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City Space, Technology, Popular Culture: The Modernism of Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's *Manhatta*

JUAN A. SUÁREZ

Reputedly, painter Charles Sheeler and photographer Paul Strand's *Manhatta* is the first significant title in the history of American avant-garde cinema. It is a seven-minute portrait of New York City and focuses on those features which make the city a modern megalopolis – the traffic, the crowds, the high-rise buildings, the engineering wonders, and the speed and dynamism of street life. The film strives to capture rhythmic and graphic patterns in the movements and shapes of cranes, trains, automobiles, boats, steam shovels, suspension bridges, and skyscrapers. Due to the dominance of technology, the entire urban landscape appears in the film as a machine-like aggregate of static and moving parts independent from human intention.

Manhatta lacks a storyline; it groups shots thematically in a series of vignettes sequenced from morning to evening. Early scenes show the beginning of the day in the city; extreme long shots of Lower Manhattan taken from the deck of an approaching boat are followed by images of commuters stepping off a ferry presumably on their way to work. Subsequent scenes show teeming streets, construction sites, moving trains, and the bustling harbor. The film closes with the sun setting over the Hudson River; this suggests the end of the working day and a lull in the preceding activity. *Manhatta*'s temporal frame stresses the repeatable nature of these slices of life. In a way, the film seems to imply, the wonder of the city is that its energy, movement, and excitement occur

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spontaneously as part of its workaday routine. The visual material is interspersed with quotations from Walt Whitman which emphatically celebrate the city's grandeur and introduce the different thematic sections. The line "When million-footed Manhattan, unpent, descends to its pavements ... " is spliced with high-angle shots of crowds; "high growths of iron, slender, strong, splendidly uprising toward clear skies!" introduces takes of building sites; and the verse "Gorgeous clouds of the sunset! Drench with your splendor me, or the men and women generations after me!" leads into the final shots of the setting sun and further intimates cyclical recurrence.¹

Manhatta was produced through most of 1920 and early 1921, and premiered on 24 July 1921 at the Rialto Theater, a mainstream commercial cinema in New York City.² Afterwards, it fitfully circulated in Europe as a cult movie and was revived in the United States toward the mid-1920s by the newly created film societies and art theaters, called at the time "little cinemas." Despite its limited success the film had an enormous influence. It inaugurated the American experimental film tradition as well as one of its most prolific and international genres: the city film or city symphony. In fact, shortly after the premier of the film, Paul Strand wrote to his mentor, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, that "apparently everybody has been making a reel of New York."³ If "everybody" made such reels, only a few remain on record – enough, however, to confirm the popularity of the genre in the United States. In the fifteen years after *Manhatta's* first screening, filmmakers as different in interests and temperament as Robert Flaherty (*Twenty-Four Dollar Island*), Herman Weinberg (*City Symphony* and *Autumn Fire*), Jay Leyda (*A Bronx Morning*), Irving Browning (*City of Contrasts*), or Robert Florey (*Skyscraper Simphonie*) tried their hand at the city film. As is well known, the genre matured in Europe. Its most frequently seen titles were produced there: Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin*, Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, Jean Vigo's *A Propos de Nice*, Alberto Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures*, and Joris Ivens's *Rain*.⁴

¹ The first quotation comes from "A Broadway Pageant" (1860); the second from the version of "Mannahatta" contained in the section "From Noon to Starry Night"; and the last one from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1856). These poems are the main sources for the film's intertitles. *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose by Walt Whitman*, James E. Miller, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), 177, 330, 119.

² For the production and exhibition history of *Manhatta* see Jan-Christopher Horak's excellent "Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's *Manhatta*," in *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919–1945*, Jan-Christopher Horak, ed. (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).
³ Cited in Horak, 270–71.

⁴ For discussions of the aesthetics of the city film, see William Uricchio, "Ruttmann's

Manhatta transposes into a new medium the kind of iconography that Strand and Sheeler had been exploring in their paintings and photographs. At the time of their collaboration, Sheeler was known for his canvasses of modern buildings, turbines, ship decks, and industrial landscapes, made in a style that anticipates contemporary hyperrealism. To supplement his income, Sheeler had also worked as a free-lance photographer; he was often commissioned for photo-shoots of buildings and urban landmarks for architectural firms. Strand had excelled with his shots of city types and street scenes, many of which had been published in the prestigious *Camera Work*. Several motifs and framings used in his early photographs reappear in *Manhatta*. The two artists shared a detached, documentary style which carries into their film. And yet the genealogy of this text must be traced beyond their authors' careers to larger cultural developments.⁵

The driving concern of *Manhatta* and subsequent city films is the exploration of the contemporary metropolitan landscape. This interest informs a variety of discourses in the American 1910s and 1920s: from

Berlin and the City Film to 1930," Ph.D. Dissertation. New York University, 1982; James Donald, "The City, The Cinema: Modern Spaces," in *Visual Culture*, Chris Jenks, ed. (London: Routledge, 1995), 77–95; William Uricchio, "The City Viewed: The Films of Leyda, Browning, and Weinberg," in *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919–1945*, Jan-Christopher Horak, ed. (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), especially Ch. 3, "Streetwalking Around Plato's Cave, or the Unconscious is Housed"; Richard Prouty, "The Well-Furnished Interiors of the Masses: Kirsanoff's *Menilmontant* and the Streets of Paris," *Cinema Journal*, 36 (1) (Fall 1996); the special issue of *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 37 (1) (1992) devoted to "Großstadtdarstellungen im amerikanischen Dokumentarfilm," edited by Eva-Maria Warth and Gisela Welz, and especially Eva-Maria Warth, "New York, Paris, Berlin: Die Großstadt im Dokumentarfilm der zwanzigen und dreißigen Jahre"; and the articles by Giuliana Bruno, Tom Gunning, Ed Dimmemberg, Scott MacDonald, David Serlin, and Jesse Lerner in the special issue, "Cityscapes I," *Wide Angle*, 19 (4) (Oct. 1997).

