

A Film About the Sea
Notes on Allan Sekula and Noël Burch's *The Forgotten Space*



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Doc.EyeFilm

Van Hallstraat 52

1051 HH Amsterdam, Holland

Ph: 31.20.686.5687

Email: DocEye@xs4all.nl

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Jose Ramón Velazquez truckdrivers
Los Angeles



Introduction

The Forgotten Space is a film that seems to be made for the Halifax Independent Filmmakers Festival. It takes as its subject the life of the port, and tries to show us what kind of global systems the port city enables and unwittingly participates in. One of its co-directors is Allan Sekula, one of the great American photographers who taught, for a period in the 1980s, at NSCAD. Its other director is Noël Burch, an expatriate living in France whose book *Praxis du cinéma*, also published as *Theory of Film Practice*, helped form the first generation of film studies and is still an indispensable work of film theory.

The film is based in some ways on Sekula's 1995 book *Fish Story*.^{*} That collection of photographs of seafarers, ships and ports has at its centre a very long, 2-part essay called "Dismal Science," part of which we reprint here. "Dismal Science" really is a masterpiece of cultural analysis, impossibly learned and searching and politically engaged. It is a great companion both to the photographs of *Fish Story* and the moving images of *The Forgotten Space*.

Sekula has also made a number of videos that connect in various ways with *The Forgotten Space*. Indeed, *The Forgotten Space* is in some ways a shorter version of Sekula's 3-hour video *The Lottery of the Sea* (2006). Other, shorter works, such as *Short Film For Laos* (2006) or *Tsukiji* (2001) deal in different ways with the political crises that define *The Forgotten Space*.

We are also including here the text that Sekula and Burch published together in the British political magazine *New Left Review*. Jonathan Rosenbaum, who recently retired after twenty years as

Liu Han Hu and Wendy Lui
Dormitory, Shenzhen, China



the film critic of the *Chicago Reader* (but who remains the Dean of English-language political film criticism) was the first critic to really recognise the importance of *The Forgotten Space*, and we are happy to reprint his text on the film, first published in the online magazine *Moving Image Source* (run by the American Museum of the Moving Image, at www.movingimagesource.us). In addition, we are publishing three new, short texts about specific aspects of *The Forgotten Space* written by Halifax-based film teachers.

Our goal here is both to show just how rich and complex a work this is, and also to offer some different ways into the film. We think this is one of the most important documentaries in years, and we hope that this booklet helps people understand why we think that.

Sekula has also been good enough to loan AFSCOOP DVDs of his earlier videos. People interested in learning more about his previous work in the medium can contact AFSCOOP to arrange viewings on-site. We have copies of the following videos:

Performance under Working Conditions (1973)

Talk Given by Mr. Fred Lux (1974)

Reagan Tape, co-directed with Noël Burch (1984)

Tsukiji (2001)

Gala (2005)

The Lottery of the Sea (2006)

The Lottery of the Sea: Prologue and Ending (2006)

Short Film for Laos (2006)

Note:

* As Jonathan Rosenbaum mentions in his text, *Fish Story* is not an easy book to come by. NSCAD's library holds a copy, though. Its call number is TR 670 S45 1995.

Allan Sekula



Dismal Science: Part 1 (Excerpt)

Allan Sekula

Full text originally published in

Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 1995)

