’ and foreign-sounding land. In the second version of the film, animated by Teo Macero’s slower, more recognizably experimental jazz soundtrack that incorporates a recognizable human voice as one of the harmonized instruments, this composition is more blue, less frenetic and dehumanized than the Barron version. Yet, Macero’s composition provides a decidedly defamiliarizing substrate for Clarke’s vision of the city rendered as a strange landscape of recognizable yet manipulated forms. The kaleidoscopic, depersonalized merry-go-round feeling of a composited city presents us with infrastructure-ness: a city defined through its diversity of bridge forms.

⁷⁵ Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, 102.

Part II

Spoken Word Landscapes

“The acousmatic voice is simply a voice whose source one cannot see, a voice whose origin cannot be identified, a voice one cannot place. It is a voice in search of an origin, in search of a body.”¹

- Mladen Dolar

Spoken Word Landscapes

This section explores how the voice operates as both a musical and a literary device in urban landscape essay filmmaking. In the case of Chapter Three, spoken voices are integrated into the soundtrack of a single postmodern city symphony to support the film’s central metaphor of the city as a complex biological organism. In Chapter Four, the personal acousmatic voice of the filmmaker (or their implied surrogate), complicates the impersonal, collective perspectives of the urban landscapes. In staging productive tensions between the visual field and the aural field, the films in Chapter Four demonstrate the use of irony, giving voice to thwarted or failed attachments to place, experiences of exile, nostalgia and *solastalgia* and suggesting critiques of heteronormativity and crises of belonging. In placing these two chapters in relationship to each other, I am making explicit the entanglement between articulated meaning and musical affect in these landscape film works; highlighting the use of the human voice as a musical element and exploring the ways that speech both participates in the meaning of landscape films and is an element of their musicality.

¹ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 60.

Chapter 3

Organism in the Space Age

“I wonder what is the source of this pleasure of ‘seeing the whole,’ of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts.

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city’s grasp. One’s body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic. When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators. An Icarus flying above these waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes...

...the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more.”¹ - Michel de Certeau



Figure 3: Video still from *Organism*, dir. Hilary Harris (USA, 1975, 19 min.)

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 92.

City Symphony Postmodernism

Whereas New York City once symbolized an apotheosis of modernism, as represented in the many city symphony films either about New York or inspired by the idea of New York (as was the case with *Berlin*), by the late 1960s, American cities in particular, and New York especially, had come to symbolize something else entirely: the urban ruins and the failures of modernism. By the early 1970s New York City, while still an icon of urbanism, was often called in represent the urban problems and illnesses accompanying deindustrialization and the increasing financialization of the economy. Many mainstream commercial films, politicians and journalists routinely represented New York as a dangerous, inhospitable and lawless “asphalt jungle,” as Miriam Greenberg has described it: “stereotypes freighted with the class and race-based prejudices of a growing right-wing anti-urbanism in the US more broadly.”² Many New York artists struggled with the challenge of how best to represent their beloved home and the incredible cultural and artistic vibrancy that claimed the old factories and piers and streets of a once thriving industrial center now home to so many different kinds of street artists and improvisers, photographers and experimental filmmakers.³ In the wake of the social rebellions of the 1960s, “the street” as a consciousness, a stage, a canvas and a subject took on a new-found

² Miriam Greenberg, *Branding New York: How a City in Crisis Was Sold to the World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 8.

³ Greenberg, *Branding New York*, 8; Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987).

importance in many “new art” forms.⁴

A “kinetic” filmmaker, Hilary Harris began his filmmaking career with studies of motion. His first film *Longhorn* (1951) is an experimental environment film, shot in black and white, that gestures directly toward Maya Deren’s work. Figureless, save for two large cattle horns that loom totemic throughout this short black and white film, Harris cleverly employs an electric record turntable to animate these curious conical shapes against the sky. Harris’ film *Highway* (1958) engages directly with the urban environment of the newly constructed elevated city highway. Robert Moses’ handiwork is here rendered as a purely joyful expanse of joyriding set to a jazz score. Harris’ enthusiastic engagement with the dual visual dynamism of driving at high-speed and the curvilinear concrete forms of the urban infrastructure is transposed in his later work, from embodied camera to embodied lens craft. In *Organism* (1975, 19m), Harris displays his long-time fascination with the mechanics of the city image and the expressive use of in-lens special effects to posit a new concept about the city as a self-regulating, autonomous entity.

Organism is first and foremost a film notable for the symphonic virtuosity of a specific cinematographic visual effect that Harris develops: his high angle, long-lensed macroscopic renderings of the city that inventively feature a smoothly panning time-lapsed vision. It is the combination of Harris’ ability to pan across both time and space simultaneously that is the most remarkable aesthetic innovation of the film. As

⁴ Cheryl L. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 135, for example.

a self-described sculptor and inventor, Hilary Tjader Harris was a master tinkerer and experimenter with D-I-Y visual techniques.⁵ Harris' invention of his own style of panning time-lapse cinematography should serve to cement his reputation as one of the key developers, alongside of Ron Fricke, of such an influential mode of urban representation—one which today is nearly ubiquitous in advertising and in the title sequences for countless television series.⁶ But, more than simply a demonstration of time-lapse techniques, *Organism* is a city symphony that both harkens to the history of the genre and exceeds its form. Most curiously, *Organism* is a city symphony that lacks almost any footage of an embodied human scale. In combining the film footage with a haunting, poetic-scientific musical score of spoken voices set to a score of electronic minimalism *Organism* is an exemplar of an aesthetic approach this is both utterly of its mid-1970s time and anticipatory of the urban environmentalist consciousness which finds fulsome, operatic popular currency in *Koyaanisqatsi* (dir. Godfrey Reggio, USA, 1982, 87 min.) and the many eco-landscape films that come after.

Organism is a film comprised exclusively of time-lapse footage that Harris shot over the course of fifteen years and that he described on Robert Gardner's public

⁵ Stephen Holden, "Hilary Tjader Harris, 69, Sculptor and Experimental Filmmaker," *New York Times*, November 3, 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/03/arts/hilary-tjader-harris-69-sculptor-and-experimental-filmmaker>; *Screening Room with Robert Gardner: Hilary Harris* (Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 2007), DVD. In both of Harris' appearances on Robert Gardner's Screening Room, in 1973 and 1979, he demonstrates various different inventions.

⁶ MacDonald, *Garden in the Machine*, 167-8. See *Koyaanisqatsi* (dir. Jesse England, 2016, 2m) for a compelling and humorous example of Harris' and by extension *Koyaanisqatsi*'s lasting visual influence on city stock footage: <https://vimeo.com/162039610>.

television show *The Screening Room* as part of a “life-work.”⁷ While Harris describes *Organism* as a city symphony, the film departs from the classical city symphony genre in three significant ways: it omits inclusion of the city’s street-level, it pushes beyond the limits of the “day in the life” structure, and it incorporates spoken text which at times serves to articulate the film’s central analogy that likens the city to the functioning of a biological organism. And yet, despite its generic elasticity, *Organism* is city symphony in that it is a visual music film the city as its the subject structured through the framework of time represented visually. As a city symphony, *Organism* does not represent individuals, but instead provides an experience of collective subjectivity. What’s more, in this city symphony of the burgeoning computer era, it is the loss of originality that becomes one of the main features of a landscape full of grids, repetition, dots of light, streaks of movement, ant-like clusterings of people and crowds and cars, coming and going every which way. Where *Querschnitt* style cross-sectional montage of different forms of labor and human activity is the basic structure of classical city symphony, in *Organism* the cross-sectional montage juxtaposes different locations and types of urban spectacles: e.g. a cloverleaf highway, a whole city block seen from the window of a very tall skyscraper, the port where containers

⁷ *Screening Room with Robert Gardner: Hilary Harris*, DVD; Maxine Haleff, “The City As Nerve Center,” *SoHo*, November 5, 1976, accessed at Carnegie Museum of Art artist archives, Sept. 30, 2017. Harris describes *Organism* as a city symphony to Robert Gardner in his 1973 appearance. On the artist’s “C.V.” from approximately 1973 (based on the latest date on the CV), obtained on September 30, 2017 from the Carnegie Museum of Art artist file, Harris lists 1963 as the year he “began work on a project called *Vision of the City*, described as “a feature length documentary of New York, still in progress.” He also lists 1972 as “Received grant from National Endowment on the Arts [sic] for continuing work on *Vision of the City*. Haleff quotes Harris as referring to *Organism* as one section of “a life-work” in her review of the film.

are being mechanically loaded onto trucks. And whereas in classical city symphonies people are defined by types of labor and locales in which machines feature, in the postmodern city symphony labor has become entirely machine-like: with people rendered as speeded-up figures who mass and then disperse without explanation.

Fredric Jameson writes that “postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good.”⁸ He compares modernism, which “thought compulsively about the New and tried to watch its coming into being,” to postmodernism, which “looks for breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the telltale instant after which it is no longer the same; for the “When-it-all changed.”⁹ Similarly, Jean-François Lyotard hypothesizes that “the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age.”¹⁰ Jameson theorizes that, beginning in the mid to late 1960s, contradictory shifts in attitude and perspective about nature, time and space began taking root and he defines the postmodern era as marked by a number of transformations in the aesthetics of visual art and architecture: an increasing fixation with image, surface and simulacrum resulting in a lack of depth, the spatialization of culture in which categories of time are replaced by categories of space, and a crisis of historicity characterized by a nostalgia for the

⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), ix.

⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

¹⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

present.¹¹ As postmodern city symphonies, *Organism*, followed by the much more well-known full-length *Koyaanisqatsi* (dir. Godfrey Reggio, USA, 1982), both herald a new phase in city filmmaking: one that uses the aesthetics of postmodernism to express the culture of expanding urbanization and increasing orientation toward globalism. By using aesthetic strategies that disconnect the viewer from everyday street-level and individualized embodiment, and by shifting the focus of the cross-sectional montage from an interest in dailiness and microcosm towards a fascination with the elasticity of film time and the macrocosmic perspective, the city symphony develops into meditations on disembodiment and the spatialization of time as befits the space age.

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), urban theorist and architectural critic Jane Jacobs excoriates the men who imposed “visionary” plans to “renew” cities by cutting up and dividing neighborhoods in the name of mechanical functionalism, segregation of use and efficiency.¹² It might even be possible to argue that the aerial perspective itself was responsible for producing the urban planning misery of so many modernist urban renewal schemas. In declaring the airplane to be “the symbol of the new age,” the celebrated master of modernist architecture, Le Corbusier, perceives the transformative nature of the bird’s eye view.¹³ In his 1935

¹¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 9, 22.

¹² Jacobs, *Death and Life*, 436-9.

¹³ Le Corbusier, *Aircraft: The New Vision* (London: The Studio, Ltd. & New York: The Studio Publications, Inc., 1935), 6.

book *Aircraft*, the architect accuses the airplane of delivering an indictment of the city that follows from “the budding of a new feeling for plastic beauty in a world full of strength and confidence” and claims “the city must be extricated from their misery, come what may. Whole quarters of them must be destroyed and new cities built.”¹⁴ Jacobs blasts this God’s eye, totalizing vision of the architects and urban planners who sought to remake the city in the name of modernist concepts imposing segregated functions and homogeneity. In counterpoint to their destructive way of “seeing,” Jacobs asserts her own revolutionary vision of the city as a living and constantly changing entity, an organism which can be severely injured, or even die, at the hands of urban planning professionals. In her view, the city is an organic and self-reinforcing entity. Her descriptions are in many ways strikingly similar to how cities are represented in classical city symphony films—an entity defined by the amalgamation of the many different kinds of activities and types of people operating throughout all times of the day and into the night. Jacob’s concept of the city is a stark contrast to the one adopted by modernist autocratic architects and urban planning technocrats who she likens to arrogant surgeons cutting into fully functioning organs in order to experiment with new and inventive “cures” for what Jacobs asserts are mis-diagnoses or even invented illnesses, needlessly and tragically bringing premature death to dynamic, yet run-down and overcrowded city neighborhoods.¹⁵

¹⁴ Le Corbusier, *Aircraft*, 11.

¹⁵ Jacobs, *Death and Life*, 436-9.

By the early 1970s many aspects of New York City life was ailing, in no small part due to (or at least hastened by) the urban medicine doled by out by so many urban planning “doctors.” Many once vibrant and diverse, loud and crowded, immigrant neighborhoods in all five boroughs of New York City, as in many other parts of the country, had been spliced, diced and thoroughly transfigured by grand visions of a city in service to the car. The transformations of the modern city into a postmodern landscape of urban sprawl are characterized by elevated super-highways snaking through, dividing and destroying the street life integrity of many older neighborhoods that, in the decades after WWII, became dwarfed by behemoth housing projects or downtowns overtaken by homogeneous office towers that destroyed the human scale street life and became monolithic caverns of glass and steel. The results of this post-war highway, housing complex and office tower boom were cities increasingly prey to the deadening phenomenon of business districts segregated from residential areas that, as they became islands of single function use, caused zones of temporal abandonment and contributed to increased rates of crime and blight.

Many historians tell the story of New York City’s decline as a phenomenon which began in the 1960s and accelerated throughout the 1970s, caused by a complicated nexus of actions, not the least of which was municipal profligacy coupled with a decreasing residential tax base due to increasing white flight to the

suburbs.¹⁶ But, whatever the specific causes, by the mid 1970s, the pervasive representation of New York City, particularly in popular movies, television shows and tv news, was as a city in free-fall. Robert Caro's 1974 Pulitzer Prize winning biography of Robert Moses, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* brings into stark relief a view of the city as an entity at the mercy of powerful political and financial operatives: a city instrumentalized by those who held a wide enough and distanced enough view of some imagined future potential. Most ironic of all, New York City's decline was coextensive with the construction and unveiling of the world's most visible and iconic symbol of the apex of this type of New York financial power: the World Trade Center (colloquially known as the "Twin Towers")—promising to provide the greatest of all aerial perspectives of the city.¹⁷ To city inhabitants aware of the political machinations behind the funding of the towers, the World Trade Center was a symbol of collusion between the state and private finance expressed in architecture. As the brain child of David Rockefeller, the President of Chase Manhattan Bank and the youngest son of New York City's great modernist master builder (and grandson of the world's first oil billionaire, John D. Rockefeller, founder of Standard Oil), the World Trade Center was sold as an urban renewal project to revitalize Lower Manhattan.¹⁸ David Rockefeller was able to leverage the

¹⁶ Congressional Budget Office, "The Causes of New York City's Fiscal Crisis," *Political Science Quarterly* 90, no. 4 (Winter, 1975-1976): 659-674.

¹⁷ The World Trade Center was constructed over the course of three years, 1970-1973, and opened to the public in 1973.

¹⁸ David W. Dunlap, "What David Rockefeller Wanted Built Got Built," *New York Times*, March 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/26/nyregion/david-rockefeller-development-nyc.html>.

eminent domain authority and the bond issuing power of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to realize his plan to shift the financial industry back down to the Wall Street area and “revitalize” Lower Manhattan, which had been in decline since the port of New York had relocated to Elizabeth, NJ. Ostentatiously symbolizing the rising tide of globalization, these once tallest buildings in the world opened to the public in 1973 to proclaim New York’s symbolic role in a new era of global finance, like two giant exclamation points on the skyline.

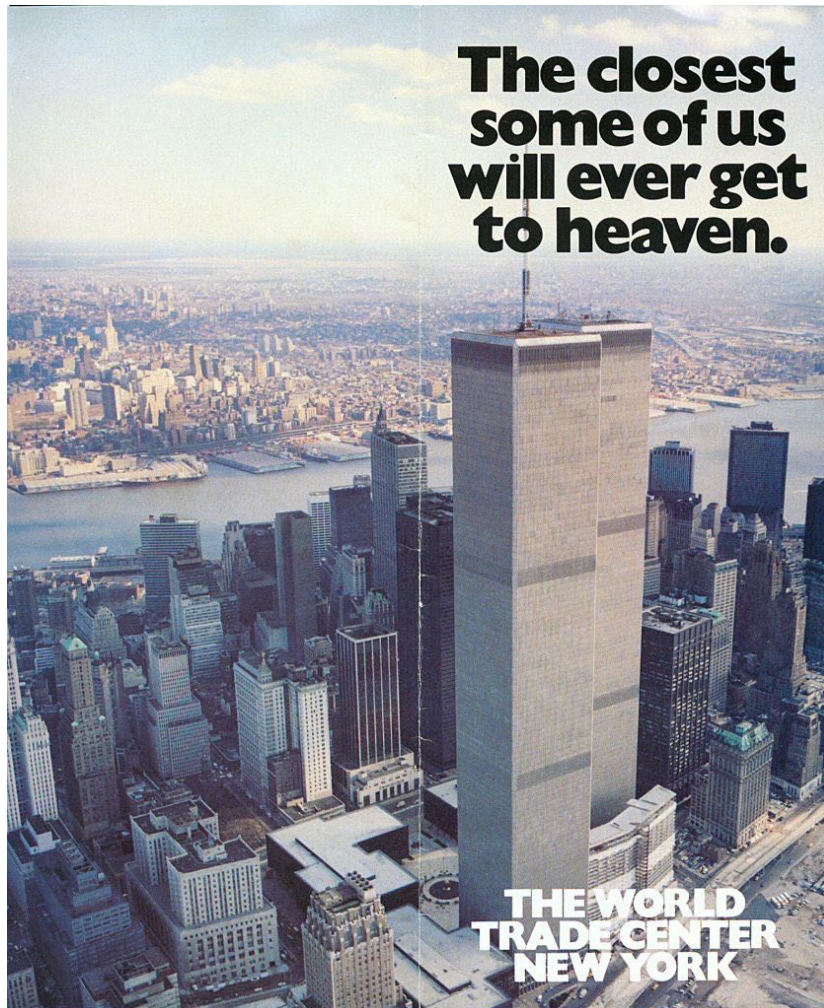


Figure 3.1: God's eye view? Advertisement for World Trade Center, c. 1984.

As Eric Darton suggests in *Divided We Stand: A Biography of the World Trade Center* (1999), the Twin Towers were, at the time of their unveiling, only economically viable thanks to the machinations of the Governor of New York, Nelson Rockefeller, David's older brother.¹⁹ As Governor, Nelson Rockefeller had the power and authority to move a large number of New York State government offices from Albany to the new towers, thus filling much of the otherwise unrented office space. This, in effect, provided state subsidies to this "economic revitalization" project for the city and masking the fact that the buildings would otherwise create a massive glut of downtown office space, well in excess of any existing demand.²⁰ And yet, far from revitalizing Manhattan, by 1975 the city's fortunes had plummeted to their nadir. Likening the city's "profligate spending" to an "insidious disease," President Ford publicly declared his readiness to veto federal bailout plans, damning the city to commit itself to draconian budget cuts and the suspension of all non-essential public services.²¹ This disastrous economic situation cemented the popular reputation of New York City as a failed entity, a pariah, and a morally culpable, rotted out place in desperate need of life support. Indeed, many of the most celebrated feature film

¹⁹ Nelson Rockefeller was Governor of the State of New York from 1959 until 1973. In August 1974, he was appointed as Vice President to Gerald Ford, who became US President when Nixon resigned following the Watergate scandal.

²⁰ Eric Darton, *Divided We Stand: A Biography of the World Trade Center* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Dunlap, "What David Rockefeller Wanted." At the time of the WTC's opening in 1973, some critics joked that the two towers should be called David and Nelson.

²¹ Ironically, during this fiasco, Nelson Rockefeller was post-Watergate President Ford's newly appointed Vice President. I could not find any press discussing the new Vice President's role in New York City's fiscal crisis.

representations of New York City from that time characterize the city as dangerous and overrun by crime and corruption—a place in which everyday city inhabitants are routinely taken hostage by irrational actors.²² If the World Trade Center symbolized the dawning of a new (neoliberal) economic order, it was one in which a hobbled, increasingly irrelevant and too easily instrumentalized municipal government was forced to acquiesce to the rising powers of global finance, insurance and real estate industries. Thus, the World Trade Center—a literal embodiment of postmodern simulacrum writ in architecture—claims itself as the world’s center of global finance and trade, iconographically and literally signifying an abandonment of concern with the ground level needs of locals as well as the health and welfare of the city into whose bedrock the foundations of this double monstrosity sprang forth.

²² *The French Connection* (dir. William Friedkin, 1971) won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1972 and took home a slew of other film prizes that year, *The Panic in Needle Park* (dir. Jerry Schatzberg, 1971) won awards at Cannes, *Serpico* (dir. Sidney Lumet, USA, 1973) was nominated for Academy Awards, *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (dir. Joseph Sargent, 1974) grossed over three times its budget and won BAFTA awards; and *Dog Day Afternoon* (dir. Sidney Lumet, USA, 1975) won best Original Screenplay and was nominated for five other Oscars.



Figure 3.2: Architect Minoru Yamasaki and the team working on The World Trade Center design, source: www.GreatBuildings.com.

While it might be tempting to view Harris' commitment to the macroscopic view of the city as a type of autocratic, top-down, instrumentalizing gaze of the sort practiced by Le Corbusier, Robert Moses and his ilk —what Zoë Druick has referred to as a “capitalist subjectivity”²³— *Organism* instead asserts a holistic and ecological use of aerial vision. In counterpoint to the century-long genealogy that links technological forms of mobility, and especially the aerial view, to privileged, omniscient vantages “developed in colonialism, warfare and nascent social sciences,”²⁴ *Organism* injects a humility and a curiosity into what we might be tempted to view as a colonialist gaze of technological mastery. As a film in which the people of the city are often represented as tiny dots, like so many ants scampering

²³ Zoë Druick, “‘A Wide-Angle View of Fragile Earth’: Capitalist Aesthetics in The Work of Yann Arthus-Bertrand,” *Open Cultural Studies* 2, no.1 (2018): 397.

²⁴ Druick, “Wide-Angle View,” 399-400.

about far below, *Organism*'s commitment to the bird's eye perspective imbues an ecological ethic onto this type of detachment from the ground level. Here the macroscopic view of the city is a method for seeing the complexity of the contemporary city with fascination and a respect for its own integrity, beyond the control of individuals. Harris uses the advantages of the bird's eye perspective, in tandem with his experimental approach to time-lapse, not to provide a totalizing vision of modernist mastery, but instead, as a possibility to see the city as a metaphor for ecological integrity and through the lens of a scientific attempting to understand how biological systems function as self-regulating organisms. Harris posits this approach to representing the city with his own style of macrocosmic time-lapse—not to diagnose problems—but rather to imbue the landscape with integrity and rhythm. In perceiving the city from above, as a musical composition, and at a remove from individualized experiences on the street, Harris' film imbues a poetic sublime into this aerial vision of the holistic city—something beyond what the bankers and financiers and commercial movie producers would have it be. It is an interesting footnote that the Rockefeller Family Fund, who have been key in funding so many institutions of both scientific research and arts and culture in the city, is credited as one of the two funders of *Organism*, especially given the family's role in shaping and reshaping the physical city along with its reputation and fortunes.²⁵

²⁵ Maxine Haleff, "The City as Nerve Center" *Soho*, November 5, 1976. The other funder is the National Endowment for the Arts. From Haleff's *Soho* review: "*Organism* was produced because initially the architecture people at the National Endowment for the Arts got interested in the subject and gave Harris a grant."

Everyday Science Film Opera

Alternating between exterior and interior shots, figures moving across and to and fro, *Organism* frames speeding bodies moving with robot-like precision across giant building interiors and streetscapes. The visual alternation between interiors and exteriors, as well as extremely wide and closer shots, and between directions of movement (mainly left-to-right and right-to-left), provides a visual analog to the rhythmic alternation of the high and low tones of the sound score as a field of aural polka-dots. Both the visual and aural fields of the film pulse with a sense of circulatory movement: speeding cars banking around onto the curving roadways spied far below, a steaming boat rushing across the river, a speeding plane flying strangely low over the Hudson while a disembodied male voice tells us that “streaming is an essential characteristic of the interior of the living cell.” The electronic, minimalist score for *Organism*, composed by David Hollister, layers these affectless, spoken word voice-overs from what sounds like snippets from educational biology films, incorporating a found footage aesthetic into the film.²⁶ Intermittently these voices enter and tangle into thickets of the seemingly objective visual sights to inform us, for example, that: “blood inside the human body recirculates completely every twenty-five seconds.” The musical aesthetic of speaking rather than singing, along with the insistent electronic-ness of Hollister’s sound score, serve to contrast the realism of speaking voices and of the visuals of the city, with the mechanicalness of the

²⁶ Robert Gardner, *Screening Room*, 1979. In actuality, the voices were biologists that Harris himself recorded when he was acquiring the microscopic footage he integrates into *Organism*.

electronic sounds and the time-lapse techniques. In this way, the voices and the
visuality of the film suggest a dialectical relationship between human embodied-ness
and the extra-human modes of presentation, or between the organic and the inorganic,
and between the unstaged-ness of microscopic biological processes and people and of
the ways that machines can manipulate and co-constitute each other.