⁵ On Sheeler, see Constance Rourke, *Charles Sheeler: Artist in the American Tradition* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1938); Charles Millard, "Charles Sheeler, American Photographer," *Contemporary Photography*, 6 (1) (1967); Martin L. Freedman, *Charles Sheeler* (New York: Watson-Guption, 1975); Susan Fillin, "Charles Sheeler, Fashion, and the Vanguard," *Arts Magazine* (Feb. 1980); Theodor E. Stebbins, Jr. and Norman Keyes, Jr., *Charles Sheeler: The Photographs* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1987); Karen Lucic, *Charles Sheeler and the Cult of the Machine* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993). On Strand, see Nancy Newhall, *Paul Strand: Photographs, 1915–1945* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1945); Calvin Tomkins, "Profile," in *Paul Strand: Sixty Years of Photographs* (New York: Aperture, 1976); Sarah Greenough, "An American Vision," *Paul Strand: An American Vision* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1990).

painting, photography, and literature to cultural criticism, cinema, and social science. In painting, city scenes were a favorite subject of the realist “Ashcan School” painters – Robert Henri, John Sloan, or George Bellows, among others – and of many experimental artists such as Georgia O’Keeffe, Frank Stella, John Marin, Adam Walkowitz, Max Weber, or Louis Lozowick. In photography, Strand’s and Sheeler’s urban views were indebted to those by Alvin Langdon Coburn, Edward Steichen, and, of course, Alfred Stieglitz, Strand’s main champion. In literature, T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, or John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer*, to name a few, prominently featured the city as (in Eliot’s language) an objective correlative of a “fallen,” disenchanted world. Cultural criticism, often aligned with aesthetic modernism and disseminated in “little magazines” like *The Seven Arts*, *The Little Review*, or *Broom*, also assessed the new conditions of city life from a variety of perspectives. The cinema, in turn, had been married to the city from birth. Before the industry relocated to Hollywood, it thrived in large northern cities, where the anonymous crowds were the cinema’s main audience. Furthermore, the metropolis was an important purveyor of cinematographic spectacle, as witnessed by the popularity of an early genre: the “urban panoramas.” From a social science perspective, the late 1910s and 1920s saw the birth of modern urban sociology in the work of Robert E. Park, Nels Anderson, Louis Wirth, Mark Woolson, Lewis Mumford, and many others who were influenced in part by European figures like German philosopher Georg Simmel. Furthermore, the mid- and late-1910s witnessed the emergence of what some historians have called “the rise of city planning,”⁶ fostered by the complexity and growth of cities, and by the need to make the urban lay-out functional (adequate to the requirements of increased traffic and industrial growth) and expressive (of the city’s character, aspirations, and ideal images of itself). One more example of the contemporary desire to explore and express the city, *Manhatta* shares in the strategies and aspirations of many of these discourses. Despite its brevity and apparent simplicity, this work is a complex cultural artifact. It is at once a documentary, a critical statement about modernity, an aestheticist exploration of patterns, shapes, movements, and rhythms, and a visual counterpart of the descriptions of metropolitan modernity produced by contemporary sociologists, architects, and planners.

⁶ The phrase comes from M. Christine Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City: The Myth of American City Planning* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983); see the chapter of this title, 59–82.

Despite its influence, *Manhatta* has received scant scholarly attention. Histories of avant-garde and documentary film give it, at best, passing mention, and substantial studies are remarkably few. A notable exception is Jan-Christopher Horak's essay "Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's *Manhatta*," the best and most complete assessment of the film to date.⁷ For Horak, "*Manhatta* is central to film modernism's project of deconstructing Renaissance perspective in favor of multiple, reflexive points of view" (271). This is most apparent in the film's stress on abstract patterns and collapsed perspectives and in its refusal to center the spectator. At the same time, such experimentalism is contradicted by the presence in the film of antimodern concerns and ideologies, such as "a Whitmanesque romanticism" and the assimilation of the landscape of modernity to natural phenomena. These antimodernist ideologies are evident in the day-long fictional span – a natural cycle binding the artificial metropolitan environment – and in its conclusion, which shows the sun setting behind the harbor, and evokes the merging of nature, mass society, the city, and technology into a harmonious unity. By attempting such a fusion, Horak argues, the film further undercuts its own modernism; after all, closure and the reconciliation of contraries are strategies used by classical Hollywood cinema to solve ideological contradiction and to appease conceptual and narrative scandals. And, by suggesting that such "popular" moments are antimodern, Horak's article assumes an opposition between modernism and popular textuality which, as I will try to show, the film implicitly belies.

Horak traces the film's ambivalent modernism to the influence of the group of artists and intellectuals gathered around Alfred Stieglitz's gallery 291. While effective and thoroughly researched, Horak's contextualization is highly selective. Stieglitz is indeed an important reference, yet others

⁷ Horak, "Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's *Manhatta*," 267. Further references given in the text. Before Horak, the film was commented on by Lewis Jacobs, Dickran Tashjian, and Scott Hammen. Jacobs's pioneering survey of American experimental film opens with a brief description of *Manhatta* [sic]. He compares it to Flaherty's now lost *Twenty-Four Dollar Island* (1925) and regards it a forerunner of the documentary school of the 1930s. Lewis Jacobs, "Experimental Cinema in America, 1921–1947," in *The Rise of the American Film. A Critical History* (New York: Columbia Teacher's College, 1974), 545. Tashjian frames it within American Dadaism and relates it to the machine aesthetic of Sheeler, Morton Schamberg, Charles Demuth, and others. Dickran Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives: Dada and the American Avant-Garde* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), 221–23. Scott Hammen describes the film's graphic patterns, shot compositions, framing, transitions, and overall structure, and highlights the cohesiveness of the film's visual motifs. Scott Hammen, "Sheeler and Strand's *Manhatta*: A Neglected Masterpiece," *Afterimage*, 6 (Jan. 1979), 6–7.

remain to be accounted for; hence a broader form of cultural history is needed. As a start in this direction, I will explore the discursive parallels between *Manhatta* and the “little magazine” *The Soil*, and the influence on the film of the modernist reception of popular cinema. In the process, I will question the (undefined and) monolithic conception of modernism which underpins Horak’s account and which has held sway in cultural criticism for decades. I am referring in particular to the notion, perhaps most influentially articulated in Clement Greenberg’s work, that modernism rejects all classical systems of representation; that it is rigorously experimental; that it subordinates content to the exploration of language and materials; and that it is separate from mass culture and the practice of everyday life. A close look at modernist culture – in this case, at a modernist text like *Manhatta* – reveals instead a mongrel practice that combines traditionalism and innovation, abstraction and figurativeness, romanticism and antiromanticism, the cult of technology and that of nature, and, running through it all, a simultaneous devotion to high culture and to popular textuality.⁸ In this respect, one could say that *Manhatta*, like many other manifestations of modernist culture, anticipates the eclecticism and popular savvy routinely attributed to postmodernism; at the same time, the film’s tendency to homogenize city space and to erase social and cultural difference runs counter to the locally nuanced, subculturally inflected depictions of the urban environment advanced in postmodern texts.

