NY, NY: A Century of City Symphony Films

Jon Gartenberg, Alex Westhelle

ESSAY

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Jon Gartenberg

New York City has always been a center of the motion picture industry. Since the dawn of the twentieth century, independent and experimental artists, as well as commercial filmmakers, have paid tribute to the dynamically changing landscape of New York City. The filmmakers have employed diverse stylistic approaches to express both the formal beauty inherent in the city's architecture and the rhythmic energy of its people. Photographed during both day and night, through distorting mirrors and prisms, as well as by more direct photographic methods, the films include scenes filmed from atop skyscrapers, under bridges, through parks, down Broadway, and in Coney Island. Such motion pictures have come to be identified as "city symphony" films.

In cinematic terms, such works represent the articulation of both a defined time frame (most often from morning until evening) as well as a carefully articulated geographic space (e.g., a loft apartment, a city block, the length of the island of Manhattan). Rather than offering a comprehensive listing of all city symphony films made in New York, this article endeavors to define the framework for thinking about such motion pictures from an enlarged perspective, encompassing a variety of genres (early cinema, documentary, experimental, animation, independent, political films, etc.).

The first films exhibited in New York City at the beginning of the twentieth century (1895–1905) revealed a sense of wonder at capturing motion by showing busy street life and powerful machines at work. The films also showcased spectacular man-made constructions such as bridges, skyscrapers, and tunnels. There
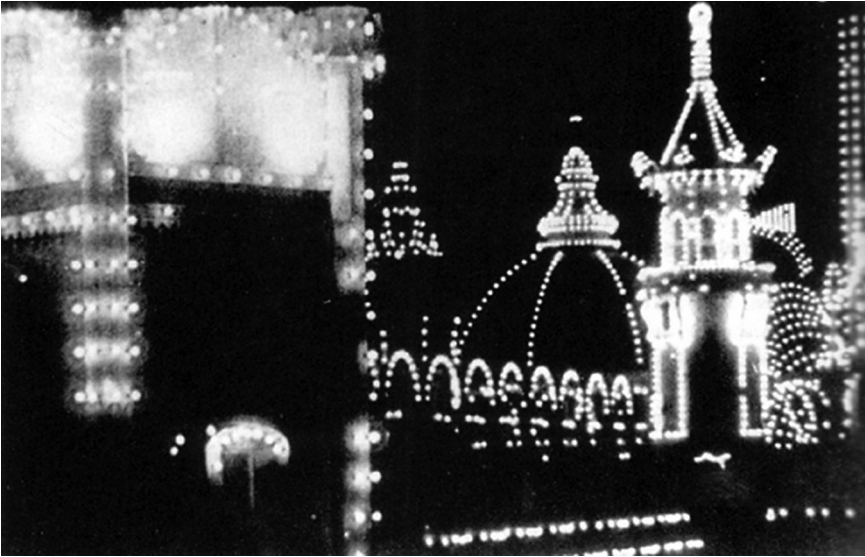
Figure 1. *Coney Island at Night* (1905), Edwin S. Porter

was an expression of optimism by the filmmakers about the limitless potential of man to control production and increase his leisure time in the machine age.

Panorama films were a popular genre view. Electric lights were first used on the exterior of public buildings in the late 1800s. Soon thereafter, filmmakers captured floodlit urban views at night. One such film, *Coney Island at Night* (US, 1905, Edwin S. Porter), captures nocturnal views of the fabled amusement park (see figure 1). This film is composed of three shots. The texture is high-contrast black-and-white imagery. The night is so dark that the electric lightbulbs function to illuminate geometric forms—the circular, rectangular, and triangular outline shapes of the buildings, interior arches, and windows—in abstract fashion. The carefully controlled and slowly moving pans and tilts serve to contrast the different forms of the buildings—the merry-go-round whirls, the steeplechase sign seesaws, and the Ferris wheel circles.

With the rise of the Nickelodeon (around 1905, when storefront theaters began showing movies), filmmakers turned their attention to making story films, which were of longer duration and composed of more shots edited together. In films of this period, the chases take place in the countryside and in streets, with the protagonists running diagonally from the background of the image to the foreground. In each successive shot, the characters traverse obstacles in their path, including natural barriers such as steep inclines, bodies of water, and fences (over, under, and through which they run, climb, and fall). All of the characters pass

Figure 2. *Interiors N.Y. Subway, 14th Street to 42nd Street* (1905), G. W. Bitzer

through the image before the cut to the next scene occurs. *How a French Nobleman Got a Wife through the New York Herald "Personal" Columns* (US, 1904, Edwin S. Porter) is representative of the chase film of the period and contains exterior shots in which a groom is pursued by prospective brides, beginning at Grant's Tomb in Riverside Park and ending on the waterfront.