Given the central importance that the voices play in *Organism*, the film might
more aptly be considered as a film-opera rather than a city “symphony.” The layered
voices have both an everyday quality of male and female scientists as non-actorly
speaking voices who present instructive information in a matter-of-fact functional
tone. Rather than narrating actions or providing a direct commentary to the visuals on
the screen, the spoken word reflects a minimalist, non-singing voice musicality: a use
of spoken text reminiscent of the ways which Robert Ashley and Steve Reich (among
other electronic, minimalist composers) use spoken word in their “operas” in the
place of singing. The film exploits this scientific vernacular to convey literal meaning
that also serves as metaphor. And, although a nineteen minute film short presents a
very different scale of artistic experience than a full-length avant-garde opera, such as
the one that was completed in the same year as *Organism—Einstein on the Beach*
(1975, composed by Phillip Glass, libretto by Glass and director Robert Wilson)—the
scope of *Organism*, which aims to represent the city as a unified entity and a
functioning ecosystem, has an epic dimension despite its diminutive running time.
(Interestingly, *Einstein on the Beach* also shares with *Organism* a fetish for science

[physics vs. biology], the use of a normally narrative form [opera /film] to present a non-narrative, circular experience of ideas about space-time relativity that champions an environmentalist politics). Of course, the analogies with Philip Glass' stage opera are particularly meaningful when considering Glass' central role as composer for *Koyaanisqatsi*, a film for which the term opera is especially apt.

Given their obvious visual similarities, the relationship between *Organism* and *Koyaanisqatsi* is a particularly interesting one to explore. One might assume that *Organism* was a direct inspiration for Reggio and his cinematographer Ron Fricke, particularly since Harris is credited with "additional cinematography" in *Koyaanisqatsi* which was released seven years after *Organism*. At least one exact sequence from *Organism* is repeated in *Koyaanisqatsi* and it seems like a number of other sequences were inspired by and improve upon Harris' own compositions. In Scott MacDonald's interview with Reggio, when asked directly about Harris' influence on and involvement in *Koyaanisqatsi*, Reggio responds:

Reggio: During the editing of the film, which took place in Venice, California, someone called me up one night from New York, very hysterical, and said he had seen a film on channel thirteen in New York: "You gotta check this out immediately!" So I looked at *Organism* and called Hilary.... I got a copy of *Organism*, looked at it, and was very pleased. I *felt* that I saw—and after conferring with Hilary, I was *sure* that I saw—a very different intention in his footage. His intention was to celebrate the city: *Organism* is a celebration of modernity. He had none of the metaphysical concerns that I have— that's no putdown of Hilary; it's only an indication of a different point of view.

Also, Hilary's shots were very short. Now, of course, with time lapse, it might take you a long time to shoot a six-second

piece, but I was looking for much longer shots. Though Hilary was willing to sell me footage, most of the footage he had was unusable in our film. I asked if we could employ him to do some of the shooting. He said he would be delighted.

MacDonald: How much of the New York material is his?

Reggio: Several of the most powerful pattern shots of people and traffic were shot by Hilary. However, most of the New York shooting was done by Ron Fricke.²⁷

Reggio's assertion that *Organism* had a "different intention" from his own film, claiming that none of his own "metaphysical concerns" were present in Harris' film strikes me as a somewhat defensive and misleading statement. While it is certainly true that Harris claimed his film was a "city symphony" and that Reggio, with his avowed ignorance of film history, likely did not view his own "non-verbal" film as inspired by the city symphony canon, *Organism* is not exactly "a celebration of modernity" and the ecological perspective that Harris' film offers, is, while less overt and bombastic than Reggio's film, worthy of further exploration.

Detachment Theories

Organism provides two types of 'aerial' experiences: 1) the bird's eye high-angle views of the city and 2) the footage of human cellular activity which are top-down views of live cells recorded through a microscope. As a film comprised almost exclusively of aerial perspectives, *Organism* volleys between the scalar extremes of

²⁷ Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1992), 387.

macroscopic and the microscopic footage. The concept of a film comprised of juxtapositions between radically different scales of magnification is reminiscent of two film different short films that were both inspired by the 1957 Dutch book *Cosmic Zoom* by Kees Boeke, both created in 1968. The first film is the NFB animated film *Cosmic Zoom* (dir. Eva Szasz, Canada, 8m) and the second is the original sketch version of the well-known Eames film *Powers of Ten and the Relative Size of Things in the Universe* (dir. Charles and Ray Eames, USA, 1977, 9m).²⁸ However, unlike those two films that traverse through regular intervals of scales of magnification (from outer space, through the human scale and all the way to microscopic and even subatomic scales), *Organism* jumps directly from the microscopic scale of human blood cells to the extremely high vantage views of the city from thousands of meters of distance above it, with very little in between these two extremes. Only a few times within the film and during the opening and closing title sequences of *Organism* in which a crowd of people are first entering and then exiting a subway station, do we see footage of people at something closer to a human scale in which we can just barely make out individual faces. Otherwise, the film presents a disembodied vision in which tiny figures or cells are mostly not discernible as individuals but rather as the many tiny elements that make up a whole and single organism.

As “objective” modes of viewing, macroscopic and microscopic perspectives have often served as traditionally autocratic gazes of conquest and to assert super-

²⁸ *The Films of Charles & Ray Eames: The Powers of 10 - Volume 1* (Image Entertainment, 2000), DVD.

human techno-perceptual abilities. In *Organism* however, the macroscopic footage, in particular, expresses a sensibility of the sublime—implying a humility in viewing oneself as insignificant in the context of the overwhelming scale of the city and the magnitude of all who inhabit it. As Rudolph Arnheim suggested in *Film as Art*, providing views that are seldom seen in everyday life, diverts the viewer’s attention from what is pictured (the subject) and shifts attention onto the form of its presentation, allowing the spectator to see the familiar as something new and providing the capacity for “true observation.”²⁹ *Organism*’s detachment from the ground level also defamiliarizes and detaches the viewer from lived experiences of both time and space and opens the way for newly articulated insights about humanity as a single species and its context on the planet. *Organism*’s mode of visuality is related to the perspective offered by the types of space-age visuality that were starting to become more widespread in the early 1970s. As Denis Cosgrove has written, photographs of the whole Earth floating in space symbolized global kinship while also suggesting the preciousness and fragility of our one planetary home.³⁰ In *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth*, Robert Poole credits the first photographs of the whole Earth floating in space (taken from the vantage point of the moon by the Apollo 8 lunar missions) with creating a new global and environmental

²⁹ Rudolph Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1957), 43-4.

³⁰ Denis Cosgrove, “Contested Global Visions: One-World, Whole-Earth, and the Apollo Space Photographs,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 84, no. 2 (June 1994): 271.

consciousness.³¹ This consciousness directly informs the meaning and resonance of *Organism*.



Figure 3.3: *The Whole Earth* (NASA AS17-148-22727), aka “Big Blue Marble,” Apollo 17 photograph of Earth from space, December 1972.

As photographs that normalize a perspective of great distance, images of the whole earth are indexes of a beyond-human mode of visibility, made possible by extreme distance and detachment from the Earth and her atmosphere. Denis Cosgrove credits the images from the Apollo moon missions, and specifically the arrival of the image of *The Whole Earth* (NASA AS17-148-22727, Apollo 17) in December 1972, as accompanied by “a rising tide of self-questioning, about limits to growth and the population explosion, about global pollution and poverty, about social injustice.”³² Photographs of the whole earth always index the inherent paradox that it is only through radical physical detachment from the earth that humans are able to gain

³¹ Robert Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

³² Cosgrove, “Contested Global Visions,” 285.

enough distance that we can think *the earth* as a single entity. As such, whole earth images index the possibility that radical physical detachment can provide new opportunities for a radical engagement with the plight of the earth as a precarious and singular living organism. In a similar way, *Organism* provides a paradoxical relationship to *the city* as an organic entity. It is both a living entity, worthy of care and yet also inspires a respect and an awe of the city as a self-regulating system that lives beyond the control of individuals. On the one hand, *Organism*, as with all city symphonies, eschews the individual human—is only concerned with representing human activity as the aggregation of many different movements and parts flowing to demonstrate the natural functioning of the city as an ecosystem. And yet, its biological anthropomorphism is yet another paradox: an organic system that is mechanically captured to demonstrate its organic-ness despite the fact that the city is a completely man-made construct that runs with the help of the most artificial and inorganic elements.

The commitment to distanced, disembodied, long-lensed visuality in *Organism* is an aesthetic articulation of an era characterized by the moon landings, and with the culture's fixation on space travel evident in popular culture, literature, films, fashion and even linguistically, as typified by the popularization of expressions such as "far-out." This "space age" period also continued to innovate from the modernist fixation with pushing the boundary conditions of human physicality and perceptual abilities. This fascination with transcending human scale is evident in the

architectural trends of the time, culminating in the USA with what some have called “the World Trade Center moment,” when New York City was becoming overshadowed by the construction of the Twin Towers. At the time of their completion in 1973, the World Trade Center Twin Towers were the largest buildings in the world. The fact that *two* nearly identical towers were being built seems to perfectly express Jameson’s notion of the postmodern compulsion with ‘simulacrum’ writ in architecture.³³ The World Trade Center towers symbolically and literally proclaim the ascendance of a new global economic order, transcending all other forms of conquest and identity which had come before it—dramatically dwarfing the modernist skyscrapers of the 1930s which had previously stood for decades as icons of the supremacy of New York City modernism (and its symbol as the “Empire” State).



Figure 3.4: Video still from *Organism*, dir. Hilary Harris (USA, 1975, 19 min.)

³³ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 18.

As if to participate in that World Trade Center moment, *Organism* delivers to its viewers an uncompromising commitment to seeing the city from the highest of available urban heights. Harris seems to have had a talent for gaining access and permission to record from some of the highest perches available in the city. He describes one of his favorite sequences in the film, the time-lapsed panning shadow of the Empire State Building sweeping across midtown “like the hands of a clock.”³⁴ He explains that, while the sequence only lasts for five seconds in the film, the footage was filmed over the course of many hours from a window on the 80th floor of the Empire State Building (which at the time Harris was recording it, was likely still the tallest building in the city).³⁵ Of course, all of the classical city symphony films featured dramatic panoramas of the city filmed from rooftops and other high off-the-ground vantages. What makes *Organism* almost unique among city symphonies of the classical form is that the bird’s eye footage is not placed in relationship to any views of the city from street level, or intercut with footage of people embodied at human scale perspectives. In this way, *Organism* harkens back to *Manhatta* (1921) with that

³⁴ Gardner, *Screening Room*, 1973.

³⁵ Gardner, *Screening Room*, 1973; Haleff, “City as Nerve Center;” *Collected Films of Hilary Harris* (Mystic Fire Video, 2007), DVD. Harris identifies this sequence as one of his favorites in his 1973 appearance on *Screening Room*. The May 9, 1975 Film Forum Press Release for the film’s premiere reads: “Much of the footage was shot from the 80th floor of the Empire State Building, using special equipment designed and built by the artist to track shadows as they move across the city.” This information is repeated in the Haleff article (both documents provided by the Carnegie Museum of Art archives). There are some conflicting sources about when Harris began shooting the footage used in *Organism*. On Harris’ personal CV (document also provided by the Carnegie Museum of Art archives), an entry for 1963 reads: “Began work on *Vision of a City*, feature documentary of New York still in progress.” Whereas, the text on the back of the DVD cover of the *Collected Films of Hilary Harris* reads: “*Organism*, Academy Award™ winning filmmaker Hilary Harris’ epic vision of New York City shot over 15 years [1959-1974] during which Mr. Harris pioneered and contemporized time-lapse film making techniques to achieve this unique experiential view of the world we inhabit.”

film's also near complete remove from the street level, albeit much less dramatically high vantages than *Organism*. Not only did Harris have the benefit of access to a building that didn't yet exist when Strand and Sheeler shot their film, but Harris is also filming with the aid of powerful and large lens developed for military purposes in WWII that he acquires from a mail-order photography supply house to create his own custom rig incorporating an extra-powerful military grade lens to create his particular super-magnification effects.³⁶ When comparing *Organism* to classical city symphony film predicated on cross-sectional montage, such as *Berlin* and *Movie Camera*, it is evident that Harris chose to omit footage of individuals riding on trains, working in factories or shops, or eating in restaurants, etc. The lack of individual scale representation in *Organism* creates a sense of disembodiment from the subject, as well as a supra-individual subjectivity in which viewers identify with the city as an ecosystem: an entity comprised of millions.

The physical detachment necessary in capturing the long lensed views of the city are distancing and abstracting viewpoints, in a sense, performing a physical and emotional remove from a “problematical” place.³⁷ Created with footage shot by Harris over fifteen years, *Organism* is clearly a film labor of love for the city that is this experimental film artist's long-time home. In the recent documentary *HyperNormalisation* (dir. Adam Curtis, UK, 2016, 166m), Adam Curtis provocatively

³⁶ Gardner, *Screening Room*, 1973. Harris demonstrates this lens on the program.

³⁷ Gardner, *Screening Room*, 1973. Gardner refers multiple times to Harris' work-in-progress “New York” film as dealing with a “problematical” place, a characterization that Harris takes issue with.

suggests that many New York City artists of the 1970s, such as Patti Smith, exemplified an attitude of cool detachment and acceptance of their ruined city landscape.³⁸ Curtis asserts that punk artists of the time adopted aesthetic strategies typified by emotional detachment and nonjudgemental acceptance of the urban ruins of neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side, which he theorizes as an “Inappropriate Aesthetic Response” to conditions of the city. He considers this period as the development of a “new kind of radical” that sought to “accept rather than change everything.” And while it cannot be denied that an increasing acceptance of counter-cultural drug-use was co-extensive with a variety of anti-social forms of escapism in the culture, *Organism* gives us another way to read the dominant 1970s aesthetics of detachment.

Jameson describes the postmodern period as characterized by a “waning of affect:”

The end of the bourgeois ego, or monad, no doubt brings with it the end of the psychopathologies of that ego—what I have been calling the waning of affect. But it means the end of much more—the end, for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brush stroke (as symbolized by the emergent primacy of mechanical reproduction). As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older anomie of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling.³⁹

³⁸ *Hypernormalisation*, directed by Adam Curtis, (London: BBC, 2016).

³⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 15.

It seems plausible that the lack of interest in the individual that characterizes *Organism* can be attributed to a lack of interest in the bourgeois ego. Certainly that would also accord with a burgeoning environmental ethos that would seek to understand and represent the whole as a system beyond the individual is also a liberation from older existentialist angst. To embrace the present, the now of being is rendered as an ecological value in the film.

But rather than viewing detachment as an apolitical response to trauma, indicative of a desire to disengage and drop-out from collective responsibilities of being in society (the embodiment of an escapist individualism), there are other values that detachment can provide. In punk music and art, there is a detachment from commercialistic dominant cultural values that suggests a willingness to reject codified and expected forms of individuality, ambition and “success.” Despite the cultivation of celebrity in forms such as Pop Art, Fluxus and Punk, these movements (as with Dada before it) flipped values about individual artistry, authorship and achievement on their heads. Jameson suggests that art embracing found materials (the lack of original source) and the embrace of gloss, surface and reflection are characteristics of the postmodern “age of pastiche” that shifts modernist values of individual authority into a post-modern interest in experience beyond the control of the individual. The willingness to detach from individualized control (authorship) and the earth-bound physical experiences of both time and space are characteristic of the rising influences of the time: cybernetics, computer technology, virtuality and new-found abilities to

“think” and “act” beyond individual human capacity. With these transformational cultural changes in mind, *Organism*'s focus on visual experiences detached from the street level and the human scale can be understood both aesthetically and politically: a way of “seeing” and understanding the city beyond a personal or individual frame. As with city symphonies of the modernist era, *Organism* represents the city as a supraindividual entity, yet, unlike modernist city symphonies such as *Man with a Movie Camera* that represent modernism as an embodied experience, and with the mobility of the moving image camera offering a “new” modern visuality with footage recorded from moving train cars and the like, Harris approaches the task of representing the city by removing himself physically from the street and removing his own physical embodiment in the camerawork.

Spectacles of Depthlessness



Figure 3.5: Still from *Organism*, dir. Hilary Harris (USA, 1975, 19 min.)

One of the characteristics of postmodernism described by Jameson is a fascination with surfaces and two-dimensionality—with screens and with tall buildings made entirely of mirrored windows reflecting the city back onto itself. Jameson argues that this fixation with surface expresses a deeper cultural superficiality: one born from a cynicism about ever moving beyond surface appearances to some deeper truth and that instead leaves us with reflections and the experience of multiplying surfaces. With its attention to the city's endless spectacles of grids and the patterns made by so many squares of windows and building facade lattices, *Organism* seems to illustrate Jameson's theory about postmodernism's fixation with surface, flatness and simulacrum. In addition to its repeated attention to the vertical canyons of skyscrapers lining the grid-like city streets, and the lists of addresses on buzzers, or lines of punch cards extruding from printers, the film finds novel ways to render flatness. One of the technical ways the film achieves this is with dramatic foreshortening and spatial compression (shallow depth of field) resulting from high magnification of Harris' lenses. Harris' unique approach to telephoto cinematography is thanks to his inventive use of an old, very large and heavy, long-distance photographic magnification lens, placed in front of his 16mm film camera's lens. This technique allows him to continually find visual novelty in views that dramatically foreshorten the depth of distance. While demonstrating his cinematographic approach on *The Screening Room*, Harris explains: "the lens crushes everything in depth together. Now, you can see about eight different cross streets here

on Park Avenue in New York. And you see the traffic going in and it has a way of emphasizing, now you see the traffic going the other direction in a second. And, you don't see the in-depth movement coming towards you at all."⁴⁰ Speaking about another clip, he explains: "this emphasizes vertical movement. You don't see the cars coming towards you as much as you see them bouncing up and down. So it emphasizes vertical movement."⁴¹ In this way, Harris' compositions serve to emphasize the two-dimensionality of the screen and the innate static-ness of the moving traffic, a technique that also serves to express the feeling of traffic congestion and crowding.

Vittoria DiPalma explains that "From the air, context and broad relationships are more apparent than the particulars of any single object: details are sacrificed in favor of a more extensive panorama. Aerial views, particularly those with a vertical perspective, flatten three-dimensional objects and topographic features to superficial patterns of colour, line and texture."⁴² The use of spatial compression techniques with long lens cinematography serves to highlight the relationship between parts, to emphasize interconnections and to create the illusion of proximity between disparate elements. Harris succeeds in creating an illusion of distance in which objects appear to be much closer to each other and to the viewer than they are. In *Organism*,

⁴⁰ Gardner, *Screening Room*, 1973.

⁴¹ Gardner, *Screening Room*, 1973.

⁴² Vittoria Di Palma, "Zoom: Google Earth and Global Intimacy," in *Intimate Metropolis: Urban Subjects in the Modern City*, eds. Vittoria Di Palma, Diana Periton, and Marina Lathouri (London: Routledge, 2009), 243.

contrasts of scale, height and dimension are also edited together, serving to juxtapose and highlight contrasting forms of movement and degrees of zoom and detail. For example, a large office interior populated by many office workers who pass papers back and forth (from left to right) is cut next to a bird's-eye view of tiny vehicles moving uptown, downtown and cross-town (north, south, east and west). The emphasis on cross-like compositions, rather than diagonals (which is the standard way that visual artists render dynamism and movement) reinforces the two-dimensional aspects of this visuality, in which horizontal and vertical planes of movement are often composed of figures crossing through centers of the screen at right angles. In comparison, classical city symphony films emphasize dynamism and motion by continually composing movement along diagonal axes, such as the initial train entering a station in *Berlin* or the X of the cross-roads intersection which is repeated in *Movie Camera. Organism*, by contrast, emphasizes squareness which implies stasis and inertia within the composition rather than dynamic movement through 3-D space.



Figure 3.6: Video still from *Organism*, dir. Hilary Harris (USA, 1975, 19 min.)

In his 1973 appearance on *The Screening Room*, Harris describes his work-in-progress “New York” film project (much of which became *Organism*) as “the study of what I call a kind of grid matrix and how different parts of the city interrelate to each other...”⁴³ The film emphasizes the interrelationships between disparate parts of the city with differing functions. Locations range from the airport, highway ramps, skyscrapers in midtown, offices, the postal service sorting mail, to the port, where we see stacks of containers being loaded onto trucks. Juxtaposing this variety, the film eschews any sense of hierarchy or ranking of importance. In *Organism*, the relationships between the parts are also “flat” in that each part relates to another as equal aspects in the total system. In this way, the film emphasizes surface and flatness in both its compositional structure as well as in its approach to the organization of its

⁴³ Gardner, *Screening Room*, 1973.

content. The wide, distanced views of the city provide a sense of the city as a *naturally* complex organization with a structure that becomes perceivable if viewed from a far-out enough distance, even as it is a view of a most “unnatural” environment. But, perhaps more to the point, the time-lapse facilitates a view of the city as an autonomous, self-regulating whole in which the parts are coordinating and communicating but without any centralized direction or command. The film’s use of voices to suggest analogies, rather than make declarative and literal statements (as in 1930s style “voice of God” use of voice-over narration), also supports an understanding of the city in which processes take place autonomously and without any central direction or embodied authority.

Systemism and Cybernetics



Figure 3.7: Video still from *Organism*, dir. Hilary Harris (USA, 1975, 19 min.)

The term cybernetics was coined by Norbert Wiener in his 1948 book *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* to describe the scientific study of self-regulating mechanisms as they exist in both natural and artificial entities.⁴⁴ Edward Shanken cites the origins of systems thinking in a biological theory first proposed in the 1930s and developed in order to understand the functioning of open systems that continuously interact with their environment or surroundings. This theory came to be understood as “systems theory,” an approach to scientific and social analysis that emphasizes “holism over reductionism, organism over mechanism and process over product” and, in contrast to traditional western scientific approaches to knowledge, shifts attention from the absolute qualities of individual parts to address the organization of the whole “as a dynamic process of interaction among constituent elements.”⁴⁵ Shanken notes that “the interdisciplinary field of cybernetics offered a rigorous technical foundation for systems theory, and became synonymous with it.”⁴⁶ Many mid-twentieth century western artists and theorists adopted the values inherent in systems thinking and used its principals for art making. For example, the artist and theorist Roy Ascott describes the cybernetic approach to art making as “concerned less with the essence of things

⁴⁴ Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1948).

⁴⁵ Edward A. Shanken, ed., *Systems* (London and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2015), 13.

⁴⁶ Shanken, *Systems*, 13.

than with their behavior; not what they are but what they do.”⁴⁷

In 1968, the art and technology writer Jack Burnham identified “Systems Aesthetics” as the emerging major paradigm in art, central to the development of a new kind of art of ‘unobjects,’ such as happenings and conceptual art projects that eschew traditional and commercial values of individual object-making such as paintings and sculptures. Burnham describes this cultural structure of feeling as denoting a transition from an object-oriented to a systems-oriented culture in the arts.⁴⁸ Shanken describes some of the emblems of the penetration of systems theory and cybernetics into the arts and culture in the creative use of feedback (what is sometimes called “signal art”) such as Jimi Hendrix’s use of electronic feedback in his music and Steina and Woody Vasulka’s experiments with manipulating live video, to cite just two among thousands of potential examples.⁴⁹ Burnham contextualizes system aesthetics or what some refer to as “systemism” as a radical evolution informed by technological shifts and an interest in the decision-making autonomy of “technocracy” characterized by fixations on the central storage of information and the techniques used to smoothly implement social change.⁵⁰ As ‘products’ become increasingly irrelevant, Burnham explains:

a different set of needs arise: these revolve around such concerns

⁴⁷ Shanken, *Systems*, 12.