Manhatta’s alignment of modernism, technology, and city space had already been foreshadowed in the 1910s by *The Soil*, an influential but largely forgotten “little magazine” published between December 1916 and April 1917 in New York City. It was founded by Robert J. Coady,

⁸ In this respect, my own account is inspired by recent reassessments of modernism in literary studies and the visual arts; see, for example, Thomas Crow, “Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts,” in *Pollock and After*, Francis Frascina, ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 233–66; Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Peter Wollen, *Raiding the Icebox: Essays on Twentieth Century Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995); Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the Twenties* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995). The need to examine and, in many cases, contest traditional definitions of modernism in these titles is of a piece with the current vogue of modernist and postmodern cultural critics committed to thinking *with* the popular media; I am thinking of Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Georg Simmel, Guy Debord, Paul Virilio, or Friedrich Kittler, among others.

owner of the Washington Square Art gallery, on Fifth Avenue, and edited by himself and Enrique Cross.⁹ Its pages offer a wild mixture of modernism, technology, and the popular arts. Illustrations by Claude Lorraine, Van Gogh, Picasso, and Douannier Rousseau were combined with film stills and pictures of athletes, comedians, singers, film stars, clowns, and bullfighters, and also with shots of locomotives, skyscrapers, steam hammers, and cranes. The mixed quality of the magazine's visual style was also reflected in the writing it published. Pieces by Wallace Stevens, Maxwell Bodenheim, and Gertrude Stein competed for attention with decidedly lowbrow genres: the Nick Carter serial, "The Pursuit of the Lucky Clew"; sports chronicles; and articles about magic, billiards, dressmaking, shop window arrangements, or the dime novel as literature. A considerable number of pieces and illustrations were devoted to non-Western art and cultures. In addition, the April 1917 issue had a section on children's art, which Coady, following Stieglitz's example, had exhibited in his gallery.

The combination of "legitimate" modernism, technology, and popular forms implicitly leveled off the cultural hierarchies between them while highlighting their common roots in metropolitan modernity. The easy passage between the popular and technology was based on their mutual implication, as most popular art was by this time mechanically reproduced and disseminated, and also on their anti-artistic nature. In the eyes of the editors of *The Soil*, both were forms of practice that owed little to the Romantic notions of art upheld by the genteel tradition. While, according to these conceptions, art was expressive of subjectivity and had little to do with use, both popular culture and technology sprang from compulsion and need. Here lie their particular Americanness, modernity, and truth – three interconnected qualities in the philosophy of the journal. Art is "true," in the terms of *The Soil*, when it responds to "everyday demand" – that is, when it is rooted in local conditions and works to change or express them. This hands-on quality is, at the same time, what makes it specifically American. In the words of a contributor: "What is called Americanism does not dwell in men's minds; it is a sort of

⁹ On Coady and *The Soil* see the personal reminiscences, Robert Alden Sanborn, "A Champion in the Wilderness," *Broom*, 3 (3) (Oct. 1922), 174–79; and Gorham Munson, "Robert J. Coady, *Soil* and the Skyscraper Primitives," *The Awakening Twenties: A Memoir-History of a Literary Period* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 39–47. Two critical studies are Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives*, 71ff.; and Judith Zilczer, "Robert J. Coady: Forgotten Spokesman for Avant-Garde Culture in America," *American Art Review* (Nov. 1975), 77–90.

compulsory service.”¹⁰ An example of form born of social and technological compulsion is the skyscraper, an innovation prompted by the increase in land values, urban congestion, and the necessity to build upward. “It was when architects began to ... conceive of a building based, decoratively, on its internal structure that they began to shake off the prestige of antiquity.”¹¹ Style in sport and popular culture stemmed from analogous compulsions. The movements of boxers and bronco riders responded to the need to beat their oponents. The art of the moving pictures, the comedian, the variety performer, or the cabaret singer arose, among other factors, from the need to hold the attention of the jaded urban spectators while depicting in sharp, recognizable outline aspects of these spectators’ experiences.

In its demotion of high art and its celebration of technology and the popular *The Soil* may be related to other historical avant-garde movements. In fact, as Dickran Tashjian has pointed out, its irreverence and sense of humor are close to the spirit of Dadaism.¹² *The Soil*’s main link with the movement was the notorious Arthur Cravan, who was active in the New York Dada group led by Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia. Cravan contributed occasional poems and brief reflections and was, besides, the instigator of the homage to Oscar Wilde (his avowed uncle) in the last issue of the periodical. The Dada spirit most often cropped up in visual jokes. Images of riders at rodeos bore captions like: “Not among the art notes” and “He doesn’t need an -ism to guide him.” A black smear on the page was titled “Evening of the three hundred and sixty-sixth day of the year.” And in a late issue a highly abstract canvas titled “Cosmic Synchrony,” by Morgan Russell, was printed next to a picture of an egg, captioned “Invention–Nativity” by A. Chicken. Russell’s solemn pronouncement on method and intention, printed at the bottom of the page, contrasts with A. Chicken’s laconism: “Cluck, cluck.”

Despite the agrarian resonances of its title, *The Soil* can be read as an urban collage of sorts made up of pictures of store window displays, locomotives, and skyscrapers; articles on the New York harbor and the Bronx zoo; reports on rodeos, circus shows, and boxing nights; transcriptions of conversations heard on the street; and interviews with the stars of the day. Coady defended the artistic value of these forms of city life in his two-part manifesto “American Art,” published in the first two issues of the magazine. There he stated: “There is an American Art.

¹⁰ Alfred Turner-Keller, “Mispronunciation,” *The Soil* (Jan. 1917), 80.

¹¹ J. B., “The Woolworth Building,” *The Soil* (Jan. 1917), 61, 62.

¹² Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives*, 71–84.