Interiors N.Y. Subway, 14th Street to 42nd Street (US, 1905, G. W. Bitzer) is representative of the early documentary, or actuality form of filmmaking (see figure 2). From a camera mounted on the front of the subway car, the camera travels through the tunnel toward Grand Central Station while pillars whiz by and dwarfed human figures move silently about on the platforms. A striking emphasis on the verticality of the pillars and the square shape of the tunnel links this film in a formal way to the concerns for geometry highlighted in experimental films of the 1920s.

During the 1920s, painters, photographers, and other artists in Europe and the United States, through the medium of film, furthered their ideas about the kinetic and plastic qualities of art. A genre of "city symphony" films emerged. Whether made in Paris (*Rien que les heures,* 1926, Alberto Cavalcanti), Berlin (*Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt,* 1927, Walter Ruttmann [see figure 3]), or New

York (*Manhatta,* 1921, Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler [see figure 4]), these films were structured around a day in the life of the metropolis from sunrise to sunset. Rhythmic editing patterns, privileged camera positions, extreme angles, and visual effects were all used to alter representation of the objective world.

Photographer Paul Strand and painter/photographer Charles Sheeler collaborated on making *Manhatta,* inspired by a poem of Walt Whitman's. The design of their film extols the virtues of the skyscraper. Organizing their subject matter to emphasize the forms of objects, Strand and Sheeler shape the documentary images into reflections of formal patterns consistent with their work in the fine arts. In their movie, the artists transform images of skyscrapers and other man-made industrial creations into plays of light and shadow, and studies of geometry and linearity. For example, in the sequence showing building construction, shovels swing diagonally across the frame, beams rest flat against the horizon, and bare girders jut vertically into the air. The filmmakers distend real time by showing in multiple shots and points of view such activities as the construction of buildings and the vistas from rooftops.

Other motion pictures have used the process of building as their subject. Today, with the current flurry of high-rise construction, these films serve as historic documents of the changing face of the metropolis. Because their sponsors were frequently steel and copper businesses, and other companies associated with

Figure 3. *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt* (1927), Walter Ruttmann

Figures 4a–4c (above and opposite). *Manhatta* (1921), Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler
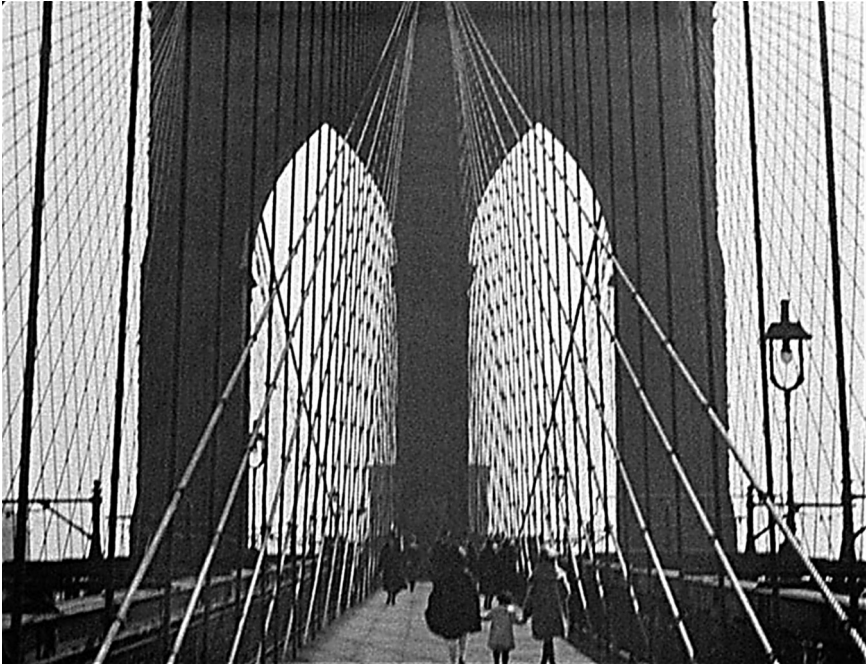
the production of raw materials, these films highlight the quality of the material used, the workmanship involved, and the unique characteristics of the particular building. Included among them are *Empires of Steel* (US, 1931), about the Empire State Building; *Skyscraper* (US, 1959, Shirley Clarke), about the Tishman Building at 666 Fifth Avenue (see figure 5); and *Birth of a Building* (US, c. 1958), about the Seagram Building at 375 Park Avenue. This last film depicts the planning stages, the gathering of marble in Italy, the processing of steel in the United States, and on-site construction. The narration emphasizes the unique characteristics of this skyscraper, including the use of bolts as opposed to rivets, heat- and glare-resistant glass, and a bronze sheath. Like other films of its kind, the filmmakers balance the process of gentrification and progress with sensitivity to the neighborhood environment.