⁴⁸ Burnham, Jack. “System Aesthetics” (1968) in *Systems* (London and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2015), 112-115.

⁴⁹ Shanken, *Systems*, 12.

⁵⁰ Burnham, “Systems Aesthetics,” 112.

as maintaining the biological livability of the Earth, producing more accurate models of social interaction, understanding the growing symbiosis in man-machine relationships, establishing priorities for the usage and conservation of natural resources, and defining alternate patterns of education, productivity and leisure... Here change emanates not from *things*, but from *the way things are done*.⁵¹

Burnham writes that a systems viewpoint revolves around “the problems of organization” and focuses on the creation of stable, ongoing relationships between organic and non-organic systems, “be these neighborhoods, industrial complexes, farms, transportation systems, information centers, recreation centers, or any of the other matrixes of human activity.”⁵² Burnham puts his own spin on detachment when he writes: “Situated between aggressive electronic media and two hundred years of industrial vandalism, the long held idea that a tiny output of art objects could somehow ‘beautify’ or even significantly modify the environment was naive.”⁵³

The systems approach goes beyond a concern with staged environments and happenings; it deals in a revolutionary fashion with the larger problem of boundary concepts. In systems perspective there are no contrived confines such as the theatre proscenium or picture frame. Conceptual focus rather than material limits define the system.⁵⁴

As a film expression of systems aesthetics, *Organism* overlays its biological metaphor with a cybernetic or systems theory frame, a focus on the holistic, self-

⁵¹ Burnham, “Systems Aesthetics,” 113.

⁵² Burnham, “Systems Aesthetics,” 113.

⁵³ Burnham, “Systems Aesthetics,” 113-114.

⁵⁴ Burnham, “Systems Aesthetics,” 115.

regulating organization of the city. The biological metaphor of the city as a complex (human) organism, is achieved through the juxtaposition of microscopic scientific footage of human cellular activity juxtaposed to Harris' time-lapse footage of various locations around the city and with the film's sound-score integrating the voices of biologists matter-of-factly describing various organic processes. The voices, interwoven into an electronic sound-score composed by David Hollister, are edited so as to correspond with particular visual imagery, suggesting parallels between human bodily functions and city functions. For example, a description of the digestive system corresponds to footage of a garbage processing plant, while the line "the skeletal system supports and protects the interior" is heard during a vertical pan up the side of a tall building's grid like exterior. In this way, the film illustrates ways to perceive the physical city as a single body with many interrelated parts and systems, each of which has its own function in the maintenance of the health of the overall whole.

The technological aspect of culture and society is emphasized aesthetically in a number of ways: the film's electronic sound-score, the mechanical appearance of movement due to the time-lapse technique, and *Organism's* emphasis on geometric patterns and networks of transportation and communication. The film expresses its central metaphor of city as biological organism by paradoxically avoiding any sense of physical grounded human embodiment and emphasizing the role of automation in perception. At one point, the voices describe the function of the brain while footage of

a postal machine mechanically sorting letters without any visible human control. That footage is juxtaposed to a long panel of printed names and apartment numbers, followed by a set of printers extruding computer printouts, all without any allusion to human bodies. This sequence is cut to voices saying: “Many neurons in the brain are organized in highly structured grid-like patterns. Memory banks store store dynamic codes for matching operations.... The vast majority of the activity is automatic and involuntary.” But, the interest in automation is most acutely expressed by the film’s time-lapse cinematography that insistently suggests humans to be moving in uncannily robot-like movements. Thus, the film emphasizes the relationship between organic-ness and automation and the idea of communication between parts beyond any sense of individualized will or intention. In juxtaposing microscopic film clips of red blood cells pulsing and flowing through veins, with footage of tiny dots of cars flowing through highway arteries, the film makes the point that, whether cells or cars or human bodies, the individuality of any one element is irrelevant for the perception of the function of a whole system. What matters is flow, disposition and interaction. It also suggests that the ecosystem of the city and its struggles *against* entropy can be apprehended at scales beyond the individual human.

The Spatialization of Time

Whereas classical city symphony films represent modernity through the structure of habitual time as an embodied progression through various phases of the

day, *Organism* offers a different type of experience of time—one in which urban temporality *is* the spectacle. *Organism* expresses the postmodern idea that both time and space are relative and can be dissociated from individual, linear experience. Compared to how time is presented in the modernist city symphony—as a microcosmic “everyday”—in *Organism*, time is transformed into a machine-altered spectacle of temporality: time-lapse sequences that succeed in spatializing time into the “space of the film.” In other words, in *Organism*, the city is a “space” that contains a variety of visual indexes of urban temporalities. The passage of time is rendered visible as pathways of movement: for example, in sequences of the elevated highway in which car lights blur and become streaks or lines of color as well as in sequences in which the shadows of tall buildings are recorded as sweeping across the city landscape as the animated silhouettes of recognizable skyscrapers. Of course, Harris didn’t invent time-lapse. Its use dates back to some of the earliest film experiment in the first decade of the twentieth century by F. Percy Smith. But Harris innovates the technique by expanding its vocabulary to include macrocosmic time-lapse that condenses time while moving simultaneously across space. In this way, time-lapse becomes a method, like cross-sectional montage, that allows for perceptions of the city as a supraindividual.

In *Organism*, Harris creates the experience of space-time relativity in a number of ways. The first way is that what viewers perceive as the camera smoothly panning across the scene while being recorded in time-lapse. Whereas time-lapse had

most often been used as a technique that required a stationary camera to record a single view at regular intervals over time, Harris uses the time-lapse interval recording technique to record a scene while incrementally moving the focal plane of the camera simultaneously so as to render the illusion of the camera's panning through both time and space simultaneously.⁵⁵ The panning time-lapse technique diverges significantly from the cinematographic techniques of classical city symphony, as mentioned above, which provide embodied experiences of mechanized movement through space, such as footage of the city shot from the window of a moving train or car. Instead, Harris' "moving camera" shots are created from the camera body remaining fixed in a position high off the ground, focused on distanced subjects with the aid of telephoto magnification with which micro movements of the lens can result in dramatic shifts or movements in the frame. Just as the vantage points of his camera are far removed from the street level, Harris' shots do not physically move through space by changing physical location, but instead result only by adjusting the angle of the camera, shifting the direction of the lens or by zooming in or out over long periods of time.

Organism's second type of disembodiment is a detachment from quotidian, embodied experiences of time. The film presents time-lapse as a special effect or mechanically-enabled form of visuality that renders time as a phenomenon beyond

⁵⁵ Marie Menken is an experimental filmmaker who also experimented with time-lapse recording while moving her camera through space, but the effects that she created provide a very different, physically embodied experience of the time-lapsed cinematography.

natural human perceptual abilities. While the modern city symphony is structured as a single day in the life of a city (a trick of editing designed to present the illusion of a single day) that progresses in a roughly linear fashion from dawn to dusk or night, *Organism* presents time as an endless day into night into day experience. This is a New York City form of time in which “the city never sleeps.” In *Organism*, the sun rises and sets behind tall buildings numerous times throughout the film. Shadows of tall buildings move across the cityscape like a gigantic sundial on speed. And, although the further into the film we journey, the more night views we get, the speed of time passing itself increases until, in a fashion reminiscent of the way acceleration is employed by Vertov in *Man With the Movie Camera*, we have reached a climax of frenetic time unfolding before us at superhuman light speed, cutting from super speeded up highways and traffic whizzing through the city as strips of flashing lights, to crowds in Grand Central Station, to daytime shots and back again to aerial night views of the cityscape. Finally, during the last section of the film, dominated by images of nighttime, *Organism* culminates with multiple spectacular moon rises. The previously frenetic rhythm of the film slows into the rise of a dramatically large blood red moon, which cuts to and devolves into a smaller white moon over the night cityscape, and then disappears leaving just the dark city. And then, just as suddenly, the film returns to its opening three shots: the pale blue oblong microscopic (Manhattanesque-like shape) footage, followed by quickly flowing red blood-cells, and finally to the film’s most intimate sequence, long-lensed medium closeups of

people exiting a subway station in the still light end of the work day.



Figure 3.8: Still from *Organism*, dir. Hilary Harris (USA, 1975, 19 min.)



Figure 3.9: Still from *Koyaanisqatsi*, dir. Godfrey Reggio (USA, 1982, 87 min.)

The multiple moon risings ending sequence in *Organism* (echoed in *Koyaanisqatsi*'s dramatic full moon rising sequence), serves to remind viewers of our human, earth-bound position, despite the high vantage over the city. As a dramatic actuality, the full moon, still so far away in the night sky, is a view that unites us as

earthlings while acting as a kind of reverse shot to the “Big Blue Marble” (*NASA* 22727) image of the whole earth. In a sense, views of the still far away moon, despite all of the magnification that Harris uses, serves to reinforce our distance from that element in the sky we all share. In this case, unlike the illusion of proximity between disparate elements created in the earlier street views, Harris’s moon, although dramatic and beautiful, appear as far away as it would if we were in the city viewing the night sky. In contrast to the treatment of the moon risings in *Organism*, the full moon rising scene in *Koyaanisqatsi* is rendered to appear artificially large, seemingly created with the help of what appears to be an optical printing visual effects trick. Whereas *Organism*’s moonrise sequences suggests the eloquent poetry of the moon as a beacon of commonality beyond our control, the moon rise in *Koyaanisqatsi* embodies an opposite idea: that through the wonders of technology, the moon can be brought closer to us and made to appear as though it is under human control.

Nostalgia for the Present

At a time when the promises of the modern age lie shattered like so many ruins, when we speak with increasing frequency of the ruins of modernity, both literally and metaphorically, a key question arises for cultural historians: what has shaped our imaginary of ruins in the early twenty-first century?⁵⁶ - Andreas Huyssen

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the definition of nostalgia is not only a state of being homesick—of yearning for a place that one is away from—

⁵⁶ Andreas Huyssen, “Authentic Ruins: Products of Modernity,” in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. Julia Hell, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

but, also a yearning for a past time.⁵⁷ Writing about the emergence of memory as a key concern in Western societies at the millennial moment, Andreas Huyssen argues that contemporary cultural obsessions with urban preservation, remakes, and retro fashion mark a stark contrast to the privileging of the future so characteristic of the early decades of twentieth-century modernity.⁵⁸ He identifies a new kind of “memory discourses” as emerging in the West after the 1960s in the wake of decolonization and the search for alternative and revisionist histories.⁵⁹ Huyssen pushes back against Jameson’s contention that the key to postmodernism is the shift away from problematics of time and memory to that of space, arguing instead that the categories of time and space must be understood together as historically rooted contingencies in which “differently paced modernities” are central for rigorous understandings of the long-term processes of globalization.⁶⁰

Harris’ experiments in urban landscape time-lapse cinematography in *Organism* offer ways to perceive transformations to “postmodern” perceptions of the relativity of time and space. It is also a representation of what Marc Augé has called “non-places.”⁶¹ Augé argues that, while *place* is relational, historical and concerned

⁵⁷ “Nostalgia,” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* online, accessed October 10, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nostalgia>.

⁵⁸ Andreas Huyssen, “Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 21-38.

⁵⁹ Huyssen, “Present Pasts,” 22.

⁶⁰ Huyssen, “Present Pasts,” 21-23.

⁶¹ Marc Augé, “From Places to Non-Places,” in *non-places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* (New York and London: Verso, 1995), 75-120.

with identity, “supermodernity” produces *non-places* that are nondescript “places of memory” which facilitate transport, commerce and leisure such as the highway, the airport lounge, and the supermarket.⁶² Augé compares his notion of “supermodernity” to that of (Baudelairean) modernity in which the poet asserts the existence of two different worlds—a premodern world that, while pushed to the background, still coexists with the modern world (e.g. “chimneys alongside spires”)—while locating the “position of the poet who wants to see things from high up and far away, but contains an absolute power claimed by the individual consciousness.”⁶³ In contrast, non-places:

...are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten. ...[N]on-places are the real measure of our time; one that could be quantified...for the purposes of a communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself.⁶⁴

Augé argues that non-places offer a different experience of individual subjectivity from that of modernity—one that is not fixed but merely offers a reflection of the contingency of identity that changes with context and circumstance. Augé describes how the user of a non-place (highway, airport, supermarket, transit point) must enter into a contractual relation with that place (or with the power that governs it), a relative anonymity that is accorded “only when he has given proof of his identity;

⁶² Augé, “Places to Non-Places,” 78. Augé’s term appears to function akin to what theorists such as Jameson call “postmodernism.”

⁶³ Augé, “Places to Non-Places,” 92.

⁶⁴ Augé, “From Places to Non-Places,” 92.

when he has countersigned (so to speak) the contract.”⁶⁵ Within this relation, there is “no room there for history unless it has been transformed into an element of spectacle.”⁶⁶

Everything proceeds as if space had been trapped by time, as if there were no history other than the last forty-eight hours of news, as if each individual history were drawing its motives, its words and images, from the inexhaustible stock of an unending history in the present.⁶⁷

For Augé, the appearance and proliferation of non-places signifies a shifting relationship to temporality that transforms the individual into a node or point that either gains access to or is denied access to these non-places.

Jameson distinguishes modernism—which still has “some residual zones of ‘nature’ or ‘being’ of the old, the older, the archaic”—from postmodernism that he describes as “what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good.”⁶⁸ And if, as Jameson and Augé both seem to suggest, modernity is a dichotomous experience of continuity with the past that is also a breaking with it, postmodernity implies a liquidation of modernist reference points and groundings: a transformation that results in a flattening of distinctions between past and present and the loss of any vestiges of premodern spatial and temporal logics.⁶⁹ This distinction is

⁶⁵ Augé, “From Places to Non-Places,” 101-102.

⁶⁶ Augé, “From Places to Non-Places,” 103.

⁶⁷ Augé, “From Places to Non-Places,” 104-105.

⁶⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

⁶⁹ Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 38. Along with the loss of the credibility of grand narratives, as Lyotard and others have theorized.

helpful in understanding how the postmodern city symphony reworks city symphony, a genre that is so intimately associated with modernism. Where the modernist city symphony is built upon the structure of the “everyday” (a premodern sense of diurnal and cyclical time) that is presented so as to contrast with modernist temporalities defined by the train and the factory, Harris’ postmodern city symphony dispenses with premodern notions of time and space: leaving us to experience time as a spectacle of “history” and space as “places of memory.”

How do modernist city symphonies rely on spatial logics that are both continuous with pre-modernity and simultaneously break with them? One example of this dichotomous modernist spatial logic can be found at the opening of *Berlin*, which relies upon a premodern spatial logic with the train’s arrival from the periphery into the Hauptbahnhof, the city’s main train station, located in the center of the city.⁷⁰ In postmodern city symphonies such as *Organism* and *Koyaanisqatsi*, this sense of spatial logic and continuity with the past is largely absent. Instead *non-places* function in the film as visualizations of time and “memory.” For example, in *Organism*, the linear, progressive structure of the everyday day is dispensed with from the very beginning of the film, with its opening beginning with two different film sequences of microscopic footage of cellular activity. These clips have no sense of temporality or spatial (or any) context, but only provide movement and shape analogies for the city. Those two clips are followed by a closeup long shot of people

⁷⁰ Stein, “An Island Off The Coast Of America,” 11.

exiting a subway station somewhere, presumably in midtown Manhattan. The next clip is a wide shot of the city seen from a high vantage, with the film's title appearing and then disappearing to reveal this high angle clip as a time-lapsed sequence that increasingly focuses onto the flow of traffic far below on the street as seen between tall buildings. This clip progressively accelerates to render the movement of the traffic into a blur of motion emphasizing the idea of flow: a spatialized rendering of temporality outside of what is physically possible for humans to perceive. Perhaps the initial shot of people exiting the subway station signifies the beginning of the work day, but it could just as easily be footage of anytime of the day since the sequence and the edits before and after it reveals no specific temporal context. Instead, time itself is liquified, rendered as plastic, a spectacle that is in and of itself the subject of interest. In this way, everyday urban time is still the subject of *Organism*, however, this time is represented as a relative, spatialized visual phenomenon that seems designed to describe the oft-repeated moniker of New York as "the city that never sleeps."⁷¹

Non-places are presented as "places of memory" through the mechanical wizardry of time-lapse. The non-places in *Organism* are highways, offices, nondescript locations of transport as well as shadows, the obverse of materiality. Both *Organism* and *Koyaanisqatsi* are concerned with the transformation of place into an

⁷¹ Jenna Flannigan, "A history of NYC nicknames," *Time Out New York* online, Jan. 18, 2011, <https://www.timeout.com/newyork/attractions/a-history-of-nyc-nicknames-history>. The nickname "The City That Never Sleeps" for New York City can be traced to a 1912 story in the Fort Wayne News about the city erecting the world's largest gas plant, ensuring that the metropolis would "add to its title of the city that never sleeps that of the city that never grows dark."

agglomeration of non-places: highways, nondescript offices, newspaper stands, cafeterias and the homogenized, blank grid exteriors of tall buildings. In the case of *Organism*, recognizable landmark skyscrapers are often only seen as shadows or briefly included in larger shots in which these landmarks are not the focus. Like all city symphonies, *Organism* does not feature or highlight these recognizable landmarks of the city in order to assert their unique identities or characteristics. Instead, *Organism* represents the city in a process of homogenization. In so doing, *Organism* anticipates the next phase of city symphony filmmaking: postmodern “globalized” operatic geography films that expand beyond the concept of a single city to instead explore the phenomenon of postmodern urbanism.⁷² *Koyaanisqatsi* moves the genre into a representation of the urban character of the USA as a whole nation—a geographic expansion of the city symphony genre that continues with films such as *Powaqqatsi* (dir. Godfrey Reggio, USA, 1988, 99m), *Baraka* (dir. Ron Fricke, USA, 1992, 97m) and *Naqoyqatsi* (dir. Godfrey Reggio, USA, 2002, 89m), which are all “non-verbal,” non-narrative, visual music films that focus on phenomena of urbanization and globalization using the vernacular of time-lapse cinematography to compress both time and space.

The blurred colored lines created by time-lapse recordings of moving headlights of nighttime highway traffic represent the space of the highway as an

⁷² *Man with a Movie Camera* also expands geography to imply or imagine a new and constructed Soviet urban identity, but in Vertov’s case, this is in the service of an imagined revolutionary Sovietness and not in order to index a more universal globalism that shatters national borders and boundaries to speak about a universal human-ness.

accretion of movement over time—indexing a network—a constantly fed flow of interconnectedness without any indication of origin or destination. Whereas in classical city symphony films, the embodied camera footage shot from moving vehicles produces vicarious kinesthetic experiences for the viewer, in *Organism* the spectacle of movement is seen at a remove, not from the point of view of an embodied participant, but rather that of the disembodied observer high above. Urban movement in *Organism*, filmed from this high distance, allows viewers to marvel at how car headlights can appear to become solid lines of color that trace the lines of the streets and elevated roadways. In contrast to *Organism*, *Koyaanisqatsi* also returns the viewer to a sense of embodied frenetic movement, most often in the aerial perspective, as we experience landscapes shot from inside of a moving plane or helicopter, or, as in the later part of the film, from the inside of an insanely speeded up vehicle careening on various highways as if in a video game. In *Koyaanisqatsi*, embodiment describes the privileged experiences of a fighter pilot or experiences so beyond the human body's abilities as to suggest computer aided virtuality rather than actual physical human embodiment, prioritizing the "machine" or a posthuman view.⁷³ With *Organism*, the "machine" view of time-lapse does not so much imply a post-humanity, as an attempt to understand humanity differently, through a philosophical orientation toward systemist ecology.

⁷³ Gary Matthew Varner, "Koyaanisqatsi and the Posthuman Aesthetics of a Mechanical Stare," *Film Criticism* 41, no. 1 (February 2017), online publication, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/f/fc/13761232.0041.104?view=text;rgn=main>.

Despite their differences, both *Organism* and *Koyaanisqatsi* poetically express a “nostalgia for the present” by using time-lapse cinematography to show us the destruction or dismantling of buildings and landmarks in the process of ceasing to exist—featuring remarkable sequences in which places become palimpsests of urban remaking. In this way, the urban time-lapse cinematography performs a kind of haunting, suggesting that places which we see transforming before our eyes becoming “places of memory.” The visual spectacle of city transformation unfolds as an experience of the present—a compression of past states of being into a time-lapsed flow of present-ness. This is especially the case in the sequence in *Organism* in which we watch time-lapse footage of a building being dismantled and then subsequently watch a new building being constructed in its place. In an interview with Robert Haller, Harris explains that it was the experience of shooting this time-lapse footage of a building being torn down across the street from his apartment in 1959 that was his initial inspiration for the New York film project from which *Organism* is constructed.⁷⁴ Similarly, the first footage that Ron Fricke shot for *Koyaanisqatsi*, in 1975, was the footage of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project being dynamited.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Robert Haller, “Hilary Harris on the making of *Organism*,” 1985, *The Films of Hilary Harris* (Mystic Fire, 2007), DVD. Printed on the “About the Filmmaker” section in the DVD extras. It should be noted that Harris shows clips from his work-in-progress “New York film,” which includes many different segments not part of *Organism*. He refers to the “New York” film as a full-length work and on the DVD collection, there are references to a film called Visions of a city (working title) which identifies *Organism* to be fragment of this larger work. To my knowledge, that full-length film was never completed.

⁷⁵ MacDonald, *Critical Cinema* 2, 386.



Figure 3.10: Still from *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, dir. Chad Freidrichs (USA, 2011)

Significant for a discussion of postmodernism, the destruction of Pruitt-Igoe is often narrated as a symbol of “the end of modernism,” a view first advanced by architecture critic Charles Jencks when he described its demolition as the nail in the coffin for modern architecture and its hubristic modernist aesthetics.⁷⁶ (Uncannily, Minoru Yamasaki was the architect of both Pruitt-Igoe and the World Trade Center, which has led some to claim that Yamasaki’s work can be considered both “the alpha and the omega” of postmodernism in architecture.⁷⁷) Comparing Harris’ use of time-lapse for representing the deconstruction-construction of a city building to the Pruitt-Igoe sequence in *Koyaanisqatsi* is instructive. Whereas Harris’ footage expresses a

⁷⁶ Charles Jencks, *The Language of Postmodernism* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977).

⁷⁷ Jeanne Willette, “Modernism and Postmodernism: Allegory and Theory,” blog post, *arthistoryunstuffed.com*, Nov. 1, 2013, webpage: <http://arthistoryunstuffed.com/modernism-postmodernism-allegory/>. When the World Trade Center towers were destroyed on September 11, 2001, it was widely announced that Postmodernism was over and Yamasaki had the honor of being the omega of both Modernism and of Postmodernism.

curiosity and acceptance of the ways that old buildings are easily replaced by new construction, *Koyaanisqatsi* focuses exclusively on the destructive aspect, in which iconographically significant buildings are dynamited and obliterated. This divergent treatment suggests the different ethical outlooks of the two films. While *Organism* looks for indexes of homeostasis, *Koyaanisqatsi* focuses the dire traumatic spectacles for the purpose of alerting its audience to what it sees as a crisis of existence in the landscape defined as “life out of balance.”⁷⁸

In attempting to create a vision of the city as a complex, living entity worthy of care, Harris’ use of biological metaphors in *Organism* is strikingly reminiscent of Jane Jacobs’ writings about the city as an organic entity. One of Jacobs’ most strident repudiations of modernist urban design comes when she charges “*A city cannot be a work of art,*” arguing that the planner’s most essential job was to encourage the achievement of common goods, city liveliness, diversity and self-reinforcing vitality; not the remaking of a city for the glory of one’s own creative and individual vision.⁷⁹ In contrast to treating the city as a work of art, Jacobs advocates looking to the life sciences as inspiration for understanding the city as a complex organism:

...while city planning has thus mired itself in deep misunderstandings about the very nature of the problem with which it is dealing, the life sciences, unburdened with this mistake, and moving ahead very rapidly, have been providing some of the concepts that city planning needs: along with providing the basic

⁷⁸ “*Koyaanisqatsi*,” Philip Glass website, <http://philipglass.com/films/koyaanisqatsi/>. “Life out of balance” is one of the translations of the Hopi word that is the film’s title.