Young, robust, energetic, naive, immature, daring, and big-spirited. Active in any conceivable field.” And he proceeded to enumerate its achievements (I quote selectively, as the list goes on for a full page):

The Panama Canal, the Sky-Scraper and Colonial architecture. The Tug Boat and the Steam Shovel. The Bridges, the Docks, the cutouts, the Viaducts, the “Matt M. Shay” and the “3000” [two locomotives photographed on the facing page]. Jack Johnson, Charlie Chaplin, Bert Williams. Ragtime, Syncopation and the Cake-walk. The Window Dressers. Football. Coney Island, the Shooting Galleries, the Beaches, *The Police Gazette*, Krazy Kat, Nick Carter, Deadwood Dick, Walt Whitman and Poe, William Dean Howells, and Gertrude Stein. The Zoo. Staten Island Warehouses. Parkhurst Church and the Woolworth Building. The Movie Posters. The Jack Pot. Dialect and Slang. The Cranes, the Plows, the Drills, the Motors, Steam Rollers, Grain Elevators, Trench Excavators, Blast Furnaces – This is American Art ... an expression of life – a complicated life – American life.¹³

In a way, Coady's manifesto anticipates most of *Manhatta's* visual motifs: the Skyscrapers, the tug boats, the steam shovel seen in a construction site, the bridges (the Brooklyn Bridge appears in several shots), the docks, viaducts, locomotives, the Woolworth building, cranes, plows and drills, and Walt Whitman, source of the film's title and intertitles. Even Staten Island is once visible in the distance (though not its warehouses).

Coady bemoaned that this art is “as yet, outside of our art world.”¹⁴ Remediating this omission became the program of the journal's subsequent issues and, apparently, also the goal of Strand and Sheeler's picture. It seems obvious that the motifs anticipated in *The Soil* were included in *Manhatta* because they were considered emblematic of New York City. And yet, as emblems, they show a contradictory nature: the skyscrapers and bridges may be seen as features of the city's official, spectacular façade. On the other hand, tugs, construction site machinery, docks, and ferries belong to the city's unofficial existence. Celebrations of technological and architectural excess notwithstanding, *The Soil* was primarily devoted to a backyard view of the city. And this view predominates as well in *Manhatta*, particularly in the shots of anonymous pedestrians, a cemetery (Trinity Church's), busy side-streets, the elevated trains, the everpresent smoke, and other unheroic, homely signposts of daily life.

The affinities between *The Soil* and *Manhatta* go beyond imagery and may be traced to a shared view of their role as cultural media. Coady's magazine operated, to a certain extent, as a recording mechanism. Acting as urban reporters of sorts, as camera-toting *flâneurs*, the journal's writers

¹³ R. J. Coady, “American Art I,” *The Soil* (Dec. 1916), 3–4.

¹⁴ R. J. Coady, “American Art II,” *The Soil* (Jan. 1917), 55.

specialized in the sort of insignificant, unchronicled sights and practices present in Strand's early pictures or in many of *Manhatta's* scenes. They did so in short, descriptive pieces that were the equivalent of prose snapshots. Their titles often have the abrupt quality of photographs: "Tugs," "The Fight," "The Woolworth Building," "Prestidigitation," "To the Bronx Zoo," "The Billiard Players," to quote a few. They convey the feel of reality surprised in flight by the camera. Once caught, these slices of life are transposed to the pages of the journal, where their artistry and cultural significance are glossed. A typical example of this procedure is the article "Dressmaking," by F. M., which starts out with an elated sense of scoop: "There is a great deal more of art in the dressmaking shops than in the galleries. Particularly in most of those galleries which deal in so-called American art."¹⁵ The body of the essay is an interview with a "dress specialist," Paul Louis de Giaferri, laced with emphatic proclamations of fashion as art. On occasion such scoops were illustrated with actual photographs. The April 1916 issue contained a two-page picture of the Monroe Clothes Shop, on Broadway, praising its window arrangements in a caption: "... Daumier would have done it about the same way and ... our modern genius could learn a lot from this remarkable example of solid common sense." Even when actual pictures were not used, the writing strives to convey photographic effects. As an example, this is Robert Alden Sanborn, a regular contributor, on two boxers in action: "Art sits on the sidelines and wins bets from both of them. Phidias might sign his name under that frieze of nakedness, gliding through arenas of smoke in ten thousand instants of beauty."¹⁶ The fragment moves nimbly from allegory to classical allusion to an invocation of the camera's ability to freeze the flow of action into distinct moments.

This photographic style allowed for surprising juxtapositions: machine art with star interviews; shots of skyscrapers with children's art; the tugs in the harbor with the animals in the Bronx zoo. Such kaleidoscopic variety is that of city life itself. *The Soil's* abrupt jumps in topic, tone, and medium (from verse to prose to photography to painting) evoke the myriad shock-like sensations, perspectives, and transitions experienced by the metropolitan dweller in his or her excursions through the city. This exuberance and diversity received wide attention in contemporary urban sociology. For Georg Simmel, for example, the distinctive feature of modern metropolitan existence was an "intensification of nervous

¹⁵ F. M., "Dressmaking," *The Soil* (Dec. 1916), 26.

¹⁶ R. A. Sanborn, "The Fight," *The Soil* (Jan. 1917), 68. See also Robert Coady, "Notes on the Fight" (Jan. 1917) and R. A. Sanborn, "Fight Nights" (Mar. 1917).

stimulation” caused by the relentless barrage of outer and inner stimuli to which citizens are subjected.¹⁷ In turn, for Robert Park the city was “a mosaic of little worlds which touch but do not interpenetrate.”¹⁸ This gives city life, Park continued, a “superficial and adventitious character,” introducing into it “an element of chance and adventure.” In this heterogeneous environment contacts, impressions, and information multiply but their increase in number compels a decrease in depth. One comes into contact with many but really knows very few; sees more but understands less; has wider but shallower knowledge. The fleetingness of city life puts a premium on “visual recognition.” It favors a photographic rapport with one’s environment – a rapport that another sociologist, Louis Wirth, described as “impersonal, superficial, transitory, and segmental,” and, above all, based on what one sees, on surface appearance.¹⁹

The Soil's snapshot approach entailed a radically additive, inclusive principle also at work in *Manhatta*. In practice, any object, scene, or facet of contemporary urban culture could be (and was) framed as art by the journal: a building site, barges and tugs, a crowd of passers-by, an acrobat’s routine, a boxing match, trains and horse-drawn carts, rodeos and circus shows, movie and sports personalities, and even the fish in the aquarium, reported in the tones of an art show advertisement, “Exhibition of the Freedom of Movement in Light and Space. Aquarium. Battery Park. New York City. Open Every Day 9:30 A.M. to 4:00 P.M.”²⁰ By choosing such artless subjects, *The Soil* and *Manhatta* captured and transfigured ordinary, ephemeral aspects of urban life. They did so by placing a frame around them. Framing “elevated” the ordinary and exploited its visual and cultural potential. It also “lowered” art by bringing it into closer contact with life. Furthermore, this device displaced “artistry” from technique or subject matter to the act of pointing at, or choosing, a given particular from the countless possibilities of the actual.