To the extent that transnational capital is no longer centered in a single metropole, as industrial capital in the 1840s was centered in London, there is no longer a “city” at the center of the system, but rather a fluctuating web of connections between metropolitan regions and exploitable peripheries. Thus the lines of exploitation today may run, for example, from London to Hong Kong, from Hong Kong to Shenzhen, from Taipei to Shenzhen, and perhaps ultimately from a dispersed and fluid transnational block of capitalist power, located simultaneously in London, New York, Vancouver, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taipei, and Beijing, drawing ravenously on the rock-bottom labor costs of the new factories in the border city of Shenzhen and in the surrounding cities and countryside of Guangdong province in southern China. The ability of Taiwanese manufacturers to move rapidly from production in Taiwan to production in Guangdong or Fujian province is largely a function of the unprecedented physical mobility of manufactured goods and machinery. Shoes made in one month in Taiwan are suddenly made a month later in Guangdong at greatly reduced cost. The shoes are identical, only the label registers the change. And even labels can be falsified when import restrictions are to be circumvented. The flow of cargo to Japanese or North American or European markets is never interrupted. A ship leaves Hong Kong with its forty-foot steel boxes full of sneakers, rather than Keelung or Kaohsiung.*

The key technical innovation here is the containerization of cargo movement: an innovation pioneered initially by the United States

shipping companies in the latter half of the 1950s, evolving into the world standard for general cargo by the end of the 1960s.

By reducing loading and unloading time and greatly increasing the volume of cargo in global movement, containerization links peripheries to centers in a novel fashion, making it possible for industries formerly rooted to the center to become restless and nomadic in their search for cheaper labor.** Factories become mobile, ship-like as ships become increasingly indistinguishable from trucks and trains, and seaways lose their difference with highways. Thus the new fluidity of terrestrial production is based on the routinization and even entrenchment of maritime movement. Nothing is predictable beyond the ceaseless regularity of the shuttle between various end-points. This historical change reverses the “classical” relationship between the fixity of the land and the fluidity of the sea.

The transition to regularized and predictable maritime flows initiated by steam propulsion was completed a century later by containerization. If steam was the victory of the straight line over the zigzags demanded by the wind, containerization was the victory of the rectangular solid over the messy contingency of the Ark. As we will see, containerization obscures more than the physical heterogeneity of cargoes, but also serves to make ports less visible and more remote from metropolitan consciousness, thus radically altering the relationship between ports and cities.

The story is of course more complicated than this. It would be difficult to argue that the pioneers of containerized shipping had a vision of the global factory. Their innovations were responses to the internal competitive demands of the shipping industry, but these demands were by their very nature of an international character. Historically-militant seagoing and dockside labor had

to be tamed and disciplined: the former had to be submitted to the international search for lower wages, the latter subjected to automation. Ships themselves had to be built bigger and differently and by workers earning relatively less than their historical predecessors. International capital markets had to be deregulated and tariff boundaries circumvented or dissolved by fiat or international agreement, but these legal changes follow rather than precede containerization. NAFTA and GATT are the fulfillment in international trade agreements between transnational elites of an infrastructural transformation that has been building for more than thirty years.

Indeed, it can be argued further that the maritime world underwent the first legally mandated internationalization or “deregulation” of labor markets with the invention by American shipowners and diplomats of the contemporary system of “flag of convenience” registry in the late 1940s. At the time, American trade unionists concerned about the decline of the U.S. merchant fleet complained about “runaway ships,” drawing an analogy with the “runaway shops” of the textile industry then relocating from New England to the non-union south.[†] Little did they imagine that within three decades factories would follow ships to a more complete severing of the link between ownership and location. The flag of convenience system, which assigned nominal sovereignty to new maritime “powers” such as Panama, Honduras and Liberia, allowed owners in the developed world to circumvent national labor legislation and safety regulations. Crews today are drawn primarily from the old and new third worlds: from the Philippines, Indonesia, India, China, Honduras, and Poland, with Asians in the majority. Seagoing conditions are not infrequently as bad as those experienced a century ago.^{††} The flag on the stern becomes a legal ruse, a lawyerly piratical dodge. To the victories of steam and

the container, we can add the flag of convenience: a new ensign of camouflage and confusion, draped over the superficial clarity of straight lines and boxes.