⁷⁹ Jacobs, *Death and Life*, 372.

strategy of recognizing problems of organized complexity, they have provided hints about analyzing and handling this *kind* of problem. These advances have, of course, filtered from the life sciences into general knowledge; they have become part of the intellectual fund of our times. And so a growing number of people have begun, gradually, to think of cities as problems in organized complexity—organisms that are replete with unexamined, but obviously intricately interconnected, and surely understandable, relationships.⁸⁰

Considering how much Harris' approach to the urban landscape is in accord with Jacobs' ideas, it is curious that *Organism* is so aesthetically at odds with Jacobs' emphasis on experiencing the city from the street level. Where modernist city symphony and jazz films relished using embodied approaches to representing city life by including footage shot from fast moving trains, street cars, automobiles and other kinds of handheld street footage, Harris' commitment to the disembodied, aerial view begs the question of why he chose to exclude street level or closer-up and embodied perspectives. And, the lack of that embodied street view is even more striking when considering Harris' previous film work with dance and choreography and his avowed fascination with what he called the "kinetic" aspects of cinematography in his earlier works.⁸¹ Yet, despite its physical remove from the street level, Harris' cinematography does provide a kinetic experience: the embodiment of a complete spatial and temporal detachment from both the ground and from the mechanics of human physical perception. High above and with the magic of radically altered time

⁸⁰ Jacobs, *Death and Life*, 438-9.

⁸¹ Gardner, *Screening Room*, 1973.

signatures, Harris adopts the point of view of the skyscrapers that have come to define the city itself, without pointing to the embodied movements that the cameraperson must take in order to arrive at this perspective. In other words, viewers do not enter into the building or experience going up in an elevator or escalator in order to arrive at the high vantage points offered in the film, as we do in earlier films such as in *The Bridge* or *Movie Camera*. Instead, Harris' approach drops his viewers into already existing scientific and mechanical forms of objectivity such as the microscopic view of cellular activity or a skyscraper's view of the city, utterly detached from an individualized authorial perspective and from the spatial-temporal logics that define modernism.

Another significant difference between *Organism* and *Koyaanisqatsi* is that Reggio's film includes representation of the human scale and footage of singular, individual figures. These figures appear one by one, as well as in small groups, always shot in slow-motion, always staring wordlessly back into the camera, performing a reflexive spectatorship back at the film viewers. These individual non-characters are presented as a kind of confrontation to the viewer, with individual figures looking directly into (and through) the camera.⁸² Yet, the viewer learns nothing of their identities, nor do we follow them through anything like a narrative trajectory. They simply appear in their specific contexts, such as on a New York subway platform, or outside a Vegas nightclub, and then disappear. Gary Varner

⁸² Varner, "Koyaanisqatsi and Posthuman Aesthetics."

describes these moments as “mechanical, nonhuman vision,” and suggests that *Koyaanisqatsi* paradoxically asserts that: “life out of balance also comes too mean *life too human*, an imbalance that *Koyaanisqatsi* works to correct through its mechanical stare and posthuman vision.”⁸³ But despite their aesthetic differences, this paradox is also in operation in *Organism*—in which the extreme distancing and machine-enabled techniques of time-lapsed vision suggest a city life that is both *too human* (urban, constructed by man) and no longer the purview of human perception, but rather expressing a reality outside of the abilities of human perception.

In the past three decades, urban landscape visual music filmmaking has greatly expanded beyond the purview of the city, both in terms of geography and in technical abilities. The most recognizable films in this category are the two films that Godfrey Reggio made as part of the *Koyaanisqatsi* trilogy (*Naqoyqatsi*, *Powaqqatsi*), and the films by Ron Fricke (*Baraka*, *Samsara*). But, more recently, a spate of films that aestheticize high definition, slow-motion aerial cinematography are “deploy[ing] techniques of technologically-virtuosic seeing,” such as in the work of Yann Arthus-Bertrand (*Home*, *Planet Earth*, *Terra*, *Human*), Baichwal and Burtynsky (*Manufactured Landscapes*, *Watermark* and *Anthropocene*) and David Attenborough (The BBC *Planet Earth* series).⁸⁴ Yet, unlike expansive, dystopian-tinged documentary film imaginaries, such as *Koyaanisqatsi*, that emphasize the ways in

⁸³ Varner, “Koyaanisqatsi and Posthuman Aesthetics.”

⁸⁴ Druick, “Wide-Angle View,” 398.

which the modern Western world is doomed by an increasingly militaristic disposition,⁸⁵ Harris' approach is completely different. *Organism* implies not so much a sense of ruination, but instead an ecological perspective that employs mechanical tools in service of representing a "systems theory" understanding of organicism—of humans and of the city as an organic process that is part of the greater web of life and beyond the control of the individual viewpoint. Harris' time-lapse cinematography allows us to perceive from a distance, with the help of defamiliarization techniques that render time as a spatialized spectacle, in order to allow us to perceive patterns and networks of interconnection that yield a view of the city as "a living organism in the totality of mutual interactions."⁸⁶

Writing about "global documentaries" that employ a fly-over aesthetic to express a "capitalist subjectivity," Zoë Druick argues that, in the way the "discourse of the Anthropocene tends to collectivise human responsibility for planetary change rather than point the finger at the particularly rapacious logic of capitalism and those who benefit from it," the concept of a human era of planetary transformation "reduces... human activity in the web of life to an abstract, homogenous humanity. It removes inequality, commodification, imperialism, patriarchy, and much more from the problem of humanity-in-nature."⁸⁷ She argues that, while seemingly deployed for

⁸⁵ Varner, "Koyaanisqatsi and Postman Aesthetics;" Druick, "Wide-Angle View."

⁸⁶ Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi, *The Systems View of Life: A Unified Vision* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 130.

⁸⁷ Druick, "Wide-Angle View," 398.

“humanist” ends, globalized aerial documentaries, typified by *Home* (dir. Yann Bertrand-Arthus, France, 2009) express a logic of colonialist expansion specific to a “European planetary consciousness.”⁸⁸ The films of Reggio and Fricke might also be said to enact a similar collapsing of difference in the service of a generic form of “global humanity.” But, Druick’s contention leads me to wonder if Harris might also be guilty of a similar paradoxical dialectic. Druick describes the hypocrisy of film fly-over humanism as “expressing a fascination with Nature (organic biological) in the aesthetic realm, even as it works to bring about environmental degradation and conditions anathema to human life on the social and economic level.”⁸⁹ Given the increasing scale of ecological devastation brought about by our global capitalist system and its dependence on extractive industries, it is important to ask whether and how best to use these detached, machine views for environmental activist goals.⁹⁰ Cosgrove, noting a potential difficulty warns: “*Whole-earth* readings have difficulty keeping faith with the local because the photograph’s erasure of human signs implies the extension of organic bonds across all humanity and the entire globe.”⁹¹ Keeping this challenge in mind, landscape representations can also demand that we confront the question of how we locate and implicate ourselves in the world when the scale of our problems keep increasing while our ability to recognize ourselves in the image

⁸⁸ Druick, “Wide-Angle View,” 396-405.

⁸⁹ Druick, “Wide-Angle View,” 398.

⁹⁰ Zoë Druick. “Environmentalism from the Sky?: Anthropocene: the Human Epoch,” *Decalogue*, October 2019, <https://docalogue.com/october-anthropocene-the-human-epoch/>.

⁹¹ Cosgrove, “Contested Global Visions,” 290.

keeps shrinking.



Figure 3.11: Still from *Petropolis: Aerial Perspectives on the Alberta Tar Sands*. Dir. Peter Mettler (Canada, 2009, 34 mins.)

Contemporary theories of EcoMaterialism propose new ways of thinking about agency—ones that move beyond the human scale, such as nuclear waste and large scale weather events that upend classical understandings of individual cause and effect.⁹² For example, in the case of the film *Petropolis: Aerial Perspectives on the Alberta Tar Sands* (dir. Peter Mettler, Canada, 2009, 43m), the aerial view created by a camera mounted underneath the helicopter flying over the horrifying sublime of the Canadian tar sands landscape speaks for itself: the oil mining operation appears as a violent gash in the earth's surface and an expansive site of devastation. This aerial landscape imagery only has to unfold in front of the viewer, barely edited by the filmmaker, in order to provide a compelling and articulate anti-extraction polemic

⁹² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Morton, *Hyperobjects*; Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*.

that reveals the alarming extent of harm being done to the northern Canadian forest ecosystem. This film, created as an advocacy video for Greenpeace, constructed by a uniquely aerial view of an automated camera reveals the otherwise hidden (or at least very difficult to access) tar sands operations. In the footage, there is barely a trace of human labor visible, nor is the human hand evident in the camera's recording. The remote controlled camera, felt most acutely in the jerky, mechanical panning actions, parallels the remote controlled extraction operations where few humans seem to be at the helm of such a shockingly large scale landscape transformation. As Anna Tsing so eloquently writes: "Ruins are now our gardens. Degraded ('blasted') landscapes produce our livelihoods."⁹³ It is this sort of collaboration between machine and human that is at the heart of Hilary Harris' *Organism*. As scientific footage of microscopic human cells trafficking through blood vessels are juxtaposed to wide shots of car traffic speeding along New York City's urban highways, Harris frames the city as a living, breathing organic entity, pulsing with the life energy of all of its tiny urban inputs and outputs into the body of the metropolis that both contains and exceeds us, filmmaker and viewers alike.

⁹³ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, for the Matsutake Worlds Research Group, "Blasted landscapes (and the gentle arts of mushroom picking)," in *The Multispecies Salon*, ed. Eben Kirksey (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 87.

Chapter 4

Are You Together? Utopian Dysphorias of the Queer Landscape Essay Film

“I feel like I'm just kind of stuck here where I am. I don't really want to be a woman but I don't want to be a man either. And I'm just kind of stuck here. And this is just my path. I'm not anywhere.”¹ - Jenni Olson



Figure 4: Still from *News From Home* (dir. Chantal Akerman, Belgium, 1976)

¹ Jenni Olson, interview, Berkeley, CA, May 26, 2019.

Dysphoria

Dysphoria describes the feeling of not being at home in one's own context, whether that be one's own physical body or one's current environment. The *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* defines *dysphoria* as a pathology "describing a state of dissatisfaction, anxiety, restlessness or fidgeting."² The *Collins English*, a British English dictionary, frames *dysphoria* in more general psychological terms as "a feeling of being ill at ease."³ Although *dysphoria* can be employed to describe a variety of situations, it is most commonly used in the context of *gender dysphoria*, a phrase coined to describe the experience of one's own gender identity not being matched to the sex one was assigned at birth. But, if we apply the term spatially or geographically, *dysphoria* suggests a sense of being ill at ease in one's physical environment or current landscape. I find the concept of *dysphoria* useful for thinking about how media and mediation might express the experiences of outsidership. As a state of unease, it is easy to understand that *dysphoria* is often experienced as a kind of double consciousness in which one's personal perspective is at odds with how the external world thinks or perceives. One can have a *dysphoria* to one's own culture, or to the culture of one's family or heritage, with the religious beliefs of one's upbringing. One might also be said to be linguistically *dysphoric* to the community or nation in which one resides. As such, accented speaking can communicate audible

² "Dysphoria," *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* online (2019), <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/dysphoria>, accessed 7/30/2019.

³ "Dysphoria," *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*.

evidence as to one's outsider status. Accented-ness might also imply or indicate a form of political dysphoria, in which the very form, sound and timbre of verbal expression is at odds with the cultural as well as political structures of power that define the nation in which one resides.

In whatever ways it manifests, dysphoria is an experience of one's self as other or different from a perceived "mainstream." Dysphoria offers a framework for perceiving multiple simultaneous consciousnesses, perceptual realities or subjectivities. For example, dysphoria can occur when one sees something that conflicts with what they are hearing. In this sense, dysphoria can elevate consciousness of one's context and the ways that environment might have different consciousness than one's own. In other words, dysphoria is a phenomenological experience of an interpretative overlay or of a type of heightened subjectivity. Queerness can also be a type of dysphoria. The experience of being queer in a predominantly heterosexual world is an ontological recognition of difference in relation to gender binary norms, as well as to heterosexual and sexual "norms" and to aesthetic norms more generally. To be *queer* is to claim the identity of being other. As José Muñoz so eloquently describes it, *queer* claims a political position of insurgency and emergence: a state of being "not yet here."⁴ Muñoz helpfully positions *queer* as a utopian concept: a yearning for one's present context to be other and better than it is now.

⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009), 1.

This chapter offers a film theory of dysphoria—a way to view dysphoria as a productive structure for film form: a method for expressing multiple subjective fields simultaneously. I will argue that this concept is particularly helpful in analyzing a set of urban landscape essay film in which spatial or environmental dysphoria is expressed using a strikingly similar set of aesthetics approaches to deal with specifically queer experiences of place. The formal and literal types of dysphoria featured in this chosen set of films demonstrate ways that a film’s structure, its formal properties provide metaphors of perceptual mis-alignments and provocative discomfort for their viewers-audiences. These films represent the environment as a series of wide (objective) visual landscapes indifferent to or independent from the embodied subjective “view” articulated by the voice (vocal narration) of the essay films. However, the formal dysphoria presented in these films is not limited to the “mis-alignment” or *queerness* of the relationship between image and sound. These films also concern themselves with representing temporal dysphorias such as nostalgia and *solastalgia* in which an unease about the present is informed by a longing for some different time and place of the past.⁵

⁵ Glenn Albrecht, “Solastalgia: A New Concept in Human Health and Identity,” *PAN (Philosophy, Activism, Nature)*, Issue 3 (2005): 41-55; Robert Macfarlane, “Generation Anthropocene: How humans have altered the planet for ever,” *The Guardian*, April 1, 2016, accessed 6/2/2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/01/generation-anthropocene-altered-planet-for-ever>. Solastalgia is a neologism invented in 2003 by environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht to describe a form of psychic or existential distress caused by environmental change. Robert Macfarlane describes this word that he invented as “a type of homesickness or melancholia that you feel when you’re at home and your home environment is changing around you in ways that you feel are profoundly negative.” With this new word, he advocates for new language to describe our changing Earth and the feelings ecological destruction stirs within us all. My contention is that his term can equally be applied to feelings that gentrification and the urban renewal that preceded it invoke in long time residents of a place undergoing rapid transformation.

Alongside of their aesthetic queerness, each of the films analyzed asserts a dysphoric relationship to place—a sense of non-belonging and discomfort with self in the relationship to both personal identity and the broader environment implied by their landscapes. Beginning with *News From Home* (dir. Chantal Akerman, Belgium, 1976), and continuing with films by self-identifying queer filmmakers: *Massillon* (dir. William E. Jones, Los Angeles, 1992), *You Are Not From Here* (dir. Diane Bonder, Jersey City, NJ, 2005), *The Joy of Life* (dir. Jenni Olson, San Francisco, 2005) and *The Royal Road* (dir. Jenni Olson, San Francisco and Los Angeles, 2015), this chapter will explore the ways that each film deploys similar aesthetic strategies by setting an acousmatic yet highly personal and subjective audio track against the impersonal, disembodied everyday landscapes of the visual commons.

As films that represent the urban landscape as places that embody disregard, abandonment, disrepair, denigration, indifference, emotional coldness or unease, each film evokes the language and aesthetics of late twentieth century American landscape art photography. And yet, they all resist the modernist allure of *The Decisive Moment* (Cartier-Bresson), to instead present a sense of durational impermanence. In *News From Home*, the 1970's landscape of New York City is a largely mute, indifferent city of working people that seem neither to notice or care about the camera nor the well-being of its citizens. In Jones' film from the early nineties, the homophobic landscapes of the post-industrial mid-west and a new development in a Southern California desert expresses homophobia and is a cypher for Jones' political

awakening and disaffection. In the early twenty-first century, both Diane Bonder and Jenni Olson's films are oriented more definitively around gentrification as the immanent state of city life. These works filmmakers, along with Jones' film, all traffic in kind of gentrification of documentary aesthetics—an ironically nostalgic fetish for scenes of out-of-date, quaint looking spectacles of urban decay. This visual aesthetic might be said to be a response to the rapid and dramatic economic and demographic transformation of central city neighborhoods that began to take place in the mid 1990s—a phenomenon that obviously only continues to escalate today. Both Bonder and Olsons' films suggest that, in the context of gentrification, a particular form of place-based dysphoria is at play. In their choosing to shoot with the increasingly outmoded technique of celluloid and using a decidedly non-commercial aesthetic of long durational, wide, single-take tripod landscape shots, the films aesthetically express *solastalgia*—a longing for a previous state of place.⁶

Nostalgia and the newer and more specific term *solastalgia* are both terms that denote dysphorias having to do with both time and place. Foregrounding how dysphoria functions as both subject matter and as a formal construct, this chapter will provide analyses of films that demonstrate some different ways that dysphoria is productively used in landscape essay films. In this chapter, I will explore how dysphoria calls attention to and also complicates the binary of outsider-insider (subject-object) positions. I will also consider the ways that dysphoria functions

⁶ Albrecht, "Solastalgia;" Macfarlane, "Generation Anthropocene."

strategically to dislodge reception from film content—exploring the role that discomfort plays for audience-viewers by simultaneously allowing them to be both inside and outside of a film’s diegesis.

Queerness as Form

José Esteban Muñoz opens *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer*

Futurity with the provocative statement:

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future... Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*.⁷

For Muñoz and other queer theorists, *queer* is as much a political and aesthetic investment in non-assimilationism as it is a sexual-gender orientation. From the inception of Queer Nation, the direct action political affiliation group founded in New York City in March of 1990 as an off-shoot of ACT UP!, the identity *queer* was intended as a militant, non-gender specific identifier that is both inclusive for many different kinds of queers and an in-your-face approach to heteronormative cultural assumptions.⁸ To some in my generation, the identity positions of lesbian and gay are

⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

⁸ “Queer Nation,” Wikipedia, accessed on 4/10/2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer_Nation.

tainted by an historical legacy of gender binary essentialism and gender exclusionary practices. Women only and men only spaces promoted gender segregation for many reasons: rational, protective, pragmatic, prescriptive, paranoid and reparative, cultural and sexual. But, in the early 1990s, the adoption of the term *queer* as a political identity distinct from lesbian or gay was an attempt to promote militant visibility of a multi-gendered political and cultural collective. *Queer* culture embraced mixed gender dance parties, social spaces, political organizing and artistic collaboration between dykes and fags and bisexuals and transgender people, gender-queers and any form of gender and sexual deviance proclaimed.

Personally, when I attended those earliest Queer Nation meetings at the Gay and Lesbian Center in the West Village, *queer* felt like a new identity for my generation: a third wave feminist pushback against an older gay/lesbian binary. My desire to transcend the social constraints of my biology felt utopian to me: unattainable yet deeply motivating: a lodestar, a horizon imbued with potentiality. Identifying as *queer* feels like a helpful obfuscation: both a veil and an umbrella that allows one to move fluidly between multiple categories such as bisexual, lesbian, butch and trans.⁹ *Queer* as an umbrella, covers over individual specificities and allows one to merge into an inclusive collectivity comprised of a spectrum of LGBTQIA+ people. *Queer* allows for gender, attraction, identity and expression to shift and change—to hold the space for the instability of these concepts. As a veil,

⁹ Samuael Topiary, “Looking Back on Queer Futures,” *Open Space* blog, SF MoMA, July 22, 2019, <https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2019/07/looking-back-on-queer-futures/>.

queer allows one to eschew a specific gender identification or to avoid having to remain fixed in a particular gender or sexuality position.

But, beyond questions of individual gender and sex categories, queer also stakes an explicitly anti-capitalist and anti-assimilationist claim, illustrated in the often performed rally chant: “We’re here, we’re queer, we’re not going shopping.” This anti-capitalist ethic was a direct reaction to the co-opting of gay and lesbian politics that was increasingly evident by the early 1990s with the advent of a pro-Gays in the Military and pro-Gay Marriage political stances as well as the increasingly rampant gay capitalism evidenced by Gay Pride parade, parties and Lesbian and Gay film festival sponsorships by alcohol companies, banks, corporations and politicians whose “pink washing” was perceived as masking nefarious politics and policies.¹⁰ From its inception as an identity, the term *queer* conjoined sexuality, political radicalism and aesthetic deviances that stood as an explicit stance against neoliberal and corporate forms of assimilation. *Queer* was subversive both because it had a pejorative sting that claimed otherness and because it embodied the provocation to understand gender as a spectrum.

The queer utopian branch of queer theory championed by Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz, along with the work of Eve Sedgwick, Karen Tongson, and Lauren Berlant, among others, offers a methodology for reading queerness as a

¹⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 19; Karen Tongson, “Keywords,” 158; J. Halberstam, “What’s that smell? Queer temporalities and subcultural lives,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 3 (2003), 320, Warner.

cultural and embodied political orientation. For Munõz, queerness is a structuring mode of desire that allows us to see and feel oppressive structures that function in the present, while simultaneously doing the work of imaging a better and more liberated future. Halberstam defines a queer geography informed by the ways that space and place theory can be read through the concepts of gender, sexuality and embodiment:

Queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. They also develop according to other logics of location, movement, and identification.¹¹

Generally, we are used to film operating within a hegemonic ocular-centrism, whereby a film's visual track serves as the primary mode of description of the film's world, often dominating the viewer's consciousness. However, when films present a conflict between the reality that one sees and the subjectivity that one hears, a queer or non-hegemonic film spectatorship can surface. Formal looseness of affiliation between the visual and the audio is what I consider to be *film form queerness*—a queer relationality that deviates from expected film norms of how visual and audio material relate to each other. This non-committed, non-monogamous relationship between the audio and visual tracks tends to create a dysphoric consciousness for the spectator.

The queer relationship between picture and sound in queer landscape essay films are often staged as a contrast between a visual subjectivity of “common” or

¹¹ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York University Press, 2005), 1.

general, “objective” perspectives of place and the personal subjectivity of an invisible voice. In this way, queer landscape essay films provide a shifting dynamic between ocularcentrism and the logocentrism of the aural field. These films allow for polyphony and especially for irony to prevail, with their fascination with the emergent meanings that arise from the clash between visual and auditory meanings and intentions.

The films that I analyze in this chapter have a number of striking aesthetic similarities. In all of them, the visuals are comprised exclusively of public, exterior landscapes that may or may not bare any direct correlation to the words being spoken or to the individual perspective implied by the speaker. These visuals provide a heightened temporality: a slow, durational experience of the quotidian urban environment in which “nothing” or at least, very little appears to be happening in the frame. The extended duration of the static landscapes in which no narrative action can be discerned invites viewers to consider “why this frame?”— an invitation to engage in an active (or dissociated) form of perception which allows for space for the viewer to have their own thoughts and interpretations and provides a film experience in which there is no correct or right way to see something.¹² This approach to visual information is often interrupted or challenged by the soundtrack offering an overtly subjective, personal, and embodied point of view. The aural specificity of the voice-over performance compels its audience to question their own perceptions of place.

¹² Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

Because the visual field is almost exclusively trained upon landscapes owned by no-one or no-one in particular and is often unconnected or at least loosely connected to the stream of consciousness embodied in the narration, capitalist property (ownership) relations are displaced by the insistent presentation of landscapes of a visual commons (a visible world of public exterior spaces) placed in contrast to the highly subjective, individualized, literal voice of the film.¹³ In this sense, these films offer a montage of the portrait and landscape mode simultaneously, where the portrait mode is an exclusively aural experience while the landscape mode is exclusively the purview of the visual.

The Essay Film: Deviance & Nonassimilationism

The history of experimental film and media is in many ways a history of queer artistic expression, from Kenneth Anger, James Broughton, Andy Warhol, Marlon Riggs, Barbara Hammer and Su Friedrich, to name only a few of the canonized experimental lesbian and gay filmmakers. Queers have often gravitated toward experimental forms of expression that allow them to express their ideas using non-conventional and non-assimilationist forms and aesthetics.¹⁴ And yet, most analyses of LGBTQ visual media is predicated on the ways this media provides authentic forms of queer visibility that operate to validate and empower queerness through

¹³ Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (Spring 1983): 17–30.

¹⁴ Scott MacDonald made this point to me anecdotally in conversation at Visible Evidence, Los Angeles, July 28, 2019.

images of real queer bodies in all of their multi-racial and pan-gendered diversity.