This practice inaugurates a cultural logic pushed to its ultimate consequences by the contemporary Dadaists. Barely a year before Coady

¹⁷ Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, Donald Levine, ed. and trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 410.

¹⁸ Robert E. Park, “The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment,” in Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie, *The City* (University of Chicago Press, 1925), 23.

¹⁹ Louis Wirth, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” in *Louis Wirth on Cities and Social Life. Selected Papers*, ed. with an Introduction by Albert J. Reiss (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 71.

²⁰ Anonymous, *The Soil* (Mar. 1917), 124.

and Cross launched *The Soil*, Marcel Duchamp was producing his first ready-mades in New York. They were mass-produced commodities framed as art objects by giving them a title and an authorial intention, and by placing them in an exhibition context. Well-known examples are the snow shovel titled “In Advance of a Broken Arm”; the marble cubes in a bird-cage, “Why not Sneeze, Rose Selavy?”; and the notorious “Richard Mutt’s Fountain,” a porcelain wall urinal lying on its flat side. Duchamp also developed extensive notes for using the Woolworth building as a ready-made, a project that was never carried out by him. It was Sheeler and Strand who fulfilled Duchamp’s idea in *Manhatta* by slowly tilting their camera down the side of the building. Their ideology and spirit differed from Duchamp’s and yet at base they shared with him a structural affinity: the framing of everyday particulars as (anti-)art.

It is small wonder, then, that Arthur Cravan found in *The Soil* a fitting outlet for his cultural hooliganism. And it makes cultural sense as well that *Manhatta* was first shown in Paris at a Dadaist event, together with a Man Ray film, readings of Apollinaire’s poems, and music by Eric Satie.²¹ However, we should be careful to push beyond structural resemblances; *The Soil* and *Manhatta* practiced a sportive, genial Dadaism that never shared the aggressive despair of their European counterparts. They were Whitmanian celebrations of the common and conceived the modern material world as a hieroglyph of spiritual principles – “art,” democracy, “Americanness.” For their part, Dada collages and ready-mades jumbled the world’s *deiecta membra* as fragments devoid of purpose or meaning – bits and pieces which did not add up.

I have been proposing that, as an urban collage, *The Soil* was a forerunner of *Manhatta* and of the city film at large. But in this capacity it also looked back to the aesthetics of early cinema. This attachment to the past is characteristic of modernist film culture. At the time when the film industry was acquiring its classical configuration with the feature film, the incipient star system, increasing production values, and the gentrification of the film product and the film-going experience, modernist critics and commentators rebuffed these developments and resolutely sided with pre-classical genres – early shorts, actualities, serials, and physical comedies (like those by Chaplin or the Keystone Studios). For Robert Coody these rough, lively movies demonstrated the cinema’s fullest potential. They accomplished, in his own words, “that for which it [the cinema] is

²¹ Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives*, 222.

constituted – visual motion.”²² However, the industry’s recent emphasis on dramatic or narrative aspects acted as a sort of censorship, curtailing the most distinct possibilities of the medium. Hence right around the time when the National Association of Motion Picture Producers was busy trying to prevent public censorship of its products, Coady polemically exclaimed: “Yet have not these organizers been censoring [the cinema] right along? Have they not been limiting its activity to ‘the story,’ the ‘photoplay’ and the ‘photodrama,’ limiting its scope in the field of visual motion?” (38). These ideas were articulated in the essay “Censoring the Motion Picture,” published in the December 1916 issue of *The Soil*. There Coady spurned the trappings of respectability the cinema had acquired since the nickelodeon days – psychology, narrative, and, tied to both, illusionism. Film should not become a dramatic or narrative form: “To the moving picture, and to [film] acting, the story is merely a motive, a convenience or an excuse” (37). Stripped to its essence, the cinema was a popular language of surface and speed. These qualities made it an apt vehicle for exploring and expressing modern life.

Coady’s views are echoed by other authors. One of them was Robert Alden Sanborn, a close associate of Coady’s. His essay “Motion Picture Dynamics,” published in the Dadaist journal *Broom*, also decried contemporary productions and celebrated the “boisterously young” early movies, rich in “quickness of movement” and visual contrasts. The paradigmatic example for Sanborn is J. P. McGowan’s serial *The Girl and the Game*, released in 1915. This was, in his words, “one of the best motion pictures ever produced from the standpoint of a critic of the art.”²³ The value of the serial lay primarily in its speed and excitement: “characters dashed out of places and in again, men grappled, tumbled off freight cars, and rolled down embankments” (81). In the headlong plunge of the action, memorable cinematic moments pop up:

In making a scene wherein a swift motor launch was to race in to a dock, barely slacken to allow some men to leap into the pit, and then, describing a beautiful arc, speed out to sea, McGowan timed the action to take place just the right moment previous to the expected entrance into the distance of a huge coastwise steamship. The result was pronounced and unforgettable. The swift arc cut by the launch was contrasted with the slowly-drawn direct line of motion of the larger boat. The arc completed, the smaller craft sped away, passing under the

²² Robert J. Coady, “Censoring the Motion Picture,” *The Soil*, (Dec. 1916), 38. Further references given in the text.

²³ Robert Alden Sanborn, “Motion Picture Dynamics,” *Broom*, 5 (2) (Sep. 1923), 80. Further references to this piece are given in the text.

threatening bow of the great liner. Force was applied to force, two movements of contrasting beauty struck edges. Here was motion picture dynamics (81).

This epiphanic moment condenses the essence of film: motion, graphic contrast, and speed devoid of psychological or narrative import. Sanborn exemplifies here a (modernist) form of spectatorship which helped configure an alternative cinema in the United States. In fact, a film like *Manhatta* puts into practice Coady's and Sanborn's ideas as it rejects contemporary illusionism in favor of early film's primal visuality.