My argument here runs against the commonly held view that the computer and telecommunications are the sole engines of the third industrial revolution. In effect, I am arguing for the continued importance of maritime space in order to counter the exaggerated importance attached to that largely metaphysical construct, “cyberspace,” and the corollary myth of “instantaneous” contact between distant spaces. I am often struck by the ignorance of intellectuals in this respect: the self-congratulating conceptual aggrandizement of “information” frequently is accompanied by peculiar erroneous beliefs; among these is the widely held quasi-anthropomorphic notion that most of the world’s cargo travels, as people do, by air. This is an instance of the blinkered narcissism of the information specialist: a “materialism” that goes no farther than “the body.” In the imagination, email and airmail come to bracket the totality of global movement, with the airplane taking care of everything that is heavy. Thus the proliferation of air-courier companies and mail-order catalogues serving the professional, domestic and leisure needs of the managerial and intellectual classes does nothing to bring consciousness down to earth, or to turn it in the direction of the sea, the forgotten space.

Notes:

* See Xianming Chen, "China's Growing Integration with the Asia-Pacific Economy," in Arif Dirlik, ed., *What is in a Rim? Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 89-119.

** I owe this insight to Stan Weir.

† Rodney Carlisle, *Sovereignty for Sale: The Origins and Evolution of the Panamanian and Liberian Flags of Convenience* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1981), p. 112.

†† See Paul K. Chapman, *Trouble on Board: The Plight of International Seafarers* (Ithaca, New York: ILR Press, 1992).

Donlim factory worker,
Shenzhen, China



The Forgotten Space: Notes for a Film

Allan Sekula & Noël Burch,

Originally published in *New Left Review* 69, May-June 2011

The subject of the film is globalization and the sea, the ‘forgotten space’ of our modernity. Its premise is that the oceans remain the crucial space of globalization: nowhere else is the disorientation, violence and alienation of contemporary capitalism more manifest. But this truth is not self-evident and must be approached as a puzzle, or mystery; a problem to be solved. Sea trade is an integral component of the world-industrial system, but we are distracted from the full implications of this insight by two powerful myths. The first is that the sea is nothing more than a residual mercantilist space: a reservoir of cultural and economic anachronisms, relics of an older and obsolete economy—a world of decrepitude, rust and creaking cables, of the slow movement of heavy things. The second is that we live in a post-industrial society, that cybernetic systems and the service economy have radically marginalized the ‘old economy’ of heavy material fabrication and processing. Thus the fiction of obsolescence mobilizes reserves of sentimental longing for things which are not really dead.

As ships become more like buildings—the giant, floating warehouses of the ‘just-in-time’ system of distribution—factories begin to resemble ships, stealing away stealthily in the night, restlessly searching for ever cheaper labour. A garment factory in Los Angeles or Hong Kong closes; the work benches and sewing machines reappear in the suburbs of Guangzhou or Dacca. In the automobile industry, for example, the function of the ship is akin to that of conveyor systems within the old integrated car factory: parts span the world on their journey to the final assembly line.

Today, over 90 per cent of the world's cargo moves by sea. Without a 'revolution' in ocean-going cargo-handling technology, the global factory would not exist, nor the phenomenon of globalization itself. What began in the mid-1950s as a modest American improvement in cargo logistics has now taken on world-historic importance. The cargo container—a standardized metal box, easily transferred from ship to truck to train—has radically transformed the space and time of port cities and ocean passages. There have been enormous increases in economies of scale. Older transport links, such as the Panama Canal, risk sliding into obsolescence as ships become more gargantuan.

The film moves between four port cities: Rotterdam, Los Angeles, Hong Kong and Bilbao. It visits the industrial hinterland in southern China and the transport hinterland in the heart of Holland. The first three can be classed as 'super-ports', the largest in the world. In Bilbao, a fading port with a brave maritime history, functional atrophy coexists with the symbolic hypertrophy of the Gehry Guggenheim, a delirium of neo-baroque maritime nostalgia wedded to the equally delirious promise of the 'new economy'. Super-ports, pushed to the periphery of the metropolitan centre, require vast tracts of land for the containers' sorting and storage. The old, sheltering deep-water port, with its steep hillsides and panoramic vistas, is less suited to these new spatial demands than low-lying delta plains, which nonetheless require continual dredging for the ever-deeper draft of the new super-ships. The old waterfront culture of sailor bars, flophouses, brothels and ship chandlers gives way either to a depopulated *terrain vague* or—blessed with the energies of real-estate speculators—to a new artificial maritime space of theme restaurants, aestheticized nautical relics and expensive ocean-view condominiums.