Other films approach the effect of urban construction from a more personal perspective. Documentary filmmakers have frequently represented city life so as to contrast not only the different shapes of New York's buildings, but also the rich diversity of the people and the rhythms of their lifestyle. *The Window Cleaner* (US, 1945, Jules Bucher) posits the work of a window cleaner, a tiny human speck set against the mass of glass and steel. Rudy Burckhardt's *Under the Brooklyn Bridge*

Figure 5. *Skyscraper* (1959), Shirley Clarke

Figure 6. *Under the Brooklyn Bridge* (1953), Rudy Burckhardt

Figure 7. *In the Street* (1952), Helen Levitt, Janice Joeb and James Agee

(US, 1953), part city symphony and part social documentary, inscribes a day in the life of the inhabitants of lower Manhattan (see figure 6). Burckhardt reveals workmen demolishing a building, the construction crew eating, shimmering images of children swimming in the East River, and the end of the women's workday beneath the shadow of the bridge's arches.

Renowned still photographer Helen Levitt, working with Janice Loeb and James Agee, made the short city symphony documentary *In the Street* (US, 1952). Shot on the streets of East Harlem, Levitt captures children in Halloween costumes, young lovers on building stoops, an elderly woman ambling down the street; the film celebrates, in poetic fashion, the denizens of this local neighborhood (see figure 7). According to Ken Jacobs, seeing *In the Street* at The Museum of Modern Art inspired him to make his first film, entitled *Orchard Street* (US, 1956)(see figure 8).

The independent narrative feature *Little Fugitive* (US, 1953) was made in creative collaboration between Morris Engel, a still magazine photographer; Ruth Orkin, renowned for her books of photographs taken from her Central Park window; and Ray Ashley. The filmmakers depict an engrossing child-centered worldview in which a young boy, mistakenly thinking he has killed his brother, escapes to Coney Island, where he spends the day enjoying the multitude of pleasures that the amusement park has to offer (see figure 9). As evening falls, the

Figure 8. *Orchard Street* (1956), Ken Jacobs

boy's older brother finds him and brings him home. Technically innovative for the use of a hand-built 35 mm portable camera, the filmmakers photographed, with a newfound sense of vitality and spontaneity, images from a child's perspective. They peek low-angle shots of lovers embracing and capture plays of patterns of light and shadow beneath the boardwalk. Other scenes of the young boy, Joey, indulging in the food and rides are presented in rapid-fire montage style.

With the onset of a worldwide depression in the 1930s, the sense of wonder about man's ability to construct landscapes of metal and glass (as exemplified in Strand and Sheeler's *Manhatta*) was overshadowed by concern for the human problems these very buildings had created. *The City* (US, 1939, Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke) was made for the 1939 New York World's Fair. The narrative shifts from the peaceful order of small towns to unfit city living conditions, finally offering a solution in planned community developments (see figure 10). The emotional and visual power of the film, however, lies in its central sequence depicting urban life.

Images of destruction and poverty in *The City* provide stark contrast to those of construction and elegance in *Manhatta*. Frames of dark streets and tenements suppressed in shadow in *The City* supplant shots of sunlight dappling on the

Figures 9a–9b (above). *Little Fugitive* (1953), Morris Engel, Ruth Orkin, and Ray Ashley

Figure 9c. *Little Fugitive* (1953), Morris Engel, Ruth Orkin, and Ray Ashley

water in *Manhatta.* The process of building as glorified by scenes of excavation and derricks in *Manhatta* is contrasted in *The City* with symbols of urban blight, including shots of tenements, broken windows, fires in garbage cans, traffic jams, fenders of cars crashing together, and ambulances. The city's decay, rather than its progress, is revealed.

The physical chaos and psychological pressure inherent in urban living is depicted through rapid cutting, the hurried movement in successive shots of masses of people in different directions (overflowing the edges of the frame), and the frenetic pace of Aaron Copeland's music score. *The City* condenses time through shots of people rushing and vehicles zipping across the frame, and by rapid editing techniques. The masterful control of framing and editing in *The City* reaches a crescendo in the noontime eating sequence. In a series of shots, machines (toasters, pancake turners, coffee percolators) outpace the people eating. All the human motions—the waitress making sandwiches and the people sipping coffee—duplicate the efficiency and precision of the machines. Mechanical and human functions are broken into separate shots and shown in close-up. People and objects are transformed into finely tuned, rhythmic movements.