As an experimental text, *Manhatta* deflated dramatic and representational pretensions and highlighted the movement, surfaces, angles, lines, and textures of the urban spectacle. In doing so, Strand and Sheeler drew on the urban panoramas: a discarded form at the time yet one of the most popular film genres of the pre-nickelodeon era. The panoramas were one-take shorts depicting city scenes.²⁴ Some were random recordings of traffic and crowds; others photographed particular milestones (see, for example, *Panorama of the Flatiron Building*, from 1903, the same year as Stieglitz's first pictures of this building). At times the camera was mounted on moving surfaces, such as trains, trams, ships, or even the subway. Thus *Sky Scrapers of New York City from the North River* (1903) and *Washington Bridge and Speedway* (1903) provide views of the city from the decks of moving boats, a perspective echoed in several shots of *Manhatta*. For its part, *Interior New York Subway* shows the rear of an advancing train from the front of a second machine.²⁵ These films may have elicited the pleasure of familiarity, or may have sought, as did *The Soil* and *Manhatta*, to transfigure the ordinary. They constituted a variety of what film historian Tom Gunning has influentially called "the cinema of attractions": a type of cinema that solicits the spectator's attention not through narrative regulation but through the display of spectacle in the

²⁴ On the aesthetic of the urban panoramas see Tom Gunning, "An Unseen Energy Swallows Space," *Film Before Griffith*, John Fell, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions," *Wide Angle*, 8 (Fall 1986); Tom Gunning, "Non-Continuity, Continuity, Discontinuity: A Theory of Genres in Early Films," *Iris*, 2 (1) (1984); and, more recently, Tom Gunning, "The Whole Town's Gawking: Early Cinema and the Visual Experience of Modernity," *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 7 (2) (1994). Related to the concerns of the panorama film are Charles Musser's "The Travel Genre in 1903–1904: Moving Towards Fictional Narrative," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, Thomas Elsaesser, ed. (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 123–32; and Lynne Kirby, "The Urban Spectator and the Crowd in Early American Train Films," *Iris*, 11 (Summer 1990), 49–62.

²⁵ Many of these films have become recently available in the collection *The Life of a City: Early Films of New York from the Paper Print Collection, 1898–1906*. Digital Video Disc. "American Memory" Series. Washington, D.C.: The Library of Congress, 1995.

form of a unique view or event. In the case of the panoramas, the spectacle displayed is, on the one hand, the dynamism of the city and, on the other, the camera's ability to signify it. By panning, tilting, or traveling, by opening a visual field and transforming perspectival relations, by showing the entire length of a skyscraper or by cutting into the crowds, these films display the camera's ability to "mobilize and explore space."²⁶ *Manhatta* is a throwback to the cinema of attractions and recalls the double spectacle of the panoramas. It offers striking views of city space and celebrates, simultaneously, the versatility of the instrument that articulates them.

At the same time, *Manhatta* is a panorama film with cubist self-consciousness. The early panorama film was characterized by a certain bid for completeness. *Panorama of the Flatiron Building*, for example, pans up and down the entire length of the structure; other films provide 360 degree views from rooftops, observation points, or street corners (*Panorama from Times Building, New York*; or *Panorama from the Tower of the Brooklyn Bridge*); or travel slowly along the water front. Their symmetrical, deliberate camera movements attempt some closure and thoroughness. While framings may be off-center and beginnings and endings arbitrary, panoramas often seek to produce a complete impression of the scene or view at hand – whether it is a fishmarket downtown or a row of buildings on the shore. *Manhatta*, however, eschews such exhaustiveness. It reproduces the city as a fractured space. Shots of recognizable milestones appear truncated and asymmetrical: a shot of the Woolworth Building leaves the top off the frame, and tilts down its side and off to the right over the nondescript constructions around it. Balanced takes alternate with others which refuse to pick a clear center of interest and merely open up a space for aimless drift. In the harbor sequence, for example, carefully composed views of cruise ships are spliced with erratic shots of scattered barges and tugs crossing the frame in different directions. Other times, barrier shots reproduce within a given frame the simultaneity and perspectival contrasts common in cubist painting; hence two high-angle takes show distant ground-level activity through thick stone balustrades close to the camera lens at the top of a skyscraper. The editing yields no clear spatial relations – mostly contrasts of mass, volume, and direction. The overall aim is not a travelogue, an intelligible picture of the city but a decomposition, a dissemination, of the cityscape.

Like its attachment to the pre-classical panorama, *Manhatta*'s fragmentariness may have had its source in a modernist way of reading commercial

²⁶ Gunning, "An Unseen Energy," 362.

films which consisted in dislodging discrete segments from the flow of the narrative. This is exactly what Sanborn does in the paragraph quoted above. The procedure reappears in other modernist writings on film. In an article published in the December 1916 issue of *The Seven Arts*, critic Kenneth Macgowan proposes that the most significant moments in the cinema are the intermittent flashes of photographic beauty that appear in the crevices of the narrative. These moments of “visual distinction” are often involuntary and work against the general grain of the text:

Even the worst bungler gives once or twice – setting against it as his commercial creed may be – some new grasping at reality. It may be the rounding of a valley into view, the poise of a shoulder against a background, the proportions of a house to its frame of trees ... the flare of shadow cast by a single point of light, or just the reflection and diffusion of a cross light under a summer pier.²⁷

If for Coady and Sanborn film’s basic visuality demands a return to origins, for Macgowan it prompts a fragmentary reception: a sifting through the “flash and disjointed rush of mediocrity” for enlightened moments when “the director infuses life with the beauty of his pictorial art” (168–69).

These ideas suggest that one can see *Manhatta* as a recreation of the fragmenting, selective reading of a modernist spectator confronted with a standard commercial feature. One may read it as an archive of memorable city views culled from narrative films; as establishment shots or montage sequences purged of the storylines that might have supported them. Seen in this fashion, the film pulsates with possibility: it anticipates a story without actually producing one. The ships and docks evoke departures and arrivals; the cemetery suggests bereavements; the crowd scenes, frantic searches for missing characters. One almost waits for the film to light on a particular passerby and follow her or him till a story ensues. The story, however, is always held at bay, constantly hinted at but constantly withdrawn. In this respect, *Manhatta* is a pre-story, an evocation of the milieu where narrative emerges; or else a sort of cinematic unconscious: the unruly profusion of subjectless objects, spaces, and perspectives that the classical film has to repress, or else to bind into a storyline, in order to say what it says.

²⁷ Kenneth Macgowan, “Beyond the Screen,” *The Seven Arts* (Dec. 1916), 166. Further references are given in the text. Macgowan’s ideas foreshadow those of the surrealists, also avid readers and debunkers of classical cinema. Compare, for example, his statement here with Man Ray’s famous pronouncement: “The worst films I’ve ever seen, the ones that send me to sleep, contain ten or fifteen marvellous minutes.” “Cinimage,” in *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, Paul Hammond, ed. (London: British Film Institute, 1979), 84–85.