As the class character of the port cities changes, the memory of mutiny and rebellion by dockers, seafarers, fishermen and shipyard workers—struggles that were fundamental to the formation of the institutions of social democracy and free trade-unionism—fades from public awareness. What tourist in today's Amsterdam is drawn to the old monument commemorating dock-workers' heroic but futile strike to prevent the Nazi deportation of the Dutch Jews? Today's seafaring crews are drawn from the old and new Third Worlds: Filipinos, Chinese, Indonesians, Ukrainians, Russians. The conditions they endure are not unlike those experienced by the lascars of the 18th century. The legal instrument underwriting their exploitation is the 'flag of convenience' system, which allows ships owned in rich countries to be registered in poor ones. Here again, American capital was in the lead, seeking to break powerful maritime unions in the wake of the Second World War: the flag of convenience was created to obscure legal responsibility for safety and fair labour practices.

The cargo containers are everywhere, mobile and anonymous: 'coffins of remote labour-power', carrying goods manufactured by invisible workers on the other side of the globe. For apologists of globalization, this flow is indispensable for the continued prosperity of the West and for the deferred prosperity of those who labour, so far away. But perhaps this is a case for Pandora—or for her more clairvoyant sister, Cassandra.

Bilbao Guggenheim



Sea Change: The Displacements of *The Forgotten Space*

Jonathan Rosenbaum

Originally published in *Moving Image Source*, 8 April 2011 (<http://goo.gl/drcec>)

I'm sure that I learned a lot more from *The Forgotten Space*—an essay film by Allan Sekula and Noël Burch about sea cargo in the contemporary global economy—than I did from any other feature that I saw last year, fiction or nonfiction. In more ways than one, I'm still learning from it, and its lessons start with the staggering but elemental fact that over 90 percent of the world's cargo still travels by sea—a fact that seems all the more important precisely because so many of us don't know it.

Gary Younge recently contextualized this sort of ignorance in the pages of the *Guardian* (“Wisconsin is making the battle lines clear in America’s hidden class war,” 27 February):

You can tell a great deal about a nation's anxieties and aspirations by the discrepancy between reality and popular perception. Polls last year showed that in the US 61% think the country spends too much on foreign aid. This makes sense once you understand that the average American is under the illusion that 25% of the federal budget goes on foreign aid (the real figure is 1%).

Similarly, a Mori poll in Britain in 2002 revealed that more than a third of the country thought there were too many immigrants. Little wonder. The mean estimate was that immigrants comprise 23% of the country; the actual number was about 4%.

Broadly speaking, these inconsistencies do not reflect malice or willful ignorance but people's attempts to make sense of the world they experience through the distorting filters of media representation, popular prejudice and national myths. “The way we see things is affected by what we know and what we believe,” wrote John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*. “The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.”

The Forgotten Space was filmed mainly in four port cities (Bilbao, Hong Kong, Los Angeles, and Rotterdam) and what the filmmakers call “the industrial hinterland in south China and the transport hinterland in the heart of Holland,” with subtitled languages including at least two separate Chinese dialects, Dutch, Indonesian, Korean, and Spanish. Drawing upon work that Sekula has been engaged with as a photographer and writer for most of his career, the film also grew out of many years of discussions with Burch. It premiered last September in Venice, where it was awarded a Special Orizzonti Jury Prize, and I caught up with it two months later at the Viennale, at a well-attended screening held at the festival’s largest venue, with Burch in attendance.