The essay film presents a different kind of opportunity for non-assimilation and deviance. If you've read any of the recently published literature on essay films (see Appendix B), you might be familiar with the debate about whether essay film can be considered as a genre. I was particularly interested in Volker Pantenburg's take on this question because he argues that, not only is essay film not a genre, but as Pantenburg describes it, the essay film's resistance to generic categorization is a type of deviance.¹⁵ Any yet, interestingly, overtly queer-themed landscape essay film as a subcategory of the more general essay film type, has been ignored or at least left as yet unthought in the growing body of recent scholarship on essay film.¹⁶

To my mind, at least part of what makes the essay film form deviant is that, ontologically, essay films challenge mainstream assumptions about film being not only a form of entertainment, but also one which is a dominantly visual medium in which sound is subservient to the meaning generated by the image. With visual dominance, the viewer presumes the visual field to be dominant in the economy of meaning making and attention. This visual dominance or occularcentricism positions sound as playing a primarily supportive role, attending to both the roles of emotional labor (music) and formal cohesion as ambience (diegetic "wild" sound or "environmental" sound and sound effects/foley) and supplier of synchronicity with

¹⁵ Volker Pantenburg, "Deviation as Norm—Notes on the Essay Film," in *Farocki/Godard: Film as Theory* (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 136.

¹⁶ See Appendix B.

the image. If we consider occularcentricism in mainstream film to be a kind of ‘film heteronormativity,’ then film form in which the audio and the visuals trade off in dominance or assert independence (non-monogamy of meaning) between what is seen and what is heard, is a queering of mainstream audio-visual form. And, if we extend the idea of formal queerness to the question of what we should call the people who listen to and watch essay films—viewers or audience—then we might consider the receivers of essay film as non-binary audience-viewers.

In the *Keywords for Media Studies* (2017) volume, queer media theorist Karen Tongson argues that the term ‘queer media’ functions as an historical index to the “medial transformations and shifts” enabled by the advances and interruptions caused by LGBTQ civil rights movements.¹⁷ Tongson acknowledges that, despite all of the great advances and opportunities for queer viewers to see ourselves on screens, “arguments about queer visibility still run the table.”¹⁸ She suggests that despite the political advances and increasing mainstream normalization of images and media about queer people, queer visibility continues to be a strategy and *raison d’être* in the vast majority of queer media. Given this reality, the queer landscape essay film, with its absence of any visual representations of queer people, is a rather *queer* form of queer media. The lack of literal images of queer bodies and queer places in queer landscape essay films can be viewed as a formal resistance to how and why LGBTQ

¹⁷ Karen Tongson, “Queer,” *Keywords for Media Studies*, eds. Laurie Ouellette, Jonathan Gray (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 157.

¹⁸ Tongson, “Queer,” 157.

filmmaking is generally understood. In the queer landscape essay film, queer identity politics are instantiated invisibly, pushing back against the limitation that queer ‘visibility’ is the only form of cultural empowerment for an under-represented and historically marginalized subjectivity.¹⁹

Queer landscape essay films can pose a challenge for queer audiences and LGBTQ film festivals who seek to program films for queer film who expect to see stories by and about queers and are hungry for images of queer bodies, characters and sex on screen. In queer landscape essay films, the queer voice is the sole enunciation of queerness: articulated as a particularized, personal, individual. This queer voice is an embodied voice that has specificity and timbre and gender and personality and point of view. Sometimes this voice is performed by a recognizably queer personality or performer, such as Philip Horvitz in *You Are Not From Here* or Harry Dodge in *The Joy of Life*. In queer landscape essay films generally, the voice provides a starkly different kind of subjectivity than the mute, static images of de-populated urban landscapes that often bear little attachment to the personal expression evidenced in the voice. And yet, it is both the lack of a traditional narrative arc as well as the resistance to delivering visually dominant film experiences that suggest the queer landscape essay form’s non-assimilationist stance toward queer media expectations.

¹⁹ S Topiary Landberg, “Citizenfour and the Anti-Representational Turn: aesthetics of failure in the information age,” in *Rethinking Popular Documentary*, eds. Christie Milliken and Steve Anderson, Indiana University Press, forthcoming publication. Film theorists such as Michael Renov and Bill Nichols, Alisa Lebow and many other documentary scholars assert that giving image and voice and providing a platform for underrepresented minorities to be seen and heard on their own terms is akin to empowerment.

The set of landscape essay films in this chapter articulates a counter-intuitive queer politics of anti-representational identity that starkly diverges from the politics of queer visibility that has dominated the discourse about queer media.²⁰ Queer abject subjectivity has often been a visual as well as a narrative spectacle in Hollywood. Pooja Rangan, building upon Fanon's insight about race being a visual spectacle, reminds us that voice and sound also contribute to the construction of abject subjectivities.²¹ In this set of films, the filmmakers resist this abjection to enact an empowered and enunciated out queer aural subjectivity that constructs an utopian relationship with their audience.

Spoken Word

Landscape essay films are a "spoken word" form of visual music landscapes. The films in this chapter are all dominated by a singular, subjective, unseen voice-over: a voice that articulates an embodied and individual point of view and which provide the sound experience—audible musical qualities of the spoken word, what Rangan describes as "the corporeal sonic dimensions of the voice that exceed linguistic meaning—that is, the embodied matter of the voice that is excluded when 'voice' is employed as a metaphor for political subjectivity."²² These are film essays which function like epistolary films in which the voice-over operates as a

²⁰ Tongson, "Queer," 158.

²¹ Pooja Rangan, "In Defense of Voicelessness: The Matter of the Voice and the Films of Leslie Thornton," *Feminist Media Histories* 1, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 98.

²² Rangan, "In Defense of Voicelessness," 96.

confessional or a direct interpellation to their audience. In these films, the voice—both the meaning of what is said and the physical voice as an instrument with rhythms, inflection, accent and timbre or emotion are as integral to the meaning of the film as are the images that populate its visual field. This radical egalitarianism of image and sound in landscape essay filmmaking foregrounds the authorship of the film director while highlighting the role that context and environment play in shaping meaning. Voice is cast in an ethical position that contrasts with the mute indifference of the film’s wide, static landscapes.

In contrast to the constructivist, modernist aesthetics of city symphony cross-sectional montage that emphasizes dynamism, visual juxtaposition, harmonic contrasts and jazz, these late twentieth century and early twenty-first century urban landscape essay films offer a different sort of montage. The collision between picture and sound serves to contrast with the illusionism of audio-visual synchronicity. The democratic gaze of the visual field of “objective,” largely static, vernacular landscapes portray generality and indicate collective experience. This approach to visuality supplants a “master shot” of establishment to thrust them into the center of the film experience without any supporting narrative aids or hooks or closeups—an exclusively arm’s-length form of visuality.²³ Wide-shot landscapes, the language of establishment, of context and background, instead are presented as the visual

²³ Discussion at “Dysphoria: The Uses of Not Belonging in Documentary Media,” panel, Visible Evidence XXVI, Los Angeles, CA, July 26, 2019. Abigail Severance described James Benning’s films as embodying a democratic gaze. Pooja Rangan quoted Jenni Olson as describing her approach to landscape as not having any pull of attention anywhere in the shot.

foreground yet come to be experienced as a concept background to the voice. Because these landscapes are often only tenuously attached to the diegesis of the audio, they function as visual information parallel to what can be heard. The sound, in contrast, offers the ultimate experience of intimacy—a particular voice, as if whispered in our ears, confesses to us, personal feelings and details as well as facts that are directly related to our own lives.

News From Home: dysphoric nostalgia



Figure 4.1: Still from *News From Home* (dir. Chantal Akerman, Belgium, 1976)

Although Chantal Akerman's 1976 film *News from Home* might be considered an urtext for queer landscape essay film, and although Akerman was an out lesbian and had overt lesbian content in at least one of her films (*Je tu il elle*, 1974), this film has no overtly queer content and certainly was not intended to be viewed as queer.

Akerman famously resisted being identified as a lesbian filmmaker and had a long-standing reputation for refusing to allow her films to be shown in LGBTQ Film Festivals.²⁴ And, yet, despite the film's seeming resistance to being coded as queer, the queerness of its aesthetic strategies are palpable.

News from Home is first and foremost a film about dysphoria and displacement. It is a portrait of guilty, feminist rebelliousness against the pressures of family values. It is also a portrait of a foreigner's feelings about the experiences of being a stranger in a strange land, of being unable to feel at home in the inhospitality of 1970s New York, while at the same time asserting an unwillingness to return to family back in Belgium. The film expresses the sense of not-belonging solely through its aesthetic sensibilities: the affect of Akerman's own voice as the sole spoken presence, and consequently the strange relationship between her voice, reading her mother's letters, and the images that present a parallel reality at odds with the words. Between the meaning of the words we hear—Akerman's mother's everyday realities back home in Belgium and the everyday street scenes of a down-and-out New York City— is space for the viewer to intuit meaning, to analyze vocal inflection and imagine Akerman as a feeling person who refuses to let herself be seen.

The aesthetics of the film, the flat, unemotional reading style, and the static, unassuming, nonhierarchical, non-narrative images, invoke the aesthetics of Judson Church postmodern dance with its interest in everyday, quotidian, embodied surface

²⁴ Alisa Lebow, *First Person Jewish* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 124; Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, 12; Olson, interview, 2019.

experiences,²⁵ emptied of the capacity for symbolism and metaphor.²⁶ The world is of the life of a post-industrial, unglamorous, decaying city and of the body that wants what it wants, despite comfort and ease. This feminist position is one of realism, acceptance of the hard surfaces of reality. There is no confrontation with the world, just a frame for one to consider one's own expectations and to sit with them without the distractions of artificial constructs of conflict.

In a series of static long-takes of everyday New York City street scenes, we hear the filmmaker's own affectless voice reading letters written to her by her mother back in Belgium. The film feels sad and emotionally distant; grey, plaintive and intriguing. A depersonalized portrait of the artist as a young foreigner to Manhattan of the 1970s, the film shows us a series of unglamorous images of working class New York, downtown, midtown, uptown, and then finally, from the deck of the Staten Island ferry as it pulls away from the tip of the island. The landscapes are often desolate and nearly devoid of people—an empty street in Tribeca, a subway platform, a midtown street corner at twilight, two boys playing stickball in the middle of a street lined with parked cars. When there are people in the shots, they are not characters or specific individuals. We do not follow any particular person's pathway. Figures appear in one shot never to be seen again. As the film's cinematographer

²⁵ Patricia White, "Camera Obscura and Chantal Akerman," *Camera Obscura* 100, 34, no. 1 (2019), 1-9. Akerman was introduced to members and art of the downtown New York experimental performance scene that included dancers and filmmakers Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown as well as by her cinematographer Babette Mangolte and other New York downtown artists.

²⁶ Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, 15.

Babette Mangolte explains: “If some people appear, they are not the reason for the shots.”²⁷ Mangolte, Akerman’s long-time collaborator, described the film director’s technique as shooting spatial contexts rather than specific activities.²⁸ Discussing the durational aspect of the static compositions, she explains: “The image becomes mute in order to shift the viewer’s attention to what we hear.”²⁹

In *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Hamid Naficy describes *News from Home* as both an epistolary film and an accented film.³⁰ Naficy’s term “accented cinema” is helpful for highlighting the central role that translation and reading play in the film’s reception. If you watch the film in its English version, Akerman’s voice reads the letters in a heavily accented English: providing visceral evidence of Akerman’s identity as a foreigner to New York. If you watch Akerman’s film in the French version, Anglophone viewers must read English subtitles of the text of the letters, highlighting the experience of translation for the viewer. In either version, there is another layer of translation occurring for the audience—Akerman’s flat performance of her mother’s letters necessitates an affective translation or a psychological interpretation of what we are hearing. The audience intuitively senses the yearning and the guilt in the filmmaker-daughter’s attempts to distance herself

²⁷ Babette Mangolte, “The Loudness of the World: Listening to What is Out There: Sound Strategies in Akerman’s Fiction and Documentary Films,” *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 77 (December 2015), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2015/chantal-akerman/sound-strategies/>.

²⁸ Mangolte, “Loudness.”

²⁹ Mangolte, “Loudness.”

³⁰ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

from her mother's plaintive words expressing a "don't worry about me," nonchalance while she details all the ways in which her own health is not so good. In the visual field, the city appears to be as callous and unresponsive as Akerman sounds to be in reading her mother's words aloud. In this sense, the images seem to rhyme with the indifference in Akerman's voice-over, allowing us to perceive the multiple forms of distance— between mother's warmth and daughter's coldness, as well as the literal distance between Belgium and New York. We viewers identify with the voice, with an assumption about Akerman's feelings, while we witness the visual scene at an arm's length. There are ambient sounds of the city, although they were not recorded sync, and these sounds are sometimes drowned out by the ambient city sounds.³¹ Mangolte explains this effect as one of Ackerman's key strategies to shift the viewer's attention from image to sound by "increasing the opaqueness of the sound imposed against an image..."³²

News from Home expresses the inner tension between the pull of familial expectation commingled with the desire to break free from those constraints. The details of "news" from home about her parents' health and the events of various friends and family members seem to elicit the filmmaker's emotional dissociation from the heteronormativity of her family. As the film goes on, we come to imagine feelings of guilt commingled with longing and loneliness, despite the fact that the

³¹ Mangolte, "Loudness."

³² Mangolte, "Loudness."

film never overtly articulates these—or any—personal feelings. If anything, the film’s unemotional sensibility underscores the queer feelings of not belonging, dysphoria, nostalgia and displacement that the insistent present-tense-ness of the images might otherwise seem to belie. Margulies describes one of the film’s central paradoxes as twisting the expectations around meaning of the pronouns “I” and “you” that “ordinarily signal one subject in relation to another.”³³

The voice issues from and is directed at the same place; it echoes from a paradoxical space, both source and end, short-circuiting communication. The pronominal shifters “I” and “you” ordinarily signal one subject in relation to another, but here these carriers of subjectivity are shown as precariously rooted. *News from Home* questions the notion of presence, of an evident, unified source for an utterance, at the very moment at which difference and distance seem abolished: the moment of voicing. Addresser and addressee are collapsed, disavowing an essential identity for either. In phasing in and out from the locus of writing (a Europe of named individuals and family relations) to that of listening and performing (a New York of now crowded, now solitary anonymity), Akerman complicates the voice-over’s disjunctiveness.”³⁴

Margulies argues that the alienation between image and sound parallels the disjunction between the mother’s space of letter writing and Akerman’s space of performance—between the foreign reality and New York.³⁵

To watch the film today, more than forty years after its making, one’s encounter with *News From Home* produces a whole other layer of nostalgic dysphoria, seeing the images of New York City rendered in such a starkly different pre-gentrified state. This experience culminates in the final 10 minute extended shot

³³ Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, 151.

³⁴ Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, 151.

³⁵ Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, 152.

of lower Manhattan receding as viewed from the deck of a Staten Island ferry. The intact Twin Towers wink at our post-9/11 fetishes for the outdated symbol of New York City as modernist ruin: metaphors rush in despite Margulies' argument that "Akerman's hyperrealism is not water on the myths of representational origins, nor are the references it mobilizes neutralized in a game of endless relativity."³⁶ In contrast to Margulies' view of Akerman's work as "anti-illusionistic," I see her film as leading the way toward a film of nostalgic illusionism. As recently described by *NY Times* reviewer David Kehr: "Lingering shots of pre-gentrified downtown neighborhoods, graffiti-slathered subway cars and the little village of shops and stands that once filled the Times Square station now carry a sense of impermanence and inaccessibility, of a world receding into the past, just as notions of 'home' have receded for the unseen protagonist."³⁷

You Are Not From Here: Gentrification as Dysphoria

Diane Bonder (1960-2006) grew up in Northampton, MA, studied photography in Boston and received her MFA from Rutgers in 1993. She lived in Brooklyn from 1996 until her premature death ten years later. She was active in the New York City experimental film scene.³⁸ Her poetic, semi-narrative and autobiographical films often explored the themes of identity, landscape, memory and

³⁶ Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, 11.

³⁷ Dave Kehr, "The Evolving Vision of a Belgian Auteur," *New York Times*, Jan. 29, 2010. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/31/movies/homevideo/31kehr.html>

³⁸ website: <http://dianebonder.com/index.php?/about/bio/>, accessed 6/8/2019.

loss.³⁹ Bonder made a number of short landscape essay films including *If you lived here, you'd be home by now* (2001, 15 min.), *Closer to Heaven*. (2003, 15 min) and *You Are Not From Here* (2005, 10 min.).⁴⁰

You Are Not From Here is “a record of a rapidly disappearing vernacular landscape.”⁴¹ I think of this film as a poetic parable of gentrification. The voice-over delivers a soliloquy written in the second person, hailing the listener to understand themselves as a colluder and a participant in the structure and dynamics of gentrification. The film proceeds as a series of unfolding revelations about “this place,” the unnamed and unplaceable landscape that we view while we hear our thoughts being voiced for us. By the end of the film, the work resolves itself into the recognition of a pattern in which “you” have unwittingly participated. Beginning with curiosity, amused desire and then fantasy projections, the film marches us through the phases of capitalist accumulation of the city, a desire to own a piece of this place. Acquiring property is accompanied by uncertainty and insecurity, that leads to wishes for a sense of belonging, which comes finally when you’ve given up wanting it, and only at the moment when the place itself is ready to betray you.

³⁹ “Screenings,” Diane Bonder website, accessed 6/8/2019, <http://dianebonder.com/index.php?/screenings/film-1/>. Her films screened in experimental film venues such as the Anthology Film Archives, Whitney Museum of Art, Brooklyn Museum of Art, SF Cinematheque and the Pacific Film Archive as well as at LGBTQ festivals includes Outfest in LA, Image and Nation in Montreal, the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Film and Video Festival, the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film and Video Festival, the New York Gay and Lesbian Film and Video Festival, and MIX-NYC. Retrospective screenings of her work include the San Francisco Cinematheque at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, the Museum of Modern Art, Hallwalls and the Pacific Film Archives.

⁴⁰ *You Are Not From Here* was Bonder’s second to last film, made while she was battling cancer.

⁴¹ “You Are Not From Here,” Diane Bonder website, accessed 6/8/2019, <http://dianebonder.com/index.php?/you-are-not-from-here/>.

The voice-over, delivered in a distinctly androgynous voice, perhaps recognizable to some in the audience as the voice of the New York City based queer performer Philip Horvitz, suggests entitlement. The “you” of the voice-over text appropriates the audience’s subjectivity, directly interpellates the audience to identify oneself as the central subjectivity in this tale of generic gentrification. We the audience are placed into the role of gentrifier, only to be ultimately returned to a state of disenfranchisement akin to our initial position of outsider.⁴² *You Are Not From Here* is a parable about the role of the gentrifier, casting gentrifier as a stock character in an oft-repeated play.⁴³ The opening voice-over declares:

*“It begins like this. You step off the bus, or perhaps the train.
Maybe you have driven. Parking is easy here on main street.
You take a look around and find yourself in a familiar place.
Not that you have ever been here before,
But, this city, town, municipality, hamlet, call it what you like,
reminds you of somewhere.
Something longed for, but lost long ago.
Everything has the decayed charm of a Walker Evans photograph
and just enough of the oddly juxtaposed element
to interest the likes of William Eggleston.
Timeless and classic, this place,
your feet stand firmly rooted in history.*

⁴² Jesse Hamlin, “Philip Horvitz -- former S.F. performance artist,” Obituary, *San Francisco Chronicle*, Monday, April 11, 2005, <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Philip-Horvitz-former-S-F-performance-artist-2641323.php>; Andrew Russeth, “Serious Play: Nayland Blake’s Gifts from the Department of Transformation,” *ARTNEWS*, April 9, 2019, <http://www.artnews.com/2019/04/09/nayland-blake/>. Philip Horvitz was a well-known solo performance artist and an active member of the gay performance and art world of both San Francisco of the 1980s and ‘90s and New York City, where he had moved in 1996. He tragically and suddenly passed away before the film premiered, in April 2005. Horvitz had moved to New York City in 1996 with his lover at the time, the well-known artist Nayland Blake and was active in the NYC arts scene during the decade before his sudden and untimely death.

⁴³ Gamso, Nicholas and S Topiary Landberg. “Allegories of the Encounter: Portrait of Jason and Jason and Shirley,” presentation, *Aesthetics of Gentrification Conference*, University of OR, Portland, April, 2019.

And yet, there is a distinct whiff of possibility in the air.”

The imagery is intentionally un-locatable. There is nothing to identify the specific location of this small city, that appears to be a working class enclave that has seen better days. The shop windows display items that are old fashioned and dated. The images continually display a nostalgic fetish for old signs and the quaintness of old fashioned, out of date and decrepit, small town scenery of somewhere that could be almost any left behind small city. The second person voice-over asks us to imagine ourselves settling down here, “plenty of opportunity here for the entrepreneurial soul...” And once we are firmly in the terrain of imagining ourselves settling here, the voice informs us:

*But you are not from here.
And just below the surface of this poetic vernacular,
you notice the glance of a neighbor as your out-of-town guests arrive.
They observe your comings and goings with a scant eye that resonants with
hooded distrust.
The make of your car, the cut of your suit,
the courier that delivers locally inaccessible goods,
all duly noted.
Your invitation to the local barbecue is not forthcoming.
And their chumminess does not extend itself
to holding a seat for you at Little League games.
No matter. You are independent of mind and spirit
and prefer it that way.
Inwardly, however, you chaff at this social penury.*

A number of the terms employed in the voice-over, such as “social penury” are notably dated, perhaps eluding to an upper class sort of education or out of time sense of community, and certainly seems out of place with the world of the environment:

images of fences and pacing dobermans and “beware of dog” signs. The dysphoria between the vocabulary, the diction of the voice and the working class, immigrant environment reminded me of the notion of an “accented cinema” in which the speaking voice indicates their foreignness in relationship to the diegesis. In *You Are Not From Here*, although the voice is Euro-American and without any indication of any kind of regional specificity, the oddly old fashioned vocabulary and careful diction suggest an accent of gentrification—an indication of an old fashioned education, a long-gone sense of small-town charm in sharp contrast to the back alleyways and trash-strewn ‘other side of the tracks’ landscapes being imaged. As the narration continues, the second person interpellation becomes increasingly uncomfortable:

*Sidewalks shrink, shades are drawn, boundaries established.
You consider leaving.
There are, after all, places more suited to your ambitions,
But the real estate market has gone soft,
and the loss on your investment might prove improvident.*

Once hailed as a gentrifier, one sees oneself as an intrepid explorer cum savvy investor of an urban landscape whose degraded exchange value shows the hints of future profit with all the telltale signs of the neighborhood potential for “improvement.” As an appropriator of this small corner of a place, we learn quite out of the blue that “one day, you find yourself in a familiar place.” The voice-over narrates this transformation of self-recognition as “one day” when you are no longer a stranger. Being a familiar means that visual details are no longer visible to you.

Familiarity means that things have no name, that they have become banal, disdainful and no longer wished for.

*Then, one day, you find yourself in a familiar place.
One you have passed hundreds, possibly thousands of times before.
It is no longer visible to you.
If a stranger might stop you and ask for directions
you would stumble and hesitate, surprised by your
inability to conjure the names of the surrounding streets,
the material of the buildings, the order of the shops lining the blocks.
...But you know this is all temporary.
The security of the familiar has been displaced by a disdain for the banal.
And then you notice the arrival of a new cafe,
its ultra modern styling gives you pause.
Soon, the empty lots will be abuzz with a hum of new construction.*

The last stanza of the film completes the circle of landscape desire viewed through the lens of the gentrification narrative:

*Finally you understand, although now it is too late,
this place will betray you and move on in a race toward the future
and other memories that do not belong to you.
It does not recognize you, it reflects nothing back in your image
It knows nothing of your dreams, your desires
and no matter how much you sanctify it, imagine it, or will it,
this place remains implacably itself, nothing more.
You step off the curb, and shove off to whatever's next,
not whatever was.*

For all of the performative force of the voice-over, there is the possibility of a productive failure built into the film, one that allows for the viewer-audience to fail to identify with the narrative. Despite its second person address and the presumption of

identification, a paranoid viewing⁴⁴ in which the audience member feels feel defensive and, to borrow Muñoz's concept, might *disidentify* with the spoken text.⁴⁵ In asking its audience to recognize the clichés of gentrification as a pattern or a socio-economic structure, the film frames ways to perceive how aesthetics collude with the innately exploitative nature of capitalism. The "you" of the film is exploited multiple times over. The "you" is appropriated as the subject of the film, an ethnographic appropriation of self as accomplice to a structure one doesn't fully understand until one has been used up and spent. The fetish for the undervalued urban landscape is expressed in the cinematography, with its appropriation of the 'undervalued' urban landscape as cinematographic visual subject.