“Subjectless” is an important term here. As a sort of spatial unconscious of the classical film, *Manhatta* yields a dream-like space resulting from the condensations and displacements of ordinary film grammar we have just sketched out. Space in the film is abridged, syncopated in the manner typical of the city film. Lost in this abridgment are the city dwellers, seen always at a distance as black dots scurrying along on sun-drenched pavements or as a compact mass in ferries and thoroughfares. When readable at all, as non-descript strollers or generic workers, they seem endowed with few marks of belonging or identity. The human figures are, in a way, serialized and streamlined. They are nearly turned into abstractions, reduced to pattern, movement, and type. In fact, such reduction (or flattening, to recall Clement Greenberg’s vocabulary) is central to the film’s modernism and seems to have been the primary purpose of *Manhatta*. As Strand wrote in an unpublished statement of goals and method: “Restricting themselves to the towering geometry of lower Manhattan and its environs, the distinctive note, the photographers have tried to register directly the living forms in front of them and to reduce through the most rigid selection, volumes, lines and masses, to their intensest terms of expressiveness. Through these does the spirit manifest itself.”²⁸

The “spirit” is that of New York City, a synecdoche for American modernity – even for modernity at large. Its expression, Strand seems to suggest, somehow requires the erasure of the human landscape, or its complete equation with the material landscape. This erasure is already figured in the depopulated industrial scenes of Sheeler’s canvasses; yet it contrasts with some of Paul Strand’s earlier photographs. The last issue of *Camera Work* (Nos. 49/50, 1917), for example, featured six portraits of anonymous street types: a blind woman, a sandwich man, a yawning street vendor, a burly gentleman in a derby hat, a wrinkled middle-aged lady, and a bleary-eyed fellow staring frontally at the camera. They were captioned generically “Photograph, New York, 1917” but have later become known by other titles. These pictures provide another view of the modern metropolitan milieu, this time indirectly shown through the beaten physiques of their subjects, whose faces and gestures individualize and translate into physiognomic terms the harrowing march of progress.

²⁸ Paul Strand, unpublished press release, cited in Horak, “Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler’s *Manhatta*,” 272. The film’s abstraction and schematism were highlighted in the press coverage it received. See, for example, the photomontage made out of film stills titled “Manhattan – The Proud and Passionate City: Two American Artists Interpret the Spirit of New York Photographically in Terms of Line and Mass,” in *Vanity Fair*, 18 (Apr. 1922), 51.

In these snapshots, modernity is not a spectacle to be consumed in detachment but an embattled, painfully negotiated process. Here “being modern” is filtered through class position and cultural specificity. Neither class or cultural identity are obviously stated but can be inferred. Most of these characters seem working class – except perhaps the man in a derby. None is appreciably “ethnic,” yet one could easily read into them traces of the recent immigrant. Some of them stare wary and withdrawn, as if immersed in a cacophony of foreign voices. Something of a rural (East European?) manner clings about the style and demeanor of the sandwich man.²⁹

This messiness of ascription and difference is lost in the towering perspectives and geometries of *Manhatta*. The “spirit” of modernity, *Manhatta*-style, demands the extreme long take, the establishment shot which blurs the details, or transposes them into what Weimar theorist Siegfried Kracauer famously called the “mass ornament”: the crowd transformed into spectacle, as in chorus lines, gymnastic demonstrations, stadiums, parades, or, spontaneously, in streets and public spaces.³⁰ These aggregates are for him “surface manifestations” of the historical process – emblems, in short, of modernity. Their underlying cause was the population increase in metropolitan centers. They depend for their effect on the mediation of photography and film. Like dancers in a Busby Berkeley ballet, the protagonists of these crowd scenes can not take in directly the show they are a part of; they have to see themselves reflected in a picture or on a screen. At bottom, the mass ornament signals for Kracauer the passing away of organic communities and the emergence in their place of the regimented, Taylorized mass. Lost in the mass ornament are the specificities of cultural and social difference, of locality and sedimented meanings – obstacles to the rationalization process which

²⁹ For another reading of these pictures see Greenough, “An American Vision,” 37. For Greenough these shots “superficially resemble” Lewis Hine’s pictures of immigrants on Ellis Island yet are closer conceptually to Edgar Lee Master’s *Spoon River Anthology*. Hine taught Strand photography at the Ethical Culture School in New York City. Peter Conn also emphasizes the Strand–Hine connection: *The Divided Mind: Ideology and Imagination in America, 1898–1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 287–91.

³⁰ Siegfried Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament,” *New German Critique*, 5 (Winter 1975), 67–76, translated by Barbara Correll and Jack Zipes. It is reprinted, with a different translation, in *The Mass Ornament. Weimar Essays*, Thomas Y. Levin, ed. and trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). Levin provides an excellent introduction to Kracauer’s Weimar essays. I am quoting from Correll and Zipes’s version here. The piece was first published as “Das Ornament der Masse,” *Frankfurter Zeitung*, (9 and 10 July 1927).

characterizes modernity: “Personality and national community (*Volksgemeinschaft*) perish when calculability is demanded” (69). And it is demanded by the scientific management, profit maximization, and accumulation that transformed the life-world during the second industrial revolution. Because of this, Kracauer maintains that “the mass ornament is the aesthetic reflex of the rationality aspired to by the prevailing economic system” (70). From this standpoint, the faceless crowd in *Manhatta* becomes, with the rest of the film’s iconography, an ambiguous hieroglyph for the two interrelated forces of “Americanness” – or Americanism, as it was called in Europe – and capitalist modernity.

But, as Kracauer points out, capitalist rationality obeys a truncated form of reason – “not reason itself, but obscured reason Rationality grown obdurate. Capitalism does not rationalize too much but *too little*” (72). Its particular rationality is characterized by “abstractness,” by an empty formalism endowed with nearly totemic powers but which fails to address concrete life situations. It does not take into account human beings in their concrete needs and particularities and, besides, it cannot set its own limits. Its processes have become ends in themselves; its conceptual machinery has lost sight of goals and values beyond those which contribute to the endless growth of the system through relentless industrial expansion, ever deeper cash flows, more thorough colonization of daily experience by commodities. As a self-propelled, unstoppable force, capitalist rationality turns full circle here. Born of the attempt to curtail nature as blind compulsion, it has become just another compulsive force, a perverse second nature. In Kracauer’s own words: “It is only a consequence of capitalism’s unhampered expansion of power that the dark forces of nature continue to rise up threateningly, thereby preventing the emergence of a humanity whose essence is reason” (73).