Following World War II, in order to counter the increased emphasis on

Figures 10a–10b (above). *The City* (1939), Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke
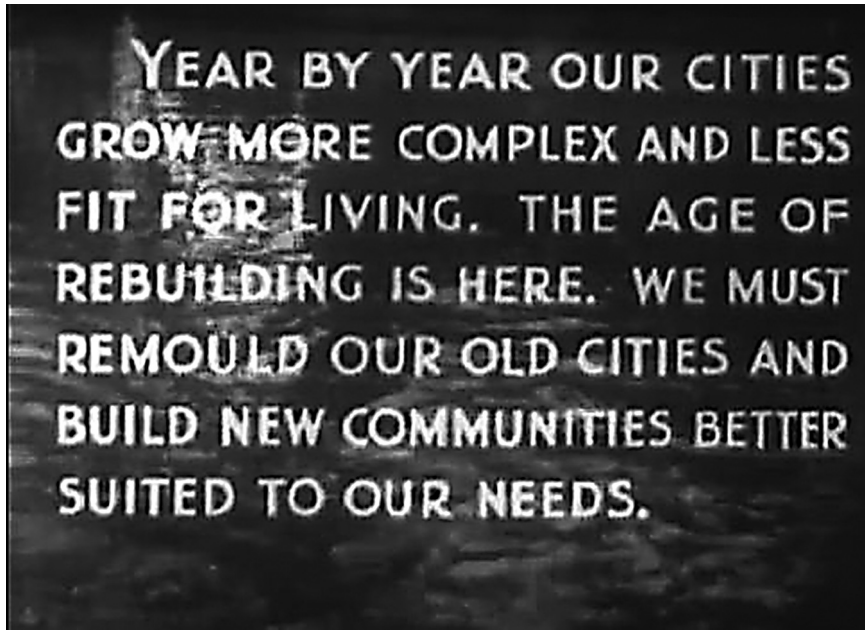
Figure 10c. *The City* (1939), Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke

mechanization and conformity, avant-garde filmmakers in the United States used cinema as a means of expressing their inner states of consciousness. A vast repertoire of techniques was employed to represent subjective awareness, including the use of distorting lenses, multiple exposures, and a movement from representational images toward abstraction.

Ian Hugo was a major champion of this strategy. In *Jazz of Lights* (US, 1954), he resorts to refracting mirrors, superimpositions, and abstract patterns of light to transform observations of the odd assortment of characters in the Times Square area into a meditation upon the world of his psyche. In *Bridges-Go-Round* (US, 1958), dancer and filmmaker Shirley Clarke pays homage to the majestic bridges spanning the harbors of New York City (see figure 11). Using a mobile camera, superimposed images, and rhythmic editing patterns, Clarke unmoors the bridges from their foundations. These concrete and steel girders and spans dance across the frame, resulting in choreography of abstract forms.

New York's elevated trains also inspired experimental city symphony films. Carson Davidson's *3rd Ave. El* (1954), is structured around city life from day until night. The film begins with static shots of lower Manhattan that are reminiscent of images from *Manhatta*. The loosely structured narrative focuses on a series of protagonists (a still photographer, an alcoholic, a man and a child, and a young

Figure 11. *Bridges-Go-Round* (1958), Shirley Clarke

couple), each attempting to recover a coin on the floor of the subway car. The filmmaker employs this narrative device to celebrate the progressive journey of the train throughout Manhattan. Davidson lovingly photographs the surrounding cityscapes, dappled in both light and shadow, from a variety of perspectives (overhead, high, and low angles). He occasionally varies the camera speeds as well as the film stock from positive to negative (paralleling the alcoholic's deranged visions), adding an element of abstraction to this artfully constructed documentary. *The Wonder Ring* (US, 1955), made by Stan Brakhage and commissioned by fellow artist Joseph Cornell, portrays the more abstract aspect of a parallel journey. Brakhage constructs his narrative with the unique focus of the quality of light; additionally, through selective framing and superimposed reflections, he reveals only fragments of buildings and glimpses of human figures (see figure 12). Figurative images are beautifully transformed into formal plays of light, whether reflected from the train stairs or refracted from the edifices outside the elevated train's window. In this very same year, the Third Avenue El was torn down, leaving these two experimental films as expressive legacies of a bygone mode of urban New York City transportation.

Figure 12. *The Wonder Ring* (1955), Stan Brakhage

Like *Manhatta,* Francis Thompson's *NY, NY* (US, 1957) is structured around a day in the city (see figure 13). This film shows objects similar to those in *Manhatta,* including building cranes and light dappling on water. But in *NY, NY,* these entities are processed through prisms, distorting mirrors, and special lenses, in opposition to Strand's principles of "straight" photography. The shapes of individual objects are severely distorted and multiplied innumerable times in the frame. Disorientation abounds. Objects defy gravity. Skyscrapers, streets, and people are transformed into curvilinear shapes, extending and compressing like funhouse mirrors. Two buildings float upside down in mid-air, steel girders rest suspended in space, buses bend back on themselves, skyscrapers bulge, and alarm clocks shatter into slivered pieces patched together. Many objects are so distorted that the resultant frames, containing irregularly shaped splotches and rough edges, have the look of Abstract Expressionist painting and of Op art of the period.