The landscapes are also expressions of gender-queerness. The film emphasizes gendered signifiers, such as male mannequins in a store window wearing a baseball uniform and a business suit. In another window, the film nonchalantly serves up a sly pornographic moment, the open mouth desire of a blow-up doll. But, "masculine" domains of public exteriors are emphasized as motel signs, exteriors of buildings, the mylar flags hanging above a car dealership, the street view looking inside an empty diner.⁴⁶ The landscape of otherness is inhabited by animals: barking dogs behind fences and stray cats ruling driveways and alleys. These are the only

⁴⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-151.

⁴⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

⁴⁶ Margulies, *Nothing Happens*.

living creatures who indicate our unwelcomeness, despite what the language of the voice-over might want to believe. This landscape that we only temporarily “own” reflects nothing back in our image. The aesthetics of gentrification, the projection of fantasy futures onto kitsch images double as a nostalgic for an everyday that looks like somewhere familiar but has not yet been named.

In her essay, Rangan poses the question of whether a speaking voice can counter the objectification of a powerful gaze, and whether a voice can be a force for objectification.”⁴⁷ In Bonder’s film, the voice enacts a force of objectifying appropriation. The voice bares witness and calls attention to its appropriative gesture. It claims the “you” of its literal object, objectifying the listener, while at the same time, enacting a gentrifying entitlement to appropriate the place it wants and claims as property. The film speaks to its audience about its dysphoric relationship to property as a mode of class mobility. At the same time, the images, the urban landscape rendered with an aesthetics attuned to valuing the old, to documenting and aestheticizing the landscapes of yesterday’s quaint affordability, operate as both an appropriation and a critique, an ironic sense of the *queer* position of simultaneous identification and disidentification, participation and exclusion.

⁴⁷ Pooja Rangan, “In Defense of Voicelessness: The Matter of the Voice and the Films of Leslie Thornton,” *Feminist Media Histories* 1, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 96.

Queer California: irony as dysphoria



Figure 4.2: Map of California as an island. Johannes Vingboons, c. 1650. (source: Wikimedia Commons)

The San Francisco Bay Area has long been considered a haven for LGBTQ people. In *Gay By The Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area*, Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk suggest some of the origins of San Francisco’s status as the “Gay Capital of the World.”⁴⁸ They point out that the very name “California” itself has queer origins. Locating the first documented use of the name California to 16th century Spanish explorers who mistakenly mapped the region north of present-day Mexico as an island, they recount how the name was inspired by a popular Spanish novel written around 1500 about a fictional island west of America

⁴⁸ Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk, *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 1996), 4.

that was inhabited by a band of fierce Amazon women ruled by Calafia, Queen of California.⁴⁹ Stryker and Van Buskirk describe Montalvo's novel as "an anxious masculine fantasy about subduing a society of well-armed women" as "the scenario that fueled the Spanish desire to penetrate the 'northern mystery' on the margins of their Mexican holdings."⁵⁰ The authors also describe the section of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, "A Promise to California," written in 1860, as advocating a "specifically homoerotic male love as the emotional tie that could best bind the fractious states."⁵¹ They argue that for Whitman, the newly incorporated state of California represented "the culmination of the westward-tending process of nation-building, the place where a peculiarly American civilization would one day be realized."⁵²

This notion of California as the landscape in which conquest and sexual liberation are commingled, in which queer desire and mythology collude, has been an engine of inspiration for a unique culture to develop and thrive. As one of the most influential schools of American experimental landscape essay film, CalArts has been responsible for shaping a generation or more of experimental filmmakers. William E. Jones was a student there in the late 1980s and one of the first (if not the first) to apply an out gay political perspective to the techniques and aesthetics of this form.

⁴⁹ Stryker, *Gay by the Bay*, 9.

⁵⁰ Stryker, *Gay by the Bay*, 10.

⁵¹ Stryker, *Gay by the Bay*, 10.

⁵² Stryker, *Gay by the Bay*, 10.

The Fatherlands of William E. Jones



Figure 4.2: Still from *Massillon* (dir. William E. Jones, USA, 1991)

Massillon (dir. William E. Jones, USA, 1991, 70 min) was William E. Jones's first feature film, shot and edited while getting his MFA at CalArts. As a student of James Benning, Thom Andersen and Pat O'Neill, Jones transposes the landscape essay film traditions of his school to a queer context. He delves into the homophobic landscapes of his past in order to contextualize the inflammatory homophobic present tense of the Reagan-Bush era. The title of the film refers to the name of the small Ohio rust-belt city fifty miles south of Cleveland, where Jones grew up. An autobiographical film narrated by the filmmaker, the audio track of *Massillon* strongly contrasts with Akerman's indirect approach. In *Massillon*, the narrator speaks directly to the audience in the first person about his personal experiences of growing up as a kid who first suspects and then begins to accept his homosexuality while growing up the context of his conservative Christian homophobic environment. The

film is told from the perspective of an adult gay man during the height of the AIDS crisis. It is a queer film meant to speak to other queers about the experience of growing up queer and of coming to inhabit a queer perspective on the ongoing homophobic culture of the mainstream at the time. As radically, militantly queer as the film is, it is not a screed. Far from it—*Massillon* is a thoughtful, meditative disquisition on the nature of sexuality and the perception of “naturalness” and social constructions rendered in the context of landscapes. Ed Halter describes the early climactic moment of the film as “a furtive truck-stop fuck, for which the blunt odor of shit emerging from the hole-in-the-ground toilets bears a comparable weight to Proust’s madeleine—wafting through Jones’s memory not so much for any perverse pleasure but rather as a marker of our socially determined degradation.”⁵³

Massillon is organized in three parts. The first section, “Ohio,” is comprised of personal recollections of growing up in a homophobic, Christian, mid-Western declining industrial town. The narration is disjunctive, with vignettes of discrete moments of Jones’ experiences through time, beginning when he is a boy and first begins to suspect that he might be gay. Subsequently, the voice-over relates a series of social and then increasingly sexual experiences that unfold as a kind of progressive realization toward Jones’ own gay desires and then identity. Achingly personal, the narration of this adult male voice, leads us through his own coming to gay consciousness in the context of the homophobic messages he gets from his

⁵³ Halter, Ed. “Porn Yesterday,” *Artforum*, February 22, 2010, <https://www.artforum.com/film/ed-halter-on-william-e-jones-24911>.

environment. While he narrates mixed messages, rumors and innuendos he gets from other kids he grows up with, the images are static shots of the public landscapes around the town: billboards, roads, façades of buildings and images of the relics of the town's industrial past. Jones' narration is delivered in a matter of fact tone, as if to say: I survived this environment and I am who I am despite, as well as, because of, where I grew up. The "Ohio" section of the film climaxes in the description of Jones' first penetrative sexual encounter, which took place when he was in high school, at a truck-stop that he had heard rumors about as a place where men have illicit sex. Although Jones recounts his first experience of anonymous sex as a painful and degrading encounter, the episode is narrated in a confident, straightforward and unemotional fashion. The dysphoria of Jones' subjectivity is a queer dysphoria in a conservative Christian landscape. Firstly, this is a kind of queer childhood in suburban or rural dysphoria, a kid growing up in a place he is psychologically uncomfortable in.

After Jones has completed the story about that episode, the voice-over turns his attention to recent current events. Although he now lives in Los Angeles, while visiting Ohio, he learns about the Supreme Court's decision upholding sodomy laws. The voice-over informs us that despite the news being front page in New York, "local papers must have thought no one was interested since most gay people lived in New York or San Francisco. The only thing I heard about it was broadcast on the local religious station." At this point, the film becomes driving footage, the green

landscapes of Ohio farmland whooshing past. Along with the sound of driving, the car radio is turned on. The voice-over position transforms into a Christian talk radio show host. The radio show is about President Regan and how he is molding the federal judiciary. The voice is telling us that by time Regan leaves office, in 1989, he will have appointed half of the nation's judges. This polemical voice pervades the Ohio landscape rushing past the car's window. What might have been pastorage and neutralizing, this blur of "nature" has acquired a politically charged valence, a car seeming to speed away from the radio voice it cannot escape. The Christian radio voice invokes Satan and proclaims "sodomy has *always* been viewed as a sexual crime by Judeo-Christian tradition...". The radio show culminates in a rant about how Satan is so seducing, because of the fact that a word that means happy could be associated with such a perverted and sick lifestyle. The voice tells us that he read in a magazine that homosexuals have the highest rate of alcoholism and drug use and V.D. in nation."

Jones' appropriation of this actuality of Christian talk radio is a *queer* strategy, an ironizing activism, a flipping of meaning when heard in a queer context.⁵⁴ Jones' appropriation is intended to affect outrage when heard by queer ears; by a gay film festival audience. The ironic presentation functions in two ways, as an illustration of the context that Jones' subjectivity exists in reaction to, and also as an affective activation for the audience. We queers are interpellated by Jones' archival curation of

⁵⁴ Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found footage and the audiovisual experience of history* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

this Christian radio voice. He is setting us up for an intellectual arousal, a challenge to really listen to what is being said and to lay the groundwork for the ability to continue to listen. He is activating our sense of political awareness and creating a thirst for learning. This is emotionally engaged didacticism: queer activist didacticism.⁵⁵

The second section of the film is called “The Law.” This chapter continues with driving footage, though Jones’ voice has returned and how he gives us a rundown of the history of sodomy laws culminating in a description of the laws in various US states criminalizing forms of sex among consenting adults. Although this section is mainly a series of historical facts, we receive them in the context of Jones’ individual subjectivity. The stark objectivity of the facts contrasts with the personal nature of its potential effect on the speaker who we know to be a practicing sodomite. In other words, despite the lack of personal information, the lack of seeming subjectivity in the factual didacticism of the text, we feel the impact of these homophobic laws personally. This is the postmodern ironization of the voice-over form: one type of enunciation (factual, objective, general, collective) can hail another (the personal, highly subjective experience as context).⁵⁶ The driving footage is a physicalization and a metaphor for the ways that the law knits people and places together. The infrastructure of roads is what enables the driving and which also enables the Christian radio voice to infect our thinking and our perception. Our ironic

⁵⁵ I see an echo of Russian Constructivist and Third Cinema revolutionary aesthetics in the work.

⁵⁶ Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, 10-11. “...the kind of questioning of language that is apparent in both cinematic modernism (where it has a moral tone) and postmodernism (where it has a cynical one).”

position to that voice, our *disidentification* with that voice-over is what locates our listening as queer, enacts an identity politics of listening.⁵⁷ In this section, where we learn about the many different sodomy laws on the books, we visit many different state capitals. As we drive past the Supreme Court in D.C., we learn that the name homosexual didn't exist until the 19th century, part of a categorization movement in which laws were developed to punish "crimes against nature": a process which also allowed law to be thought of as natural.

The final section of the film is called "California." This section is a series of long shots of a brand new housing development in mid-construction, somewhere in a desert landscape in Southern California. Jones' voice-over recounts a time when he stumbled into an urban planning conference in which the planners discussed how to create "heritage" as an intangible asset that influences the way homeowners feel about where they live. As we look at various compositions of the construction and marketing of the housing development, the voice-over recounts the history of the concept of homosexuality and the origin of various terms like buggery. The images of this new housing development in the desert, underscore the very constructedness of concepts such as "home" and heritage and culture and nature. In thinking about what is "natural" and what is highly artificial and out of place, like a waterfall feature in a desert environment. This feeling might be thought of as a kind of environmental dysphoria, not only feeling that one doesn't belong culturally to a place, but one's

⁵⁷ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.

consciousness is also aware of the harm being inflicted upon the landscape. In the final moments of the film, Jones' voice-over tells us:

There was a time when I hoped to return to the moment before I knew that desires had names. I couldn't have been more misguided. Now I am more concerned with what those names mean, each word used to describe sexuality seems to hold a key to a part of our history. I must confess though, my motives are rather selfish. I've tried to make sense of the things I've learned as a child.

Circling back to tell you how the film first begins, because *Massillon* ends with an echo of how it began. The film starts in black, with Jones' speaking in a confident declarative manner:

As I child I went on several vacations with my family. I suppose I had a feeling of childish awe when confronted with Niagara Falls or the Washington Monument, but I don't really remember. My father shot home movies which made such a strong impression on me that my memory of these places are actually memories of the home movies.

The first image we see is super 8 home movies of Niagara Falls. The film is shown silent and the footage is constantly roving, never settling on a composition. Then we are in Washington, D.C. scanning the scenery, the Washington Monument of the late '60s or early '70s. This initial act of appropriation, using his father's super 8 film footage as his own visuals, creates an experience of double consciousness for the viewer, an experience that Jaimie Baron has named the archive effect: "a sense that certain sounds and/or images within these films come from another time and served another function"⁵⁸ This act of appropriating his father's footage demonstrates Jones'

⁵⁸ Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 11.

ability to both take ownership over the types of lessons he grew up being taught, but also his ability to queer those images, and allow us to see beyond their frames.

Butch San Francisco: Nostalgia and the Temporalities of Survival and Gentrification



Figure 4.4: Still from *The Joy of Life* (dir. Jenni Olson, USA, 2005)

Jenni Olson's two feature-length essay films, *The Joy of Life* (2005) and *The Royal Road* (2015) poetically wrap the contradictions and co-instantiations of place, fantasy, film and persona. Olson's representations of queer California are meditations on the dysphoric contradictions of this state: a place where attachments to false histories and lies, once fodder for tourism and self-mythologizing, are unmade in a lyric and self-deprecating manner. Both films are essay works centering on the voice of a self-identified butch dyke as anti-hero and queer historian, mining the landscape, classical Hollywood and under-told histories in order to advocate for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between place and identity. Both films grapple with the allure of unrequited desire, offering attempts to reconcile the

relationship between belonging. In an interview with fellow queer artist Tina

Takemoto, Olson explains:

Over the years, my work has been about grappling with my butch self, my gender identity, and my discomfort in the world. It has to do with a kind of longing that resides in a perpetual state of desire, and trying to find ways to savor that experience on an erotic, emotional, intellectual, and even philosophical or spiritual level. Transforming these emotional resonances into a poetic language has helped me work through some of these experiences. Nowadays, even though I still feel very uncomfortable in the world, I have developed a strong connection to the landscape component of my work that is about being in the moment and being spiritually present in the physical world.⁵⁹

Both films are comprised exclusively of static shots of film landscapes, mainly of San Francisco, with Los Angeles figuring prominently in the sections of *The Royal Road*. Both films are shot in 16mm Kodachrome and provide a sense of a timelessness of the city, nearly always emptied of people or of any contemporary signs of tech industry or new environmental elements. Olson explains her approach to the landscape as “an impulse to simply document things before they got torn down... to capture the simplicity of this landscape before it’s gone.”⁶⁰ She intentionally cropped out certain kinds of traffic signs or billboards or signs with prices on it, elements that would fix a place in a particular time.⁶¹ She explains that she is haunted by development and the changing landscape—thinking about the way that longing and unrequited desire can also be applied to the buildings and scenes that she loves

⁵⁹ Tina Takemoto, “Towards a Butch Poetics: A Conversation with Jenni Olson,” *Millennium Film Journal*, No. 63 (2016): 76.

⁶⁰ Olson, interview, 2019.

⁶¹ Olson, interview, 2019.

and that will never love her back.⁶²

Both *The Joy of Life* and *The Royal Road* employ a roughly similar structure to *Massillon*. The films are divided into chapters and comprised almost exclusively of static city landscape exteriors narrated by singular voice-over, vacillating between highly personal anecdotes, vignettes from resonant Hollywood films and significant and underrepresented details of California history, all delivered in a cool, matter-of-fact tone, in order to connect fact and fiction. *The Joy of Life* (2005) was directly modeled after *Massillon* and consciously takes up a similar three part structure. Although that film has a strongly autobiographical feeling, the narration for this film is not performed by Olson herself, but by Harry Dodge, a well-known queer performer and visual artist and the former co-owner of the legendary San Francisco dyke cafe, Red Dora's Bearded Lady Cafe. In *The Royal Road*, made ten years after *Joy of Life*, Olson performs the voice-over herself.⁶³ Both begin with autobiographical sounding voice-over monologues detailing the sexual exploits of a butch dyke in San Francisco who fashions herself as something of a Casanova, albeit a largely unsatisfied one. Presenting a persona that is both committed to an ideal of butchness as impenetrable seducer who is always ready for another conquest, while at the same time being painfully honest and open about her needs and shortcomings, Olson is working at what producer (and Olson's wife) Julie Dorf has

⁶² Olson, interview, 2019.

⁶³ Olson, interview, 2019. Olson reveals that this choice was at first done reluctantly and only because Harry Dodge had transitioned to be male and his voice had changed too significantly.

called “the vanguard of butch vulnerability.”⁶⁴ Tina Takemoto suggests that Olson’s work can be considered a form of “butch poetics.”⁶⁵ Queer representation is of central importance for Olson, who co-founded the Lavender Images festival in Minneapolis in 1986 and worked as co-director of Frameline (San Francisco International LGBT Film Festival) from 1992-94. She has also worked in queer film distribution and preservation and as a film critic for many years:

As a queer film historian, it’s been my experience that obviously in general LGBT people have fewer representations than the mainstream, whatever, straight people. Each sub-identity in our community suffers from not enough visibility or not enough representations of our stories. Being butch, I’ve been very aware that there are few films that speak to me or to my experience as a butch dyke and so that was something that was really important to me, to try to tell a story and speak to an audience, particularly a butch audience. I feel we’re all hungry for representations of ourselves and our experience in a more nuanced way... Using the diary format was very effective in conveying an intimate experience... a very specific personal intimate story that is so much about one person’s experience that it facilitates a million other people connecting to it in an experiential way, saying, “Oh, that’s like me or that’s exactly what my experience is like.”⁶⁶

As the long-time proprietor of *butch.org*, Olson is literally and figuratively a steward of butch identity, a gender at the crossroads of female masculinity⁶⁷ and transgender masculinity. In an interview with me on May 26, 2019, Olson described her younger butch identity as being “somewhat emotionally wrought,” informed by a gender dysphoria in which she neither wants to be a woman, but also does not want to

⁶⁴ Takemoto, “Towards a Butch Poetics,” 76.

⁶⁵ Takemoto, “Towards a Butch Poetics.”

⁶⁶ Guillen, Michael. “The Joy of Life—Interview with Jenni Olson,” *Screenanarchy*, August 2, 2006, <https://screenanarchy.com/2006/08/the-joy-of-life-interview-with-jenni-olson.html>, accessed 2/18/2019.

⁶⁷ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

be a man.⁶⁸ In our interview, I ask her about her choice to retain a female gender identification, a fact that sets her apart from many of her high-profile formerly butch dyke identifying contemporaries who have more recently become trans identified and use he/him or they/them pronouns.⁶⁹ Olson tells me that for her, identifying as butch is a way accepting the way one's body is while also honoring its complicated troubled-ness. She is a resister, old style. Although she tells me that she did try taking testosterone for a brief period, she soon decided that it was not for her:

All my life I've felt different and like I still feel like I don't really understand myself and my gender... And I feel like I'm just kind of stuck here where I am. I'm not, I don't really want to be a woman but I don't want to be a man either. And I'm just kind of stuck here. And this is just my path. I'm not anywhere.⁷⁰

Olson's gender dysphoria is presented as a parallel to other types of dysphoria, both expressed in terms of content and formally, in relationship to the physical and the cultural landscape of California. As a classic Hollywood film buff, Olson identifies her personal fetish for the romantic pursuit, and the role that unrequited love plays in her psychic imagination. Towards the beginning of her second feature film, *The Royal Road*, her character's voice-over says:

Growing up in the midwest as a gender dysphoric tomboy, watching movies

⁶⁸ Olson, interview, 2019.

⁶⁹ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, xiii. Halberstam thanks "my pal Jenni Olson for being a great butch buddy over the past decade and for helping me learn to be more open-minded and generous in my judgments and speculations not only on gender but also on life in general." Film director Silas Howard, who performed the voice-over in Olson's first film *Blue Diary* (1997), artist Harry Dodge, who performed the voice-over in *The Joy of Life* and Halberstam all used to identify as butch dykes and have since transitioned and now identify as transgender.

⁷⁰ Olson, interview, 2019.

was a cherished relief from the awkward realities of daily life. Emulating the actors in my favorite classic Hollywood films I happily acquired a new borrowed masculine persona. Experiencing myself as a fictional character has been a mode of survival for me ever since.

As a film that is ostensibly about a road, El Camino Real, the “royal road,”—built in the 18th century by Spanish Missionaries to connect the twenty-one missions stretching from San Diego to Sonoma in order to cement the Spanish Empire’s hold over the northern reaches of the colony of New Spain—Olson’s film places the mythology of Hollywood’s “boulevard of broken dreams” alongside both colonial and queer quests for unrequited love. As an invisible thread that connects the past with the present, Olson’s films provide a poetic defense of nostalgia: of the uncomfortable relationship between looking backwards and being awake to embodiment in the present moment.

Olson’s curiosity about the dynamics of dysphoria might be the underlying motivation for her exploration of histories of callousness and injustice embedded in the landscape. There is a sense of her commingled love for and simultaneous discomfort with the landscape that seems to hide in plain sight the reality of lesser known truths. In the case of *Joy of Life*, the Golden Gate Bridge is both lovingly rendered and also narrated as a “suicide landmark” where over seven thousand people have ended their lives. In the voice-over, we learn that, despite many years of people asking the bridge authority to raise the height of the guard rails and prevent more deaths, the bridge authority callously resists taking action in order to not ruin the

view. In the case of *The Royal Road*, Olson's voice-over comments on "the persistent mythologizing" of the Spanish Mission period. Her indictment of the beatification of Father Junípero Serra is revealed over the course of the film, while the images continually return to long durational shots of various statues of the man responsible for establishing this mission system and systematically converting and enslaving Native inhabitants. As the voice-over tells us:

These disingenuous parables may have soothed the collective conscience of California's anglo inhabitants. They also provided a convincing fairy tale backdrop for what remains a prominent ethos of the states' cultural fabric. The idea that it is a land of pioneers and visionaries, of angels and saints.

Over the course of both films, the personal vignettes of unrequited love are juxtaposed with these difficult historic reckonings. In the case of *Joy of Life*, the Golden Gate Bridge as a symbol of San Francisco's remarkable beauty becomes transformed as a symbol of suicide and of the callousness of the authorities to care about this deadly shadow side of the bridge. Although it is never made explicit, to me *The Joy of Life* reads as a poignant metaphor for the AIDS crisis and the callous indifference to the suffering of so many queers in the midst of the plague. In the *The Royal Road*, the horror of the Spanish colonial history of Native American genocide is coupled with the Anglo-American theft of Mexican territory perpetrated through a largely forgotten, illegitimate and unjust land grab known as the Mexican-American war of 1846-48, a history that rarely accompanies the widespread knowledge about the Gold Rush, one year later. Olson places her personal revelations about the allure

of butch conquest in juxtaposition to the underlying ugliness of California's history, suggesting that the hold romance has over us colors our understanding of place and memory. The film wraps the persistent allure of Hollywood fantasies in her own personal narratives about impossible romance.

Although Olson describes *The Royal Road* as: "Butch dyke pining over unavailable women and the Spanish colonization of California,"⁷¹ the film finds its emotional core around the idea of nostalgia. Explaining that she felt guilty when she heard the playwright Tony Kushner rail against how nostalgia is a "bad" bourgeois desire to live in the past, realizing how much of a nostalgic person she is and wondering if "I was politically irresponsible or regressive or not engaged in the progressive struggles that I want to think are important to me."⁷² In response to those feelings, she suggests that her work is an attempt to develop a radical re-definition of nostalgia, one that "could be the very thing that saves us." Contextualizing her use of long durational static shots of landscape, Olson views this approach as building, not only a nostalgic appreciation of old buildings and old spaces, but one that creates an awareness of the present.⁷³ As Jennifer Peterson has pointed out, this project is not without irony, since San Francisco, as an epicenter of future-obsessed tech innovation, is rapidly disappearing much of what made that city culturally distinctive,

⁷¹ Jennifer Peterson, "The Long Take Breathes, It Makes Room: An Interview with Jenni Olson," *Incite!*, July 27, 2016, <http://www.incite-online.net/olson.html>.