I planned to write about it for this site as soon as the first North American playdate was announced, naively assuming that this wouldn’t take very long. But it wasn’t until I selected the film myself for a single showing at “Film Criticism in Focus,” a conference being held later this month (April 21-23) at Northwestern University’s Block Museum, that I had my opportunity. (I’ve subsequently learned that the film will be surfacing next month at Hot Docs in Toronto, and a May 15 screening at New York’s Cooper Union is also set, to be followed eventually by a longer run at Anthology Film Archives.)

In fact, this was my second rude shock concerning *The Forgotten Space*. Back in Vienna, Burch explained that the film had been directly inspired by “Dismal Science,” the central essay in Sekula’s 1995 book *Fish Story*. I immediately went to Amazon to order a copy, only to discover that not only was the book out of print, but that the cost of single used paperback copies ranged from \$288 to slightly over \$344. (Fortunately, for this article, Sekula sent me copies of this book and its 2002 “sequel,” *TITANIC’s wake*, which

can't be found on Amazon at all—although AbeBooks offers new hardcover copies from France for \$50.73 each plus overseas postage, and is offering its own used copy of *Fish Story* from the UK for a cool \$515.)

Is there some connection between *The Forgotten Space* being passed over by North American venues and Sekula's *Fish Story* being available only at prohibitive prices? I think so, but ascribing this to any simple conspiracy theory involving the film's anticapitalist positions would be much too facile, even if it contains some grains of truth. I think that conspiracy theories—for all their popularity in the contemporary blogosphere and in spite of their seductiveness—are often not simply misguided and glib but also frequently unnecessary as tools for comprehending various institutional and structural glitches and lapses. (This is incidentally why I persuaded Chicago Review Press several years ago to shorten the subtitle of my most popular book, *Movie Wars* [2000], for its paperback edition—a subtitle I hadn't selected in the first place—by removing the sixth and seventh words from *How Hollywood and the Media Conspire to Limit What Films We Can See*.)

A central part of the problem, I suspect, is institutional, relating to both Burch's background as a nonfiction filmmaker in state-supported European television and Sekula's own work as photographer, writer, and (more recently) solo filmmaker within the art world, despite the fact that he stubbornly sticks to the practices of photojournalism and the principles of realism that are now commonly regarded within that world as outmoded. Throughout Sekula's work can be found a running polemical battle with the political and ideological orientations of the art world. This comes to the fore in one of the penultimate sequences of *The Forgotten Space*, focusing on Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum

in Bilbao, described in *TITANIC's wake* as “a Los Angeles export product, a leviathan of California postmodernity beached on the derelict riverfront of the economically-depressed maritime-industrial capital of the Basques” that “marks the first move in a projected campaign of economic ‘revitalization,’ tied, as one might expect, to land speculation and tourist promotion.”

The paradox is that this Guggenheim Museum, persuasively viewed by the film as a grotesque symbol and instructive example of globalization's power to mask its own exploitation of underpaid labor, is a luxury item that inadvertently and incongruously rhymes with Sekula's own coffee-table books, now collectors' items, in glaring contradistinction to their power, thrust, and purpose. But I hasten to add that there's a crucial difference: Gehry's museum is both omnipresent and “available” to a local populace that, from what we see, feels completely disconnected from it, whereas the books *Fish Story* and *TITANIC's wake*, devoted to the histories and realities that are directly relevant to that same populace and to us, are effectively unavailable to both. So there seems to be a certain deadly logic to *The Forgotten Space* existing—or, more precisely, not existing—in the same academic and art-world context in North America that it is bent on challenging. This is a battle that Sekula was already waging in his first major collection, *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973-1983*, as the very title of one of its key essays—“Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)” —makes clear. The book is buttressed by an elegant literary-academic prose whose style might be described as a form of controlled rage (yet delivered with a measured calm whose eloquence and lyricism periodically evoke Chris Marker). Benjamin H.D. Buchloh spells it out in an essay that serves as an appendix to *Fish Story*: “That Sekula's project is engaged in the reconstruction of critical realism

after and against the abrogation of photography by modernist aesthetics is first of all evident through his continuous involvement with those photographic practices that were already identified by [Alexander] Rodchenko as 'unartistic': photojournalism and the traditions of (American) street photography and documentary photography."