The mass ornament partakes of this truncated rationality. With their abstraction and geometric splendor, the modern crowds replace earlier forms of community, often based on mystical appeals to the natural and the organic. Through abstraction and anonymity subjects are able to loosen their ties to compulsive forms of community and to enter more open types of association, potentially based on the exercise of critical reason, common aspirations, or analogous rapport with power. Yet under present conditions abstraction becomes an end in itself, not a platform for rewriting identity and remapping collective insertion. Besides, the gymnastics demonstration, the parade, or the chorus line hide behind pretence of order and power, the actual formlessness and dispossession of the crowd. At worst, these mass formations might become (as they did

with the rise of Nazism) new incarnations of the folk community and the “national spirit,” expressions of an organic bind. The abstract, geometrical mass then reverts to myth and nature.

This is indeed what happens in *Manhatta*, where the abstract crowds appear as an organic accretion on the city’s surface. Horak describes them as “antlike ... insects crawling between skyscrapers.”³¹ Their biological regression is perfectly consonant with the film’s eventual assimilation of the artificial modern environment onto nature – to the day cycle and the serenity of the sunset.³² From the standpoint of Kracauer’s ideas, the reassertion of nature would not be necessarily antimodern, as Horak proposed, but part and parcel of the film’s ideological modernity and aesthetic modernism. Flattening and abstraction, the reduction of specificity and difference, and the volatilization of history produce a schematism that finds the natural back in the heart of the modern.

As a natural outgrowth, the crowd in *Manhatta* stands above local allegiances and particularities and might therefore be the bearer of a unified civilization. This dream of unity seemed especially urgent in the United States in the early decades of this century, when the destruction of traditional rural societies, the relocation of large numbers of people into industrial belts, and foreign immigration (which peaked between 1880 and 1914) brought together vastly different population groups. The ensuing social and cultural heterogeneity was especially perceptible in cities. And yet, in its depiction of the urban milieu, *Manhatta* seems intent on exorcizing heterogeneity in favor of a uniformity reminiscent of the flatness and geometry of skyscraper architecture.

If this schematism brings up the promise of harmony and integration – of a cohesive polity without cracks – it also glosses over the complexities of cultural practice. On appropriating popular culture and the modern urban environment, *Manhatta* stresses formal components (speed, flatness, movement, line) and omits the multiplicity of the human landscape. Ethnic, class, and gender differences intervene in the production and

³¹ Horak, “Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler’s *Manhatta*,” 279.

³² It is also of a piece with a cognate naturalization of crowds in contemporary texts such as Vachel Lindsay’s *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915, 1922; rept. New York: Liveright, 1970). For Lindsay, one of the main capabilities of the cinema was its ability to portray “the sea of humanity, not metaphorically but literally,” since the crowd “is dramatically blood-brother to the Pacific, the Atlantic, or Mediterranean. It takes this new invention, the kinoscope, to bring us these panoramic drama elements” (67ff.). For a survey of contemporary views of the crowd, see George W. Bush, “Like ‘a Drop of Water in the Stream of Life’: Moving Images of Mass Man from Griffith to Vidor,” *Journal of American Studies*, 25 (2) (1991), 213–34.

consumption of urbanity and the popular, yet these differences are obliterated in the film by the imperatives of abstraction and the intended goal of cultural unity – the manifestation of “the spirit.” As a result of this erasure, *Manhatta*'s streets appear remote and uninhabitable. The film's exploration of the city and its assimilation of the popular are exhilarating for the way in which they contest traditional cultural hierarchies and give shape to everyday experience. But, at the same time, its inability to picture difference reflects an oppressive underside of modernism.

The mixture of utopianism and standardization present in *Manhatta*'s handling of the urban milieu persisted, in other quarters, in the “cities of tomorrow” imagined by architects and planners such as Le Corbusier, Sant'Elia, Mies van der Rohe, Hugh Ferriss, or Siegfried Gideon – the maximally rationalized environments of yesterday which have often mutated into the devastated housing projects of today. Against their alienating severity postmodern architecture has rebelled by reclaiming a vernacular idiom that would replace modernist abstraction with postmodern concreteness, and modernist seriousness with postmodern playfulness. Not restricted to architecture, such localism has been regarded a part of a new cultural regime, generically named “postmodernism,” which reacted against the erasure of heterogeneity and practice enacted in modern art – or at least in the universalizing way modern art had been read for decades. From this perspective, texts like the film *Blade Runner* or William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*, to name just two, offer postmodern rewritings of *Manhatta*'s modern cityscapes. In the new versions, city space is far from uniform or reducible to pattern; it resists the panoramic long shot and demands to be engaged in close-up; it is hotly contested and complexly inhabited from a variety of strategic positions dictated by class, subcultural alliance, gender, ethnicity, and even human/non-human status.³³

³³ On *Blade Runner*'s depiction of a postmodern urban space and polity see, for example: Douglas Kellner, Flo Leibowitz, and Michael Ryan, “*Blade Runner*: A Diagnostic Critique,” *Jump-Cut*, 29 (1984), 6–8; Yves Chevrier, “*Blade Runner*, or the Sociology of Anticipation,” *Science-Fiction Studies*, 11 (1) (1984), 50–60; and Giuliana Bruno, “Ramble City: Postmodernism and *Blade Runner*,” in *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science-Fiction Cinema*, Annette Kuhn, ed. (London: Verso: 1990), 183–95. The succinct and indispensable introduction to cyberpunk fiction is still William Sterling, “Preface,” *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* (New York: Arbor House, 1986), vii–xiv. Most readings of Gibson's fiction focus on gender politics; comments on the peculiarities of his urban landscapes are scattered throughout David Tomas, “The Technophilic Body: On Technicity in William Gibson's Cyborg Culture,” *New*

The shifts implied in these rewritings, however, should not make us forget the continuities between the modern and the postmodern, or, differently put, the existence of “postmodern” moments in modernism. These are most visible in modernism’s indebtedness to the popular and in its rootedness in the social and historical processes of modernity. In this article, I have tried to rescue these traits in *Manbatta*. As we tackle such revision of the cultural archive, we are forced to reassess the conceptions of modernism passed down by traditional cultural history. And in the process we may gain a new archeology of our present together with possible roadmaps for moving ahead.

Formations, 8 (Summer 1989), 113–29 and Andrew Ross, “Cyberpunk in Boystown,” *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits* (London: Verso, 1991).