Changing perception is the subject of this film. *NY, NY* moves the camera within a shot so as to alter objects from solid forms to fluid ones; frozen images reveal the wavy distortion of surfaces; a multitude of geometric, linear, and curvilinear patterns fill diverse frames; and boldly changing color schemes splash throughout the film. The focus on curvilinear forms in *NY, NY* contrasts sharply with the angular lines in *Manhatta.* The plane of the horizon line is broken, and
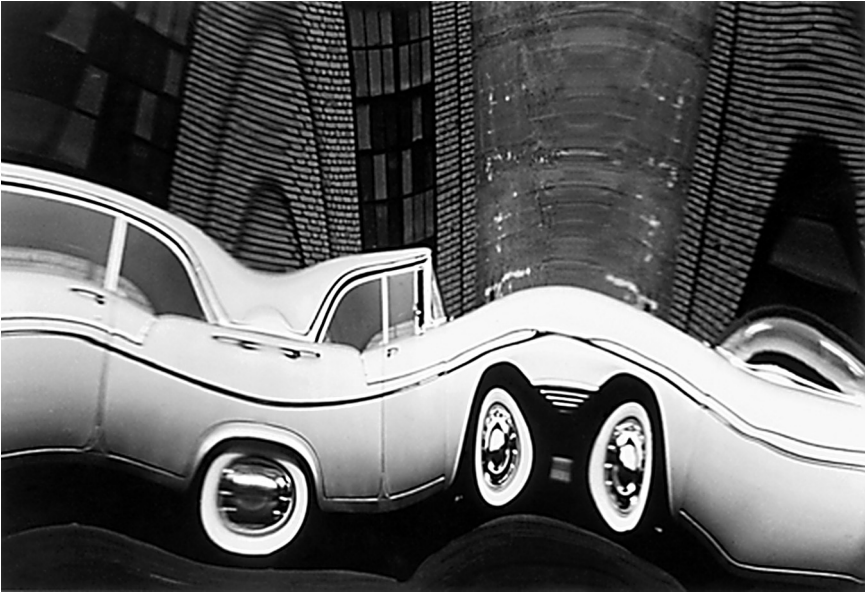
Figures 13a–13b. *N.Y., N.Y.* (1957), Francis Thompson

Figure 14. *Fire* (1963), Beryl Sokoloff

the image is wavy, rocking, unsettling. Despite its humorous tone and colorful look, *NY, NY* is a film reflecting the uncertainty of modern-day existence.

In Beryl Sokoloff's *Fire* (US, 1963), a conflagration on a Chelsea pier along the Hudson River becomes a metaphor for the tension between creative and destructive forces of nature (see figure 14). The filmmaker's cinematography exhibits a flair for vividly capturing the tactile feel of objects, whether man-made constructions or waves crashing upon the shore. A dynamic montage style involves radical spatial and temporal displacements. Dispensing with establishing shots, Sokoloff juxtaposes long shots in one locale with extreme close-ups in another to create a disorientation in the spatial continuum. Sokoloff forgoes the temporal continuity (progressing from sunrise to sunset) traditionally used in the city symphony film; instead, he interlaces shots from different times of day into a poetic contrast of shifting light and texture.

Paralleling concerns to expose the painterly process in minimal art and abstract expressionism, experimental filmmakers soon began incorporating an awareness of the materiality of the film stock into their city symphonies.