⁷² Takemoto, "Towards a Butch Poetics," 81.

⁷³ Takemoto, "Towards a Butch Poetics," 81.

including its minority and queer populations.⁷⁴ As a film about unrequited love, for me *The Royal Road* points to the painful and visceral experience of unrequited love that many Bay Area queers still feel for San Francisco, a place that was one a magnet for queers from all over the world and that is now so expensive, most queers can no longer afford to live there.

Queer Time / Queer Space—Nostalgia and Gentrification Aesthetics

One of the similarities between all of the queer landscape essay films in this chapter is their slow temporality. The aesthetic of *longue durée* landscapes connects this form of filmmaking with a experimental landscape film tradition, described in *The Garden in the Machine* and typified by a wide range of landscape filmmakers from Rudy Burckhardt to the upstate New York school that includes Larry Gottheim and Peter Hutton and to the Southern California landscape filmmakers including Babette Mangolte, and members of the CalArts school from James Benning, Pat O’Neill, Thom Andersen, to Deborah Stratman and Lee Anne Schmitt. Some ecocinema theorists, following from MacDonald, place the strategy of durational static landscapes, such as *Fogline*, as operating with a ecological framework, allowing viewers to slow down and contemplate the environment in ways that undermine a capitalist, linear narrative, accumulation logic.⁷⁵ An earlier generation of film

⁷⁴ Peterson, “Interview with Jenni Olson.”

⁷⁵ MacDonald, Scott. “The Ecocinema Experience,” in *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, eds. Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 17-41.

theorists, from Bazin onward, see duration and the sense of rigor that derives from unchanging compositions and limited camera setups as establishing a sense of oscillation between "illusion" and "fact" to elicit a hyper-acute perception on the part of the viewer.⁷⁶ Olson has suggested that her own use of the *longue durée* is a technique that allows the viewer to enter into the experience of the film and provides a temporal space for viewers to connect their own personal experiences to the film as it unfolds.⁷⁷

Elizabeth Papazian and Caroline Eades argue that the “relational and mediatory dimension of essay film” is conceived as a gesture to the spectator, a space between self and other, and “a passage between filmmaking and criticism.”⁷⁸ They note that the essay film is inextricably tied to both an engagement with politics and to a critique of ideology, at the same time that it longs for utopia, whether conceived in aesthetic, technological or social terms.⁷⁹ In all of these films, the space between what is heard and what is seen, between what the voice says and what is implied in relations to the visual, allows space for the audience-viewer to experience the film as a formal and musical experience apart from the experience of receiving its content.⁸⁰ They open a space in which the viewer-audience’s own interpretative experience of

⁷⁶ Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, 44.

⁷⁷ Takemoto, “Towards a Butch Poetics,” 79.

⁷⁸ Elizabeth A. Papazian and Caroline Eades, eds., *The Essay Film: Dialogue, Politics, Utopia* (New York & London: Wallflower Press, 2016), 2.

⁷⁹ Papazian, *The Essay Film*, 2-3.

⁸⁰ Peterson, “An Interview with Jenni Olson.” Jennifer Peterson credits Bazin with the argument that the long take and deep focus gives people space to inhabit the shot.

the work is foregrounded. This utopian orientation to audience reception expresses what Halberstam terms ‘queer time’ and ‘queer space.’⁸¹

Both Halberstam and Muñoz articulate a utopian orientation to reception that builds upon Eve Sedgwick’s notion of reparative and paranoid viewing modes.⁸² As films that were created to play in explicitly queer film screening contexts, the voice-overs in *You Are Not From Here*, *Massillon*, *The Joy of Life* and *The Royal Road* create a utopian dialogue with imagined queer audiences. Papazian and Eades describe the dialogic qualities of essay films as digressive, “circling around an idea while refusing to offer tidy conclusions,” and defying notions of totality, fixity or completion.⁸³ In the case of Bonder and Olson, the filmmakers deliberately play with and even undermine the presumed documentary voice-over’s frame of mastery or objectivity. For example, *You Are Not From Here* (2005) plays with the voice-of-authority mode of address by using a second person tense, implicating the audience as a collaborator in the reality being presented. That voice, while performing a matter-of-fact recitation of actions “you” have taken as a “gentrifier” circles back on itself to concede that, “although it is now too late, this place will betray you and move on in a race toward the future, and other memories that do not belong to you.” In *Joy of Life*, Olson seems to poke fun at the didactic aspect of the voice-over, a final wink of

⁸¹ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York University Press, 2005).

⁸² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-151.

⁸³ Papazian, *The Essay Film*, 3.

recognition of the seeming “mansplaining” aspect of her essay film, with a final card that defines the meaning of “monologue” as if to remind the audience of their role as critical listener and participant in an exchange. Additionally, in all of the films, the loose or seemingly arbitrary relationship between the landscape and the voice-over functions as a type of anti-representationalism. The general nature of the landscapes supplant any visual specificity and function to facilitate audience projections of themselves into the film diegesis.

As essay films, all of the works assert the musical qualities of the voice—its rhythm as well as its timbre—suggesting the quality of vocal performance contains meaning alongside of the *écriture* of the films. In other words, meaning is manifest, not simply through the literal meaning of the spoken voice-overs and through their juxtaposition with the visual field, but also by the musicality, the tempo and other auditory qualities of the voice as performed in the film. As queer works, their formal or structural aspects assert a non-commercial cinematic experience that also includes, whether covertly or overtly, non-heteronormative relations to the everyday, lived world. In the case of Akerman work, *News From Home* expresses a disaffection with the dreary, smog filled, indifference of an inhospitable New York, an experience that both implies yet also disavows nostalgia. In both Bonder and Olson, twenty-first century digital-age filmmakers use the materiality of 16mm film to evoke a nostalgic aesthetic of Kodachrome colored exteriors.

Most of the films in this chapter document endangered views—soon-to-be-

transformed landscapes of dying working class areas in gentrifying cities. The cinematography consciously evokes the style of late twentieth century art photographers of the urban landscape such as William Eggleston and Stephen Shore. The materiality of the past is invoked materially in the choice to use 16mm film, as well as in the project of documenting landscapes which provide evidence of a past working class vibrancy now in the process of decay. I think of this aesthetic—an art of noticing and of valuing the seemingly undervalued everyday—as a kind of gentrification aesthetics. By lingering on hints and fragments of a landscape’s transformation over time, the filmmakers demonstrate the ways that place is a palimpsest. This way of viewing is a helpful strategy for newcomers who are motivated to develop emotional and ethical attachments to their new homes. To notice a place is to practice making land acknowledgements that honor the ancestors and to welcome people to share an ethical orientation to place. *News From Home* expresses the structure of longing, of a bi-cultural or transnational experience caught between two or more languages, two or more cultures, the ocean and the duration that separates communication and “home.” In Bonder’s case, *You Are Not From Here* is a structuralist parable of gentrification, a poem about the insidiousness of its pattern, a structure of relations to one’s neighbors and one’s self as a gay gentrifier. A parable about the ways that property and capitalism will always betray us. In the case of *The Royal Road*, Olson lays out a stinging yet loving indictment of San Francisco as a city that never really loves you back despite all its sexy flirtations and great sense of style.

Billed as a defense of nostalgia, *The Royal Road* is both a meditation on the queer allure of California dreams as well as the insidiousness of its hauntings.

Part III

City Cartography

Chapter 5

Exit Zero: An Atlas of One City Block Through Time

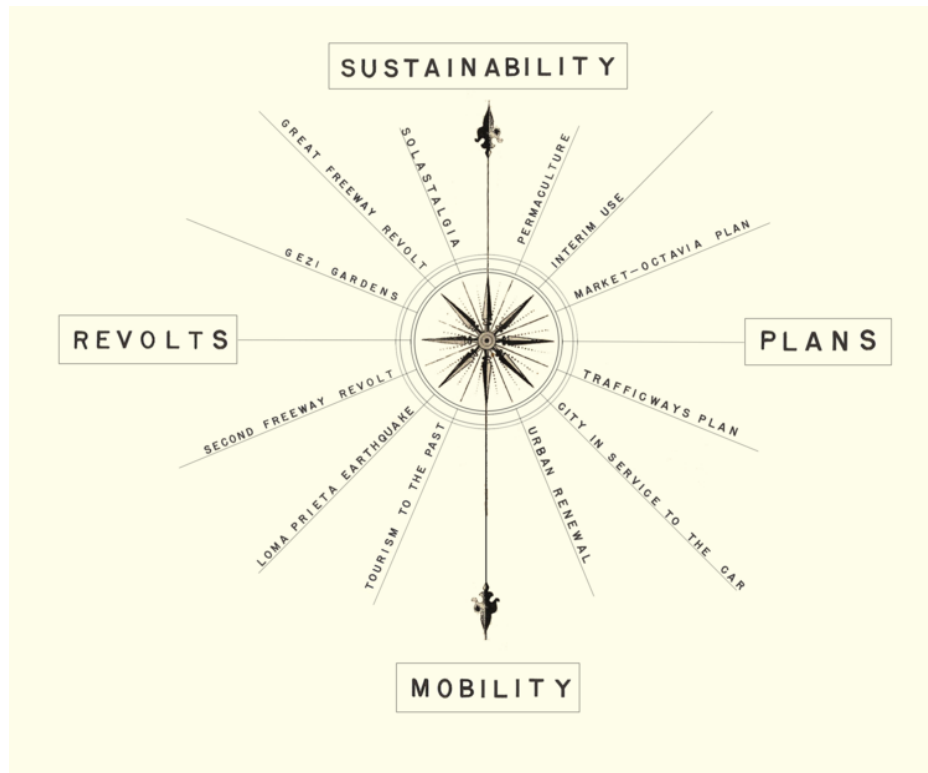


Figure 5: "Metaphor Compass" interactive menu from prototype of *Exit Zero: An Atlas of One City Block Through Time* (dir. Samuel Topiary, USA, 2020)

Online link to Prototype for online documentary project:

<https://people.ucsc.edu/~stopiary/ExitZero/>

Project Description

In *Hollow City*, Rebecca Solnit describes San Francisco as the capital of the twenty-first century, and laments that, as that city has increasingly oriented itself toward the needs and desires of the tech sector, “memory is one of the things that is being lost in the rapid turnover...”¹ *Exit Zero* is an intervention into memory loss: a work that expands the definition of sustainability— not simply as an environmental construct about materials and energy efficiency, but also as an ethics we apply toward sustaining habitation and place-making over time by conceiving of the past and the future as part of a long now.

The URL link will take you to a prototype version of *Exit Zero: An Atlas of One City Block Through Time*, a web-based multi-linear, urban landscape documentary, or “i-doc,” developed using the interactive documentary platform Klynt. This project presents the transformations of a single central San Francisco city block from multi-ethnic Victorian neighborhood to Freeway overpass to temporary community farm to hyper-gentrified Avalon Hayes Valley “green living” apartment development. The block where *Exit Zero* takes place is in a neighborhood called Hayes Valley that is, by most accounts, one of the most gentrified and radically transformed parts of San Francisco, a city that has recently become synonymous with hyper-gentrification and a crisis of affordable housing fueled by the tech industry that has become the area’s economic base. My project provides a historical context for thinking about these contemporary issues. It provides a long view of gentrification

and mobility, creative place-making and community activism that are all key aspects of San Francisco's history and contested current identity. The project dislodges some of the standard ways that gentrification is often represented—as a contest about who belongs and doesn't belong to a place—to instead offer a structural approach to representation. The multi-linear approach emphasizes the collective and collaborative forces that allow a city to develop and change in particular ways and to explore who benefits from those changes and who and what are sacrificed.

Exit Zero provides contexts for the present day and surface appearances. For example, the narrative of a high-priced “green living” rental apartment complex replacing a beloved community garden sounds like a familiar story. The fact that this community garden took place on a lot where a Freeway once stood is also a large part of what gave Hayes Valley Farm such a poetic resonance. However, the more difficult to grasp truth about Hayes Valley Farm is that it wasn't evicted but was actually, by design, a temporary, interim-use project that was initially created and funded by the city government, designed to “activate” valuable central city land that was slated for housing development. Hayes Valley Farm was possible because the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989 had damaged the freeway and a neighborhood group rose up and launched a ten year fight to remove the damaged freeway rather than allow it to be rebuilt. Despite a protracted battle with the state transportation authority, the activists were eventually successful and the Central Freeway was finally removed in 2003. To pay for the cost of removing the freeway and designing a boulevard to replace that

former freeway infrastructure, the land parcels on which the freeway had sat were sold to developers to build much needed housing— some of which was slated as affordable housing.

Contextualizing the existence and persistence of the city freeway and city policy in service to the automobile, with two decade-long periods of anti-freeway activism known as “The Great Freeway Revolt” (1960s) and the “Second Freeway Revolt” (1990s), this iDoc highlights the power of community activism and both creative and political forms of civic engagement in San Francisco. The majority of attention in this project focuses on transformations to the block that have been precipitated by the imposition of the freeway into this central city neighborhood, begun in 1948, when the on-ramp and off-ramp to the Route 101 freeway were first designed. Following the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, the freeway infrastructure was damaged and went out of use, and the block was boarded up and became the topic of a decade-long community battle to dismantle the freeway and return the block to its previous use as a residential block. For reasons that are covered in the documentary, from 2010-2013 the block became an “interim-use” community garden and home to a thriving, though temporary, “permaculture” community gardening project. That garden was dismantled in 2013 to make way for the construction of a “green living” market-rate apartment complex called Avalon Hayes Valley, a place that many consider an example of the hyper-gentrification plaguing San Francisco.

Exit Zero employs four main navigation metaphors. The first menu, “Block,” is a three-state overview, or narrative bird’s-eye, of the block at three basic states of its development: freeway, farm and condo. When clicked, each state leads to a short video intended to provide viewers with a short introductory experience of the chosen selection. Because the viewer can choose the order in which they experience the sections, the user selects a temporal orientation with which to enter the material—a freeway orientation, a farm orientation or a condo orientation. The second menu, “Timeline,” presents an interactive visual chronology of the contextual history of important moments in San Francisco’s history as relates either directly or indirectly to the block. Each date provides a different single image and title text. This navigation approach allows the viewer to get a linear presentation of the transformations of the city and context of the surrounding neighborhood of the block.

The third menu, “Metaphor Compass,” provides users with a way to navigate the content of the site using a non-hierarchical, non-chronological associative form of exploration. This approach, which I call “metaphor cartography” allows users to navigate through the content of the project using an associative or contextual (achronological) approach to exploration. The theme nodes or starting points are: Revolts, Plans, Mobility and Sustainability. Each node of the compass offers different lines of flight or topics related to the theme, which appears when you mouse over each node. For example, when you mouse over the square REVOLTS, you will see a variety of different “revolts” that include the two periods of anti-freeway activism in

the 1960s and against in the 1990s, the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake (figured as a kind of revolt against the freeway), the Gezi Gardens occupy movement by a group of anti-gentrification activists who occupied Hayes Valley Farm at the point when the city compelled the garden to close, and also the response to that occupation by the Hayes Valley Farmers themselves, who were for the most part against that occupation. At the center of the compass, if you mouse over the central circle, an alternative node, SOLASTALGIA, will appear with different named options. The final menu, “Storymaps,” provides a series of interactive “storymaps” built using the interactive online interface created by Esri using simplified ArcGIS technology. Using these different navigation devices, *Exit Zero* connects different time periods and seemingly unrelated story threads to each other—providing a cartographic documentary that enacts different kinds of mapping of relationships and entanglements across time. Placing different time periods side by side with competing ideologies about city planning, governance and mobility, this i-Doc allows the past to “speak” to the present. It uses digital media, both video and digital mapping technologies, as a provocation for embodied and emotional place-based exploration.

As an interactive urban landscape city *étude* that focuses on a single block as a microcosm for the large-scale urban transformations of San Francisco as a whole, *Exit Zero* provides a synecdochic approach to representation. In playing with the idea of mapping as a non-linear approach to collective representation, this documentary provides the experience of multiple temporalities and temporal scales of city change.

The project examines the transformative role of a variety of different ideas about “invasive species” while attempting to offer a critical engagement with history as a method for understanding the present as well as to inspire users to imagine a more holistic view of what might be possible and sustainable for the future. As yet to be developed is a section of the project, accessible from the timeline interface, that imagines the block in the future. As a method of studying the role of temporality and temporariness, I am intrigued by the different kinds of temporality at play in the stories about this block. For example, the temporality of a freeway exit ramp with thousands of cars driving through it, juxtaposed to the temporality of bees living in beehives or of fruit trees being grown in pots to be easily transplanted when the farm must close are examples of the radically different ways that time and speed are experienced. Another question that has animated this work is how interim-use, temporary frameworks might be understood to both enable and undermine environmental sustainability. In the case of Hayes Valley Farm, the “profit” motive which sold the public land to developers was actually a concept which arose out of community activism (and ballot initiatives) — seeking a viable way to remove the seemingly permanent Freeway infrastructure and improve environmental conditions. In other words, in what ways can temporariness be sustainable?

One aspect of the iDoc format is that its emphasis on the digital interface or informational architecture provides a visceral analogy to the topic of physical city infrastructures (freeway, city block, fence, land forms) and collective social structures

(city administration, federal highway commission, neighborhood association, Hayes Valley Farm collective). The concepts of collaboration and temporality are central to the aesthetic design of this interactive documentary. In presenting multiple and contrasting viewpoints and perspectives, I represent change as the result of collective action as well as interactions between colluding and colliding forces. The interface design, predicated on multiple forms of navigation, allows users to explore not only different time periods but also different kinds of temporalities in operation in this urban landscape. Working with audio and video documentation and digital animation of found and archival materials has allowed me to imagine history through different material lenses. In choosing to create an iDoc, I have been particularly interested in exploring different ways of using chance and serendipity as an element of montage. This has allowed me to experiment with how chance can provide visceral experiences of temporariness, where certain media elements or connections appear and then disappear and operate as metaphors for interim-use and temporariness within the interface itself.

In addition to recording oral histories of participants in Hayes Valley Farm, the 1990s “freeway revolt” and Hayes Valley Neighborhood Association participants, this project incorporates a wide range of archival materials, collected from a range of local historical libraries and archives including the Prelinger Library, the San Francisco History Center of the San Francisco Public Library, the Stanford University David Rumsey Map Center, the Internet Archives, the California Historical Society,

the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley and online materials available on Chris Carlsson's *Found SF* history project. I have also integrated found footage materials from social media platforms, particularly documentation of Hayes Valley Farm (2010-2013).

I have developed this work using Klynt, Adobe Premiere, Esri's Story Maps—an online platform that allows users to design and customize content- and context-rich digital maps in order to create interactive, place-based stories with customized contemporary and historical maps, augmented with ArcGIS. I intend for this prototype to be transposed into a more robust digital interface and to present this work as a performative presentation of the content and/or as a series of walking tours (or an A.R. app) that will enable users to engage with the content in the physical location of the actual block and its surroundings.

¹ Solnit, Rebecca. *Hollow City: The Siege of San Francisco and the Crisis of American Urbanism*, London and New York: Verso, 2002, 13-38.

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- Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt (Berlin: Symphony of a Great City)*. Dir. Walter Ruttmann, Germany, 1927, 62 min.
- Moskva (Moscow)*. Dir. Mikhail Kaufman and Ilya Kopolin, USSR, 1927, 60 min.
- Twenty-four Dollar Island*. Dir. Robert Flaherty, USA, 1927, 12 min.
- De Brug (The Bridge)*. Dir. Joris Ivens, Holland, 1928, 14 min.
- Les nuits électriques (Electric Nights)*. Dir. Eugene Deslaw, France, 1928, 13 min.
- Rain (Regen)*. Dir. Joris Ivens and Mannus Franken, Holland, 1929, 12 min.
- Skyscraper Symphony*. Dir. Robert Florey, USA, 1929, 9 min.
- Man with A Movie Camera*. Dir. Dziga Vertov. Russia, 1929, 80 min.
- Vesnoy. In Spring*. Dir. Mikhail Kaufman, USSR, 1929-30, 47 min.
- Harmonies de Paris (Harmonies of Paris)*. Dir. Lucie Derain, 1929, 25 min.
- Images d'Ostende (Scenes of Ostend)*. Dir. Henri Storck, Belgium, 1929, 15 min.
- Manhattan Medley*. Dir. Bonney Powell, USA, 1931, 10 min.
- A Bronx Morning*. Dir. Jay Leyda, USA, 1931, 11 min.
- De Maasbruggen: Een filmstudie van Paul Schuitema (Bridges over the River Meuse: A Cinematic Study)*. Dir. Paul Schuitema, Holland, 1937, 14 min.
- The City*. Dirs. Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, USA, 1939, 43 min.
- Up and Down the Waterfront*. Dir. Rudy Burckhardt, USA, 1946, 8 min.
- Bop Scotch*. Dir. Jordan Belson, USA, 1952, 3 min.
- Under the Brooklyn Bridge*. Dir. Rudy Burckhardt, USA, 1953, 15 min.
- Daybreak Express*. Dir. D.A. Pennebaker, USA, 1953/57, 5 min.
- Jazz of Lights*. Dir. Ian Hugo, USA, 1954, 16 min.
- The Wonder Ring*. Dir. Stan Brakhage, USA, 1955, 4 min.
- Third Ave. El*. Dir. Carson Davidson, USA, 1955, 11 min.
- N.Y., N.Y.* Dir. Francis Thompson, USA, 1957, 15 min.
- Brussels Loops*. Dirs. Shirley Clarke, Willard Van Dyke, USA, 1958,

Bridges-Go-Round. Dir. Shirley Clarke, USA, 1958, 8 min.

Highway. Dir. Hilary Harris, USA, 1958, 10 min.

Glimpses of the USA. Dirs. Charles & Ray Eames, USA, 1959, 13 min.

Go, Go, Go!. Dir. Marie Menken, USA, 1964, 11 min.

Castro Street. Dir. Bruce Baillie, USA, 1966, 10 min.

Portrait of Jason, dir. Shirley Clarke, USA, 1967, 1 hr 45 min.

A Rough Sketch for a Proposed Film Dealing with the Powers of Ten and the Relative Size of Things in the Universe. Dir. Dirs. Charles & Ray Eames, USA, 1968, 8 min.

Cosmic Zoom. Dir. Eva Szasz, Canada, 1968, 8 min.

Fog Line. Dir. Larry Gottheim, USA, 1970, 11 min.

Organism. Dir. Hilary Harris, USA, 1975, 19 min.

News From Home. Dir. Chantal Akerman, Belgium, 1976, 86 min.

Powers of Ten and the Relative Size of Things in the Universe. Dirs. Charles and Ray Eames, USA, 1977, 9 min.

Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives, dirs. Rob Epstein, Peter Adair, Lucy Massie Phenix, Andrew Brown, Veronica Selver, USA, 1977, 2 hr 13 min.

Koyaanisqatsi, dir. Godfrey Reggio, USA, 1982, 87 min.

Ornette: Made in America. Dir. Shirley Clarke, USA, 1985, 85 min.

The Empty Center. Dir. Hito Steyerl, Germany, 1998, 62 min.

Massillon. Dir. William E. Jones, USA, 1991, 70 min.

Baraka. Dir. Ron Fricke, USA, 1992, 1 hr 38 min.

New York: A Documentary Film, dir. Ric Burns, USA, 1999, 17 hr 30 min.

still/here. Dir. Christopher Harris, USA, 2000, 60 min.

The Gleaners and I. Dir. Agnes Varda, France, 2000, 88 min.

If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home by Now. Dir. Diane Bonder, USA, 2001, 15 min.

Berlin. Sinfonie einer Großstadt. Dir. Thomas Schadt, Germany, 2002, 74 min.

Closer to Heaven. Dir. Diane Bonder, USA, 2003, 15 min.

Los Angeles Plays Itself. Dir. Thom Andersen, USA, 2003, 2 hr 49 min.

Joy of Life, dir. Jenni Olson, USA, 2005, 65 min.

You Are Not From Here. Dir. Diane Bonder, USA, 2005, 10 min.

Manufactured Landscapes. Dir. Jennifer Baichwal, Canada, 2006, 1 hr 30 min.

