

Manhatta: A Film by Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler

Charles Sheeler (1883–1965), an American Precisionist artist, was better known as a painter than as a photographer. He began photographing in 1912 in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, where he developed an Americana Shaker style. He also did advertising and publicity photography for *Vogue*. In 1927 and into the 1930s, Sheeler was commissioned to photograph Ford Motor Works at River Rouge, work that made his reputation as an architectural photographer. His photographs are abstract, geometrically precise, and capture an elegance of proportions. They are, in effect, cultural artifacts as they depict the industrial might of America. Sheeler often exhibited his paintings and photographs together.

Charles Sheeler also collaborated with other photographers, including Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, and Edward Steichen. In 1920 he worked with Paul Strand on *Manhatta*, a short expressive film about New York City based on portions of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. The six-minute film spans an imaginary day in the life of New York City, beginning with footage of Staten Island ferry commuters and culminating with the sun setting over the Hudson River. It has been described as the first avant-garde film made in America. Its many brief shots and dramatic camera angles emphasize New York's photographic nature. Sheeler exhibited *Manhatta* as both projected film (as seen in this section) as well as prints made from the film strips that he used like photographic negatives.

You can view the film here → http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/artists_view/manhatta_main.html

Or here → <http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/videoDetails?segid=3516>

transcript

Frame #	Prose
4:00:48.23	The Museum of Modern Art Film Library
4:00:55.20	Manhatta
4:00:59.09 – 4:01:13.10	Photographed by Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler
4:01:15.02 – 4:01:22.50	(For All Races Are Here) "City of tall facades of marble and iron."
4:01:39.50 – 4:01:44.50	"When millon-footed Manhatta unpent, descends to its pavements."
4:02:44.00 – 4:02:48.50	"High growths of iron slender, strong, splendidly uprising toward clear skies."
4:03:08.12 – 4:03:16.06	"The building of cities. - the shovel, the great derrick, the wall scaffold, the work of walls and ceilings."
4:03:39.15 – 4:03:44.12	"Where our tall topt marble beauties range on opposite sides."
4:04:39.09 – 4:04:43.21	"City of hurried and sparkling waters City nested in bays."
4:05:02.16 – 4:05:05.19	"This world all spanned with iron rails."
4:05:30.03 – 4:05:33.12	"With lines of steamships threading every sea."

4:06:37.24 – 4:06:40.18	"Shapes of the bridges past frameworks, girders, arches."
4:06:46:23 – 4:06:53.07	"On the river shadowy group the big steam tug, closely flank'n on each side by barges."
4:07:10.27 – 4:07:15.13	"Where the City's ceaseless crowd moves on, the live long day."
4:07.39.19 – 4:07.46.20	"Gorgeous clouds of sunset drench with your splendor me or the men and women generations after me."
4:08:03.16 – End	The End

Crossing Brooklyn Ferry

1

FLOOD-TIDE below me! I watch you face to face;
Clouds of the west! sun there half an hour high! I see you also face to face.

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes! how curious you are to me!
On the ferry-boats, the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more
curious to me than you suppose;
And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence, are more to me, and more in my
meditations, than you might suppose. 5

2

The impalpable sustenance of me from all things, at all hours of the day;
The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme—myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated,
yet part of the scheme:
The similitudes of the past, and those of the future;
The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings—on the walk in the
street, and the passage over the river;
The current rushing so swiftly, and swimming with me far away; 10
The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them;
The certainty of others—the life, love, sight, hearing of others.

Others will enter the gates of the ferry, and cross from shore to shore;
Others will watch the run of the flood-tide;
Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the heights of Brooklyn to
the south and east; 15
Others will see the islands large and small;
Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an hour high;
A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see them,
Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring in of the flood-tide, the falling back to the sea of the ebb-
tide.

3

20

It avails not, neither time or place—distance avails not;
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence;
I project myself—also I return—I am with you, and know how it is.

Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt;
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd;
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd; 25
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood, yet was
hurried;
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships, and the thick-stem'd pipes of
steamboats, I look'd.

I too many and many a time cross'd the river, the sun half an hour high;
I watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls—I saw them high in the air, floating with motionless
wings, oscillating their bodies,
I saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies, and left the rest in strong 30
shadow,
I saw the slow-wheeling circles, and the gradual edging toward the south.

I too saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water,
Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams,
Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light around the shape of my head in the sun-lit
water,
Look'd on the haze on the hills southward and southwestward, 35
Look'd on the vapor as it flew in fleeces tinged with violet,
Look'd toward the lower bay to notice the arriving ships,
Saw their approach, saw aboard those that were near me,
Saw the white sails of schooners and sloops—saw the ships at anchor,
The sailors at work in the rigging, or out astride the spars, 40
The round masts, the swinging motion of the hulls, the slender serpentine pennants,
The large and small steamers in motion, the pilots in their pilot-houses,
The white wake left by the passage, the quick tremulous whirl of the wheels,
The flags of all nations, the falling of them at sun-set,
The scallop-edged waves in the twilight, the ladled cups, the frolicsome crests and 45
glistening,
The stretch afar growing dimmer and dimmer, the gray walls of the granite store-houses by
the docks,
On the river the shadowy group, the big steam-tug closely flank'd on each side by the
barges—the hay-boat, the belated lighter,
On the neighboring shore, the fires from the foundry chimneys burning high and glaringly
into the night,
Casting their flicker of black, contrasted with wild red and yellow light, over the tops of
houses, and down into the clefts of streets.