In Andy Warhol's epic eight-hour film *Empire* (US, 1963), the filmmaker shifts the time span of the typical city symphony film, beginning instead with
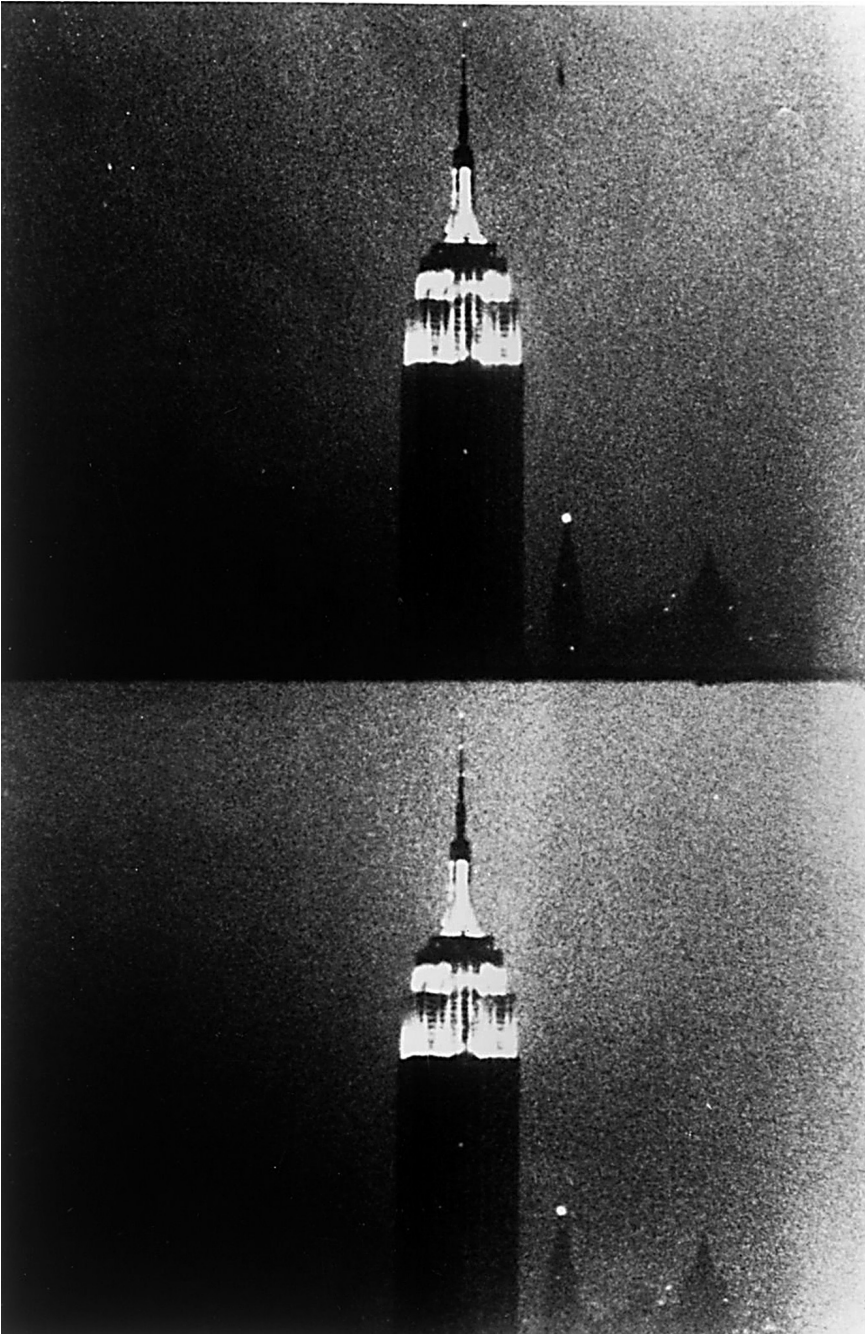
Figure 15. *Empire* (1963), Andy Warhol

Figure 16. *Wavelength* (1967), Michael Snow

sunset and ending in the early morning hours. Returning to the technique of the very first years of early cinema, the camera remains in a fixed position on the tripod. Filmed by collaborator Jonas Mekas from the forty-first floor of the Time-Life Building, the camera observes the dimly lit edifice of the Empire State Building (see figure 15). Shot at sound speed (twenty-four frames per second), the film when projected was slowed down (to sixteen frames per second). Throughout *Empire,* Warhol draws attention to the materiality of the medium by including the leader of the exposed film at the beginning and end of the individual 16 mm reels, maintaining light flares throughout the imagery, accentuating the grain of the celluloid film, and maintaining various defects (such as watermarks) embedded on the surface of the emulsion. In addition, the slower projection speed extends the duration of the film to nearly one third more than the original shooting length, thus placing extra emphasis on the concept of the passage of time. The overall shape of the film is what predominates, rendering *Empire* as a structuralist film.

In contrast to *Empire,* Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (US, 1967) employs a different minimalist technique to reinforce the primary importance of the overall shape and structure of the film itself. The filmmaker's camera lens slowly advances for forty-five minutes across the interior space of a large eighty-foot New York

City loft, relentlessly narrowing the field of vision to a photograph on the far wall opposite (see figure 16). The illusion of a three-dimensional space is compressed into a two-dimensional surface. Ambient sounds combined with an increasingly intense sine wave are heard on the soundtrack.

In this film, Snow masterfully articulates the geography of this interior urban space with a panoply of visual strategies. The filmmaker employs different film stocks, filters, superimpositions, variations in lighting, flicker effects, changes in focus, slight shifts in camera angles, and edits to highlight the progress of the zoom. These cinematic effects create the illusion of shifting time frames between day and night (as witnessed by the play of light and darkness through the large windows at the far end of the loft), subverting the real-time temporal progression suggested by the filmmaker's continuously zooming lens.

Snow introduces an array of human characters into this field of vision. The story involves an unexplained death. This plotline, however, functions as a kind of Hitchcock-like "McGuffin," or red herring, diverting attention from the more profound narrative of this film, that of the experimental re-articulation of the physical space.

The Bad and the Beautiful (US, 1967) is noteworthy for filmmaker Warren Sonbert's use of in-camera editing (see figure 17). He shot individual 100 foot camera rolls, and then assembled them into a series of mini narratives. Each sequence captures a pair of young couples in unusually intimate, quotidian moments: eating, making love, dancing, and whiling away the time (both within the confines of various New York City apartments as well as in Gramercy Park). Sonbert exploits the geography of the physical space through his ever-roving hand-held camera that is in constant choreography with the human figures within his field of vision. The rock-and-roll soundtrack enlivens the protagonists' youthful enthusiasm; however, the flares and fades at the beginning and end of each camera roll both generate and engulf each of the couples, suggesting that momentary bliss is embedded within a time span of fleeting mortality.