Maquilapolis. Dirs. Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre, USA/Mexico, 2006, 70 min.
The Profit Motive and the Whispering Wind. Dir. John Gianvito, USA, 2007, 58 min.
Somewhere Between Here and There. Dir. Liss Platt, 2008, 10 min.
Gaza/Sderot. Dirs. Alex Szalat, Joël Ronez, Susanna Lotz, France, 2008, iDoc.
A Park for the City, dir. Nicole MacDonald, USA, 2014, 34 min.
Petropolis: Aerial Perspectives on the Alberta Tar Sands. Dir. Peter Mettler. Canada, 2009, 34 min.
The Pruitt-Igoe Myth, dir. Chad Freidrichs, USA, 2011, 79 min.
Highrise: One Millionth Tower. Dir. Katerina Cizek, Canada, 2011, iDoc.
My Brooklyn. Dir. Kelly Anderson, USA, 2012, 1 hr 25 min.
Gut Renovation. Dir. Su Friedrich, USA, 2012, 81 min.
Watermark. Dirs. Jennifer Baichwal and Edward Burtynsky, Canada, 2013, 2 hrs.
The Iron Ministry. Dir. J.P. Sniadecki, USA, 2014, 82 min.
H-E-L-L-O. Dir. Cauleen Smith, USA, 2014, 12 min.
The Royal Road, dir. Jenni Olson, USA, 2015, 64 min.
Lost Landscapes: San Francisco; New York, Detroit. Dir. Rick Prelinger, various.
The Prison in Twelve Landscapes. Dir. Brett Story, USA, 2016, 90 min.
Jerusalem, We Are Here. Dir. Dorit Naaman, Canada/Israel/Palestine, 2016, iDoc.
Koyaanistocksi, dir. Jesse England, USA, 2016, 2 min.
Homo sapiens. Dir. Nicholas Geyrhalter, Austria, 2016, 94 min.
Hypernormalisation. Dir. Adam Curtis, United Kingdom, 2016, 2 hr 46 min.
Citizen Jane: Battle for the City, dir. Matt Tyrnauer, USA, 2017, 92 min.
LA 92. Dirs. T.J. Martin and Daniel Lindsay, USA, 2017, 1 hr 54 min.
The Shore Line. Dir. Liz Miller, Canada, 2018, iDoc.
Anthropocene: The Human Epoch. Dirs. Jennifer Baichwal and Edward Burtynsky, Canada, 2018, 1 hr 27 min.
The Hottest August. Dir. Brett Story, USA, 2019, 95 min.

APPENDIX A

Classical City Symphonies

- Manhatta*. Dir. Paul Strand & Charles Sheeler, USA, 1921, 10 min. [NYC]
- Rien Que Les Heures*. Dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, France, Brazil, 1926, 45 min. [Paris]
- Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*. Dir. Walter Ruttmann, Germany, 1927, 74 min.
- Moskva. Moscow*. Dir. Mikhail Kaufman and Ilya Kopalin, USSR, 1927, 60 min.
- Twenty-four Dollar Island*. Dir. Robert Flaherty, USA, 1927, 12 min. [NYC]
- Études sur Paris*. Dir. André Sauvage, France, 1928, 76 min.
- De stad die nooit rust (The City That Never Rests)*. Dirs. Friedrich von Maydell and Andor von Barsy, Holland, 1928, 56 min. [Rotterdam]
- La Zone: Au pays des chiffonniers (The Zone: In the Land of the Rag-Pickers)*. Dir. Georges Lacombe, France, 1928, 30 min.
- Sinfonia de Cataguases*. Dir. Humberto Mauro, Brazil, 1928, 12 min. [Minas Gerais]
- A Day in Liverpool*. Dir. Anson Dyer, United Kingdom, 1929, 33 min.
- Les Halles*. Dirs. Boris Kaufman and André Galitzine, France, 1927 or 1929, 23 min. [Paris]
- Champs-Élysées*. Dir. Jean Lods, France, 1929, (lost film). [Paris]
- Fukko Teito Shinfoni (Reconstruction of the Imperial Capital Symphony)*. Dir. Tokyo Shisei Chosa-kai (Tokyo Institute for Municipal Research), Japan, 1929, 32 min. [Tokyo]
- Harmonies de Paris*. Dir. Lucie Derain, 1929, 25 min.
- Impressionen vom alten Marseiller Hafen (Vieux Port) (Impressions of the Old Harbor of Marseille)*. Dir. László Moholy-Nagy, Germany, 1929, 9 min. [Marseille]
- Les Nuits électriques (Electric Nights)*. Dir. Eugène Deslaw, France, 1929, 13 min.
- Chelovek s kinoapparatom (Man with a Movie Camera)*. Dir. Dziga Vertov. Russia, 1929, 80 min. [Moscow, Kiev, Odessa]
- Markt in Berlin (Street Market in Berlin)*. Dir. Wilfried Basse, Germany, 1929, 23/43 min.
- Midi (Noon)*. Dir. Lucien Backman, Belgium, 1929, lost film. [Brussels]
- Mit der Pferdedroschke durch Berlin (With the Horse-Drawn Carriage through Berlin)*. Dir. Carl Froelich, Germany, 1929, 13 min.

Nogent: El Dorado du Dimanche (Nogent: Sunday El Dorado). Dir. Marcel Carné, France, 1929, 17 min. [Paris workers suburb]

Praha v záři světél (Prague by night). Dir. Svatopluk Innemann, Czechoslovakia, 1929, 22 min.

Prater. Dir. Friedrich Kuplent, Austria, 1929, 14 min. [Vienna]

Regen (Rain). Dirs. Joris Ivens and Manaus Franken, Holland, 1929, 12 min. [Amsterdam]

São Paulo, a Metropolitan Symphony. Dir. Adalberto Kemeny, Rudolf Rex Lustig, Brazil, 1929, 90 min.

Stramilano, Dir. Corrado D'Errico, Italy, 1929, 14 min. [Milan]

Vingt-quatre heures en trente minutes (Twenty-four hours in thirty minutes). Dir. Jean Lods and Boris Kaufman, France, 1929. [Paris]

Vesnoy (In Spring). Dir. Mikhail Kaufman, USSR, 1929-30, 47 min. [Kiev]

A City Symphony. Dir. Herman Weinberg, USA, 1930, lost film, repurposed for *Autumn Fire* (1933). [NYC]

À propos de Nice (On the Topic of Nice). Dir. Jean Vigo, France, 1930, 25 min.

Bezúčelená Procházka (Aimless Walk). Dir. Alexandr Hackenschmied, Czechoslovakia, 1930, 8 min. [Prague]

Lisboa, Crónica Anedótica (Lisbon: Anecdotal Chronicle). Dir. José Leitão de Barros, Portugal, 1930, 90 min. [Lisbon]

Montparnasse (a.k.a. Montparnasse: Poème du Café Crème). Dir. Eugène Deslaw, France, 1930, 15 min. [Paris]

A Day in Santa Fe. Dir. Lynn Riggs and James Hughes, USA, 1931, 29 min. [Santa Fe, New Mexico]

City of Contrasts. Dir. Irving Browning, USA, 1931, 28 min. [NYC]

Douro, Faina Fluvial (Labor on the Douro River). Dir. Manoel de Oliveira, Portugal, 1931, 18 min. [Porto]

Gamla Stan (Old Town, a.k.a. Symphony of the Streets). Dirs. Stig Almqvist, Erik Asklund, Eyvind Johnson, and Arthur Lundkvist, Sweden, 1931, 18 min. [Stockholm]

Manhattan Medley. Dir. Bonney Powell, USA, 1931, 10 min.

Weltstadt in Flegeljahren: Ein Bericht über Chicago (World City in Its Teens: A Report on Chicago). Dir. Heinrich Hauser, Germany, 1931, 74 min. [Chicago]

Berliner Stilleben (Berlin Still Life). Dir. László Moholy-Nagy, Germany, 1932, 9 min.

Großstadt-Zigeuner (Gypsies of the Metropolis). Dir. László Moholy-Nagy, Germany, 1932, 12 min. [Berlin]

Belgrad – prestonica kraljevine Jugoslavie (Belgrade: Capital of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia). Dir. Vojin Djordjević, Yugoslavia, 1932, 56 min. [Belgrade]

London Medley. Production Fox-Movietone, 1933, 11 min.

Chi sheyingji de nanren (The Man Who Has a Camera). Dir. Liu Na'ou, China, 1933, 46 min.

Žijeme V Praze (We Live in Prague). Dir. Otakar Vávra, Czechoslovakia, 1934, 13 min.

Halsted Street. Dir. Conrad Friberg, USA, 1934, 11 min. [Chicago]

Rhapsody in Two Languages. Dir. Gordon Sparling, Canada, 1934, 11 min. [Montreal]

Another Day. Dir. Leslie P. Thatcher, Canada, 1934, 10 min. [Toronto]

The Westminster of the West. Dir. Gordon Sparling, Canada, 1934, 10 min. [Ottawa]

City of Towers. Dir. Gordon Sparling, Canada, 1935, 10 min. [Toronto]

Budapest fürdőváros (Budapest: City of Baths). Dir. István Somkúti, Hungary, 1935, 14 min.

Odessa. Dir. Jean Lods, USSR, 1935, 23 min.

Stuttgart: die Großstadt zwischen Wald und Reben—die Stadt des Auslandsdeutschtums (Stuttgart, the Big City between Forest and Vines—the City of Germans Abroad). Dir. Walter Ruttmann, Germany, 1935, 15 min.

Kleiner Film einer großen Stadt...der Stadt Düsseldorf am Rhein (Small Film for a Big City: The City of Düsseldorf on the Rhine). Dir. Walter Ruttmann, Germany, 1935, 15 min.

Vancouver Vignette. Dir. Gordon Sparling, Canada, 1936, 10 min.

Weltstrasse See, Welthafen Hamburg (The Ocean as World Route, Hamburg as World Port). Dir. Walter Ruttmann, Germany, 1938, 15 min.

Pre-WWII Études

Jeux des reflets et de la vitesse (Play with Reflections and Speed). Dir. Henri Chomette, France, 1925, 8 min. [Paris]

Ciels de Paris (Skies of Paris). Dir. René Moreau, France, 1925.

Études des mouvement a Paris. Dir. Joris Ivens, Holland, 1927, 4 min. [Paris]

De Brug. Dir. Joris Ivens, Holland, 1928, 12 min. [Rotterdam]

Visages de Paris (Faces of Paris). Dir. René Moreau, France, 1928.

Paris Express ou Souvenirs de Paris. Dirs. Marcel Duhamel and Pierre Prévert, France, 1928.

Hoogstraat (High Street). Dir. Andor von Barys, Holland, 1929, 12 min. [Rotterdam]

Images d'Ostende (Scenes of Ostend). Dir. Henri Storck, Belgium, 1929, 15 min. [Belgian seaside town]

Impressionen der Großstadt (a.k.a. Berlin von unten) (Impressions of the Metropolis, a.k.a. Berlin from below). Dir. Alex Strasser, Germany, 1929, 6 min.

Skyscraper Symphony. Dir. Robert Florey, USA, 1929, 9 min. [NYC]

Esencia de Verbena (Essence of Verbena). Dir. Ernesto Giménez Caballero, Spain, 1930, 12 min. [Madrid]

A Bronx Morning. Dir. Jay Leyda, USA, 1931, 12 min. [South Bronx neighborhood pre-Expressway]

Pierement (Barrel Organ). Dir. Jan Teunissen, Holland, 1931, 12 min. [Amsterdam neighborhood Jordaan]

De Steeg (The Alley). Dir. Jan Koelinga, Holland, 1932, 12 min. [Rotterdam]

Visions de Lourdes. Dir. Charles Dekeukeleire, Belgium, 1932, 17 min.

Prague Castle. Dir. Alexandr Hackenschmied, Czechoslovakia, 1932, 11 min.

Ritmi di Stazione (Railway Station Rhythms). Dir. Corrado D'Errico, Italy, 1933, 9 min. [trains]

Mediolanum. Dir. Ubaldo Magnaghi, Italy, 1933, 33 min. [Milan]

Vibración De Granada (Vibrations of Granada). Dir. José Val del Omar, Spain, 1935. [Alhambra]

Así Nació El Obelisco (This is How the Obelisk Was Born). Dir. Horacio Coppola, Argentine, 1936, 10 min.

De Maasbruggen: Een filmstudie van Paul Schuitema (Bridges over the River Meuse: A Cinematic Study by Paul Schuitema). Dir. Paul Schuitema, Holland, 1937, 14 min. [Rotterdam]

Herää Helsinki! (Wake Up, Helsinki). Dir. Valentin Vaala, Finland, 1939, 8 min.

Pursuit of Happiness. Dir. Rudy Burckhardt, USA, 1940, 10 min. [NYC]

Post-WWII City Symphonies

Rhythm of a City. Dir. Arne Sucksdorff, Sweden, 1947, 20 min.

Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Dir. Jonas Mekas, 1948-51, 15 min.

Weegee's New York. Dir. *Weegee (Arthur Fellig)*, compiled by Amos Vogel, USA, 1952/55.

Under the Brooklyn Bridge. Dir. Rudy Burckhardt, USA, 1953, 15m.

N.Y., N.Y. Dir. Francis Thompson, USA, 1957, 15 min. [Manhattan]

Organism. Dir. Hilary Harris. USA, 1975, 19 min. [Manhattan]

Koyaanisqatsi. Dir. Godfrey Reggio, USA, 1982, 87 min. [USA national]

still/here. Dir. Christopher Harris, USA, 2001, 60 min. [St. Louis, MO]

Berlin. Sinfonie einer Großstadt. Dir. Thomas Schadt, Germany, 2002, 74 min.

H-E-L-L-O. Dir. Cauleen Smith, USA, 2014. [New Orleans]

Jazz-Films:

Bop Scotch. Dir. Jordan Belson, USA, 1952, 3 min.

Daybreak Express. Dir. D.A. Pennebaker, USA, 1953/57, 5 min.

Jazz of Lights. Dir. Ian Hugo, USA, 1954, 16 min.

N.Y., N.Y., Dir. Francis Thompson, USA, 1955, 15 min.

The Wonder Ring. Dir. Stan Brakhage, USA, 1955, 4 min.

Brussels Loops. Dir. Shirley Clarke and Willard Van Dyke, USA, 1958.

Bridges-Go-Round. Dir. Shirley Clarke, USA, 1958, 8 min.

Highway. Dir. Hilary Harris, USA, 1958, 10 min.

Go, Go, Go!. Dir. Marie Menken, USA, 1964, 11min.

Hybrid Dramatic or Documentary City Symphonies

Rien Que Les Heures. Dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, France, Brazil, 1926, 45 min. [Paris]

La Tour. Dir. René Clair, France, 1928, 14 min. [Paris]

Menschen am Sonntag. Dirs. Robert Siodmak and Edgar G. Ulmer, Germany, 1930, 74 min. [Berlin]

Autumn Fire. Dir. Herman Weinberg, USA, 1933, 19 min. [NYC]

Footnote to Fact. Dir. Lewis Jacobs, USA, 1933, 8 min. [NYC]
Seeing the World: Part One, A Visit to New York, N.Y. Dir. Rudy Burckhardt, USA, 1937, 10 min.
The City. Dirs. Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, USA, 1939, 43 min. [NYC and Suburbs]
Berlin: Wie es War. Dir. Leo de Laforgue, Germany, 1939, released 1950.
The Red Balloon. Dir. Albert Lamorisse, France, 1956, 36 min. [Paris]
The Making of Do The Right Thing. Dir. St. Clair Bourne, USA, 1989, 60 min. [Bed-Sty, Brooklyn, NY]

Infrastructure Études By Topic

Bridges & structures that enable mobility above the ground

De Brug (The Bridge). Dir. Joris Ivens, Holland, 1928, 14 min.
De Maasbruggen: Een filmstudie van Paul Schuitema (Bridges over the River Meuse: A Cinematic Study by Paul Schuitema). Dir. Paul Schuitema, The Netherlands, 1937, 14 min.
Under the Brooklyn Bridge. Dir. Rudy Burckhardt, USA, 1953, 15 min.
Bridges-Go-Round. Dir. Shirley Clarke, USA, 1958, 8 min.
Highway. Dir. Hilary Harris, USA, 1958, 10 min.
Highway World: Living, Changing, Growing. Dir. Martin Hans Schmitt, Germany, 2008, 81 min.

City Trains/Metros/The 'El'

Jeux des reflets et de la vitesse. Dir. Henri Chomette, France, 1925, 8 min. [Paris]
Études des mouvement a Paris. Dir. Joris Ivens, Holland, 1927, 4 min. [Paris]
Ritmi di Stazione (Railway Station Rhythms). Dir. Corrado D'Errico, Italy, 1933, 9 min. [trains]
Daybreak Express. Dir. D.A. Pennebaker, USA, 1953/57, 5 min.
The Wonder Ring. Dir. Stan Brakhage, USA, 1955, 4 min.
3rd Ave. El. Dir. Carson Davidson, USA, 1955, 11 min.

Rail. Dir. Geoffrey Jones, UK, 1967, 14 min.

Locomotion. Dir. Geoffrey Jones, UK, 1975, 15 min.

Streets

A Bronx Morning. Dir. Jay Leyda, USA, 1931, 11 min.

De Steeg (The Alley). Dir. Jan Koelinga, Holland, 1932, 12 min. [Rotterdam]

Hoogstraat (High Street). Dir. Andor von Barys, Holland, 1929, 12 min. [Rotterdam]

Halsted Street. Dir. Conrad Friberg, USA, 1934, 11 min. [Chicago]

In the Street. Dirs. Helen Levitt, Janice Loeb, James Agee, USA, 1952,

Orchard Street. Dir. Ken Jacob, USA, 1956,

Castro Street. Dir. Bruce Baillie, USA, 1966, 10 min.

Pavement/Street

Bop Scotch. Dir. Jordan Belson, USA, 1952, 3 min.

Blacktop. Dir. Ray & Charles Eames. USA, 1952, 11 min.

Side/Walk/Shuttle. Dir. Ernie Gehr, USA, 1992, 41 min.

Elegy in the Streets, 1989, Jim Hubbard

Undercurrents. Dir. John Behrens, USA, 1994, 8 min.

B/Side. Dir. Abigail Child, USA, 1996, - Tompkins Square park, homelessness

Buildings/Skyscrapers

La Tour. Dir. René Clair, France, 1928, 14 min.

Skyscraper Symphony. Dir. Robert Florey, USA, 1929, 9 min.

Prague Castle. Dir. Alexandr Hackenschmied, Czechoslovakia, 1932, 11 min.

Mediolanum. Dir. Ubaldo Magnaghi, Italy, 1933, 33 min. [Milan]

City of Towers. Dir. Gordon Sparling, Canada, 1935, 10 min. [Toronto]

Así Nació El Obelisco (This is How the Obelisk Was Born). Dir. Horacio Coppola, Argentine, 1936, 10 min.

The Evolution of the Skyscraper, dir. Francis Thompson, 1939, 40 min. (produced by MoMA Architecture Dep't)

The Window Cleaner (US, 1945, Jules Bucher

Birth of a Building (US, c. 1958) - Seagram Building at 375 Park Avenue.

Skyscraper. Dirs. Shirley Clarke, Willard Van Dyke, USA, 1959, 21 min. - Tishman Bld, 666 5th Ave.

Empire. Dir. Andy Warhol, USA, 1963, 8 hrs.

Empire II. Dir. Amos Poe, 2008.

Port District

Images d'Ostende. Scenes of Ostend. Dir. Henri Storck, Belgium, 1929, 15 min.

Impressionen vom alten Marseiller Hafen (Vieux Port) (Impressions of the Old Harbor of Marseille). Dir. László Moholy-Nagy, Germany, 1929, 9 min.
[Marseille]

De Maasbruggen: Een filmstudie van Paul Schuitema (Bridges over the River Meuse: A Cinematic Study by Paul Schuitema). Dir. Paul Schuitema, The Netherlands, 1937, 14 min.

Up and Down the Waterfront. Dir. Rudy Burckhardt, USA, 1946.

The Climate of New York. Dir. Rudy Burckhardt, USA, 1948,

Electric Lights

Les Nuits électriques (Electric Nights). Dir. Eugène Deslaw, France, 1929, 13 min.

Jazz of Lights. Dir. Ian Hugo, USA, 1954,

Night Lites. (Dir. D.A. Pennebaker, USA, 1958, 2.5 min. - part of "Brussels Loops")

Broadway by Light. Dir. William Klein, France, 1958, 12 min.

Lights. Dir. Marie Menken, USA, 1966, 6 min.

The Movement of Light at Night. Dir. John Behrens, USA, 1996, 6 min.

Street Signs

Broadway by Light. Dir. William Klein, France, 1958, 12 min.

Zorn's Lemma. Dir. Hollis Frampton. USA, 1970, 60 min.

Parks

In Paris Parks, Dir. Shirley Clarke, USA, 1954,

Aviary, Dir. Rudy Burckhardt and Joseph Cornell, USA, 1955, 5 min.

Gestures, Dir. Shirley Clarke, USA, 1958, 2.5 min.

Weather / States Water

H2O. Dir. Ralph Steiner, USA, 1929, 13 min.

Regen (Rain). Dir. Joris Ivens and Mannus Franken, Holland, 1929, 12 min.

White Flood. Frontier Films. USA, 1940.

Moods of the Sea. Dir. John Hoffman and Slavko Vorkapich, USA, 1941, 10 min.

Snow. Dir. Geoffrey Jones, UK, 1963, 9 min.

The Highwater Trilogy. Dir. Bill Morrison, USA, 2006, 31 min.

Post-modern City Symphonies

Zorn's Lemma. Dir. Hollis Frampton. USA, 1970, 60 min. [Manhattan]

Organism. Dir. Hilary Harris. USA, 1975, 19 min. [Manhattan]

Koyaanisqatsi. Dir. Godfrey Reggio, USA, 1982, 87 min. [USA national]

Aerial Symphonies:

Harmonies de Paris. Dir. Lucie Derain, 1929, 25 min.

Organism. Dir. Hilary Harris. USA, 1975, 19 min. [Manhattan]

Petropolis: Aerial Perspectives on the Alberta Tar Sands. Dir. Peter Mettler. Canada, 2009. 34 min.

Anthropocene: The Human Epoch. Dirs. Jennifer Baichwal and Edward Burtynsky, Canada, 2018, 1 hr 27 min.

Drone Film Festival winners: <http://www.uavfilmfestival.com/>

National Symphonies

Koyaanisqatsi. Dir. Godfrey Reggio, USA, 1982, 87 min. [USA]

Dogora - Ouvrons les yeux. Dir. Patrice Leconte, France, 2004, 80 min. [Cambodia]

Rasa Yatra. Dir. Param Tomanec, UK/India, 2012, 50 min. [India]

Epic Java. Dir. Febian Nurrahman Saktinegara, Indonesia, 2013, 30 min.

Heild. Dir. Pétur Kristján Gudmundsson, Iceland, 2014, 70 min.

The Iron Ministry. Dir. J.P. Sniadecki, USA, 2014, 82 min. [China]

Sedae. Dir. Daniel Smukalla, USA, 2017, 90 min. [South Korea]

Globalized Urban Symphonies

Powaqqatsi. Dir. Godfrey Reggio, USA, 1988, 99 min.

Baraka. Dir. Ron Fricke, USA, 1992, 96 min.

Latcho Drom. Dir. Tony Gatlif, USA, 1993, 103 min.

Amsterdam Global Village. Dir. Johan van der Keuken, Holland, 1996, 229 min.

Megacities. Dir. Michael Glawogger, Switzerland, 1998, 90 min.

Naqoyqatsi. Dir. Godfrey Reggio, USA, 2002, 89 min.

Laya Project. Dir. Harold Monfils, USA, 2007, (S.E. Asia affected by Tsunami)

Samsara. Dir. Ron Fricke, USA, 2011, 102 min.

Homo sapiens. Dir. Nikolaus Geyrhalter, Austria, 2016.

Anthropocene: The Human Epoch. Dirs. Jennifer Baichwal and Edward Burtynsky, Canada, 2018, 1 hr 27 min.

Interactive City Symphonies:

Man with a Movie Camera: The Global Remake. Dir. Perry Bard, USA, 2007-14,
online. <http://dziga.perrybard.net/>

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APPENDIX B

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