4 50

These, and all else, were to me the same as they are to you;
I project myself a moment to tell you—also I return.

I loved well those cities;
I loved well the stately and rapid river;
The men and women I saw were all near to me;
Others the same—others who look back on me, because I look'd forward to them; 55
(The time will come, though I stop here to-day and to-night.)

5

What is it, then, between us?
What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?
Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not.

I too lived—Brooklyn, of ample hills, was mine;
 I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan Island, and bathed in the waters around it;
 I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,
 In the day, among crowds of people, sometimes they came upon me,
 In my walks home late at night, or as I lay in my bed, they came upon me.

I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution;
 I too had receiv'd identity by my Body;
 That I was, I knew was of my body—and what I should be, I knew I should be of my body.

65

It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall,
 The dark threw patches down upon me also;
 The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious;
 My great thoughts, as I supposed them, were they not in reality meagre? would not people
 laugh at me?

70

It is not you alone who know what it is to be evil;
 I am he who knew what it was to be evil;
 I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,
 Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,
 Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,
 Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant;
 The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me,
 The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish, not wanting,
 Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness, none of these wanting.

75

80

But I was Manhattanese, friendly and proud!
 I was call'd by my nighest name by clear loud voices of young men as they saw me
 approaching or passing,
 Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of their flesh against me as I
 sat,
 Saw many I loved in the street, or ferry-boat, or public assembly, yet never told them a
 word,
 Lived the same life with the rest, the same old laughing, gnawing, sleeping,
 Play'd the part that still looks back on the actor or actress,
 The same old role, the role that is what we make it, as great as we like,
 Or as small as we like, or both great and small.

85

Closer yet I approach you;
 What thought you have of me, I had as much of you—I laid in my stores in advance;
 I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.

90

Who was to know what should come home to me?
 Who knows but I am enjoying this?
 Who knows but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?

It is not you alone, nor I alone;
 Not a few races, nor a few generations, nor a few centuries;
 It is that each came, or comes, or shall come, from its due emission,
 From the general centre of all, and forming a part of all:

95

Everything indicates—the smallest does, and the largest does;
A necessary film envelopes all, and envelopes the Soul for a proper time. 100

10

Now I am curious what sight can ever be more stately and admirable to me than my mast-hemm'd Manhattan,
My river and sun-set, and my scallop-edg'd waves of flood-tide,
The sea-gulls oscillating their bodies, the hay-boat in the twilight, and the belated lighter;
Curious what Gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and with voices I love call me promptly and loudly by my nighest name as I approach;
Curious what is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my face, 105
Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you.

We understand, then, do we not?
What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?
What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not accomplish, is accomplish'd, is it not?
What the push of reading could not start, is started by me personally, is it not? 110

11

Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!
Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves!
Gorgeous clouds of the sun-set! drench with your splendor me, or the men and women generations after me;
Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!
Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta!—stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn! 115
Throb, baffled and curious brain! throw out questions and answers!
Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution!
Gaze, loving and thirsting eyes, in the house, or street, or public assembly!
Sound out, voices of young men! loudly and musically call me by my nighest name!
Live, old life! play the part that looks back on the actor or actress!

Mannahatta

I WAS asking for something specific and perfect for my city,
Whereupon, lo! upsprang the aboriginal name!

Now I see what there is in a name, a word, liquid, sane, unruly, musical, self-sufficient;
I see that the word of my city is that word up there,
Because I see that word nested in nests of water-bays, superb, with tall and wonderful spires, 5
Rich, hemm'd thick all around with sailships and steamships—an island sixteen miles long, solid-founded,
Numberless crowded streets—high growths of iron, slender, strong, light, splendidly uprising toward clear skies;
Tide swift and ample, well-loved by me, toward sundown,
The flowing sea-currents, the little islands, larger adjoining islands, the heights, the villas,
The countless masts, the white shore-steamers, the lighters, the ferry-boats, the black sea-steamers 10
well-model'd;
The down-town streets, the jobbers' houses of business—the houses of business of the ship-merchants, and money-brokers—the river-streets;
Immigrants arriving, fifteen or twenty thousand in a week;

The carts hauling goods—the manly race of drivers of horses—the brown-faced sailors;
The summer air, the bright sun shining, and the sailing clouds aloft;
The winter snows, the sleigh-bells—the broken ice in the river, passing along, up or down, with the flood tide or ebb-tide; 15
The mechanics of the city, the masters, well-form'd, beautiful-faced, looking you straight in the eyes;
Trottoirs throng'd—vehicles—Broadway—the women—the shops and shows,
The parades, processions, bugles playing, flags flying, drums beating;
A million people—manners free and superb—open voices—hospitality—the most courageous and friendly young men;
The free city! no slaves! no owners of slaves! 20
The beautiful city, the city of hurried and sparkling waters! the city of spires and masts!
The city nested in bays! my city!
The city of such women, I am mad to be with them! I will return after death to be with them!
The city of such young men, I swear I cannot live happy, without I often go talk, walk, eat, drink, sleep, with them!

From Walt Whitman (1819–1892). *Leaves of Grass*. 1900.