In contradistinction to Hollywood's emphasis on commercial cel animation, New York City has been a fulcrum for filmmakers who work by combining masterful hand drawings with experimental animation techniques. Often their native urban locale has served as the subject of their filmmaking enterprise. In George Griffin's *Block Print* (US, 1976), the filmmaker represents the geography of a square New York City block in different forms: tracing a map, filming around the block at different speeds and angles, and through Xerography (see figure 18). Having cut the Xeroxed images into individual frames, the artist then mounts them on a rolling early cinema Mutoscope machine and retraces his steps around the block. The photocopied images and the filmic representation of the city block appear simultaneously in the frame. In this fashion, Griffin masterfully illustrates

Figures 17a–17b. *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1967), Warren Sonbert

Figure 18. *Block Print* (1976), George Griffin

how the same physical space can be represented in different ways cinematographically within the film frame, as well as deconstructing the process of making an animated film. In *NYC* (US, 1976), Jeff Scher photographed skylines, streets, waterways, and monuments (see figure 19), paralleling imagery in *Manhatta* and *NY, NY.* He filmed these images with a single-frame animation technique and then processed them in the laboratory as a negative image, reinforcing in striking fashion an awareness of the illusionism of the film medium.

Beginning in the 1980s, a number of experimental filmmakers responded to economic gentrification and the AIDS crisis by inscribing more direct political discourse into their city symphonies. In Jack Waters' *Berlin/NY* (US, 1984), the filmmaker contrasts the fenced-in empty lots of the lower east side with views of East Berlin through Checkpoint Charlie (see figure 20). The filmmaker comments on the potential for capitalist exploitation of these two sites (which came to fruition years later). Rough-hewn splices interrupt the smooth transition from one shot to another, further underscoring the fragile nature of these unclaimed commercial spaces. The film functions as a poignant visual record, according to the filmmaker, of "the erasure of memory."

Jim Hubbard's *Elegy in the Streets* (US, 1989) is a direct response to the negligence of the Reagan-era political figures toward the AIDS crisis. Chronicling
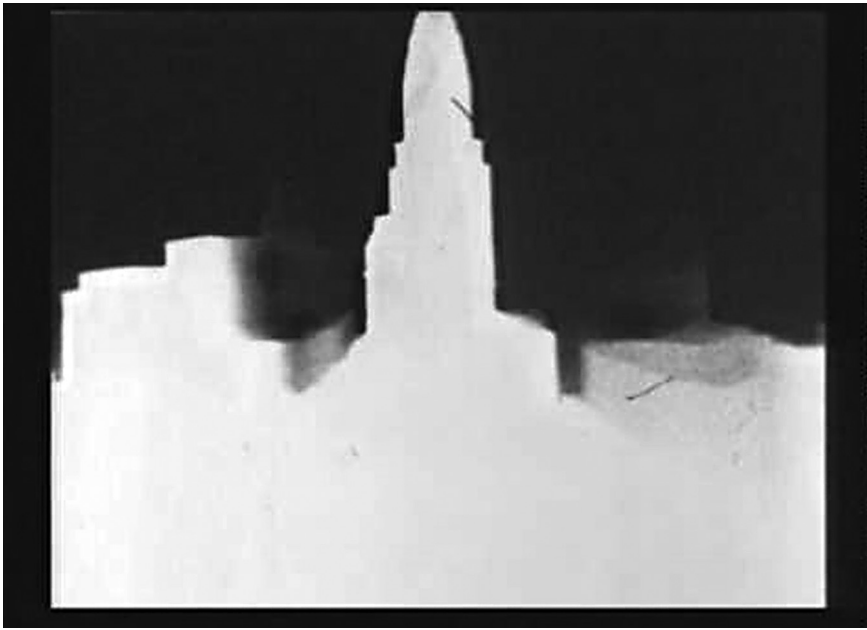
Figure 19. *NYC* (1976), Jeff Scher

the mass movement of marches, the AIDS quilt, vigils, and police confrontations in New York City, the film also serves as an intimate memoir to Roger Jacoby, a filmmaker who died of AIDS. Abigail Child's *B/Side* (US, 1996) explores the urban homeless in Tompkins Square Park on the lower east side (see figure 21). Child combines staged shots and documentary footage with a sound and image montage to create a poetic meditation on the forces of capital that ultimately drive the poverty-stricken inhabitants from their temporary homes.

The tragedy of 9/11 is woven into other filmmakers' works. In *NYC Weights and Measures* (US, 2006), filmmaker Jem Cohen creates a rhythmic assemblage of urban footage previously shot with his hand-wound 16 mm Bolex camera (see figure 22). At the end of the film, he reveals that as an overreaction to September 11, the FBI confiscated footage he was shooting for this film; Cohen's film underscores the fragility of the handheld filmmaking enterprise in a time of political repression. In *Native New Yorker* (US, 2005), filmmaker Steve Bilich employs a hand-cranked 1924 Cine-Kodak camera to shoot a geographical city symphony, extending from the northern reaches of Manhattan to the island's southern tip. The Native American protagonist first identifies with soaring birds, clusters of trees, and rocky outcroppings, and then is confronted with the effects of modern urbanization (see figure 23). As the protagonist encounters the smoldering World Trade Center

Figures 20a–20b (above and overleaf). *Berlin/NY* (1984), Jack Waters

Figure 21. *B/Side* (1996), Abigail Child

towers, the filmmaker challenges in apocalyptic fashion the conflict between who can be considered the American native as opposed to the foreign intruder.

In Mark Street's *Fulton Fish Market* (US, 2003), the filmmaker creates a haunting study of one of the last nights of operation of the Fulton Fish Market in its downtown locale. Filmed images of the nightlife are intermittently overlaid with hand-processing techniques. These colorful, patterned abstract shapes serve as a kind of scrim between the audience and the subjects in the film, thereby underscoring a process through which the landmark institution at this locale rapidly fades into the recesses of shared memory.

In *Empire II* (US, 2008), filmmaker Amos Poe radically remakes Andy Warhol's eight-hour minimalist classic. Shooting with a single-framing digital camera technique, over the course of a year from his apartment window, and then editing on Final Cut Pro, Poe generates a visually dazzling, dense array of images coupled with a richly layered sound track of music and city noises (see figure 24). Whereas Warhol's film extends time, Poe compresses time (one year of filming is turned into three hours); whereas Warhol's camera is static, Poe's camera is mobile (he zooms, pans, and layers images); whereas Warhol's film is silent, Poe's is sound (suggesting a myriad of action transpiring in the space off screen); and whereas Warhol's film is in black and white, Poe's is in vivid color.
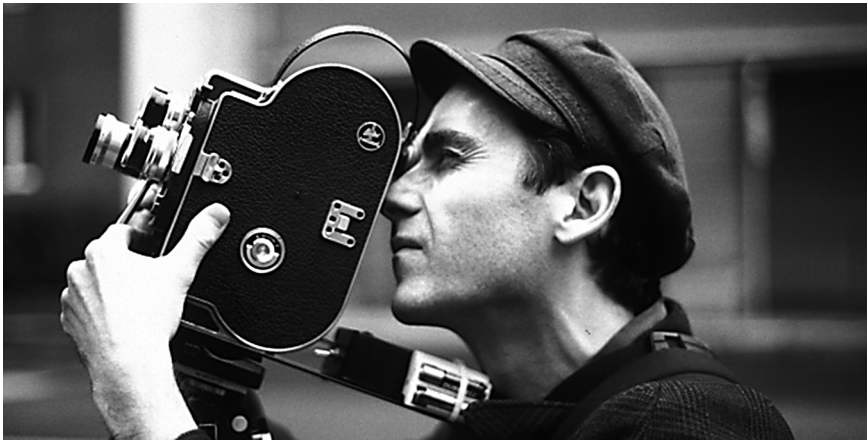
Figures 22a–22b. *NYC Weights and Measures* (2006), Jem Cohen

Poe uniquely captures the dynamic rhythm of New York throughout the film, as beautifully composed cityscapes ebb and flow into abstraction. The viewer's real-time spatial and temporal coordinates become disoriented, giving way to a cubist, fractured space of overlapping images and different moments in time colliding together. With *Empire II,* Poe has fashioned a unique, avant-garde film aligned with the tradition of the classic New York city symphony films *Manhatta, NY, NY,* and *Empire.* This film demonstrates that digital filmmaking is alive and well for the future of the city symphony genre of filmmaking.

Jon Gartenberg is a film archivist, distributor, and programmer. While working for nearly two decades as a film curator in MOMA's film department, he acquired numerous avant-garde films for the permanent collection and initiated the preservation of the films of Andy Warhol. He has also authored numerous

Figure 23. *Native New Yorker* (2005), Steve Bilich

Figure 24. *Empire II* (2008), Amos Poe

seminal articles on early cinema, including "Camera Movement in Edison and Biograph Films 1900–1906," which was a co-winner of the SCS Student Award for Scholarly Writing in 1979. In 1998, Gartenberg established his own company, Gartenberg Media Enterprises (www.gartenbergmedia.com; jon@gartenbergmedia.com). Among other projects, his company distributes silent, documentary, and experimental films in DVD and Blu-ray formats to the North American university market. Since 2003, he has programmed experimental films for the Tribeca Film Festival, and in June 2014, he curated a major retrospective program for the fiftieth anniversary of the Pesaro Film Festival, entitled "A Panorama of American Experimental Narratives in the New Millennium." He is currently preparing a film exhibition in conjunction with his essay "NY, NY: A Century of City Symphony Films."

Photo research by **Alex Westhelle**.