Of course, once Sekula's early writings and photography turn up online (assuming that this happens) and *The Forgotten Space* becomes available on DVD, these restrictions will no longer apply, though some particular qualities in each may get short-changed in the process: the interactivity of prose and image in the books matches—and in some ways surpasses—that of Walker Evans and James Agee in their radical book of the '30s about Alabama sharecroppers, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and ideally the size of the projected images in *The Forgotten Space* should match the epic sweep of Burch and Sekula's subject, which is unlikely to happen on most home screens. (One shudders to think what this film would look like on a mobile phone.) But such things are always relative. As Sekula wrote to me recently—after pointing out that photography books are quite often very expensive once they go out of print, and that this isn't necessarily an "art world" phenomenon—"In terms of 'exhibition value,' *Fish Story* was seen by 650,000 people when it was exhibited in Documenta 12 in Kassel. The three editions of the book, two in English (1995 and 2002) and one in German translation (2002), totaled about 5,000 copies."

So it's important to bear in mind that *The Forgotten Space*, *Fish Story*, and *TITANIC's wake* are only individual manifestations of a multimedia project that has been developing over many years. And part of the problem with these overlapping works is that consumers

familiar with one or even two aren't necessarily familiar with all of them. The same Internet that leads us to many previously unavailable resources may also encourage us to avoid and bypass certain others. In some ways, I prefer the books to the film because of their literary qualities and their cultural span. The second part of "Dismal Science" in *Fish Story* proceeds from a discussion of *Jaws* (novel and film) to an analysis of *Potemkin* (both the film and its historical basis), and later, on facing pages, Sekula moves from a panel in a *Popeye* comic strip to two Walker Evans photographs of sleeping tramps. But I can't compare either the film or the books—or the half-hour "short version" of his three-hour *The Lottery of the Sea* (2006), the only one of his solo films I've seen—with the exhibitions, which I haven't seen (unlike most people who have encountered this material). And despite my earlier interest in Sekula's work back in the '70s and '80s, I might not have heard about the books, the solo films, *or* the exhibitions if it hadn't been for my encounter with *The Forgotten Space* last year. Such are the ironies and hazards of competing and sometimes mutually exclusive niche markets.

And I can't deny that Burch's own work has added important elements to the mix. As an American-born but French-based critic, theorist, film historian, and filmmaker who has developed radically away from his formalist and modernist beginnings in the '60s (as exemplified in his book *Theory of Film Practice* and his film *Noviciat*) toward content-driven leftist work in both writing and film, he has remained an original and provocative thinker, even though his political orientations are far more French and generically Marxist than Sekula's, for better and for worse. (To cite one example of what I mean, in France it usually isn't considered necessary to conceal one's political motivations in order to produce work that functions politically—as do such North American

films as Ron Mann's *Go Further* and Thom Andersen's *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, at least in their opening stretches.) Due to various complications in production, Burch and Sekula wound up directing some portions of the film separately and other parts together; Sekula wrote most of the narration and Burch carried out most of the editing.

What emerges is a free-ranging film essay with a lot of fresh documentary material about what globalized sea traffic does to the lives of some workers around ports in Southern California, two separate regions of China, Holland, and the Basque region of Spain. The film's most haunting and persistent image is the multicolored and anonymous rectangular steel containers loaded on the ships, evoking giant versions of children's building blocks while never betraying what their actual contents might be—an apt illustration of the concealments and shiny surfaces of the globalized economy itself.

The global crisis that intervened in the midst of the film's production obviously complicated the filmmakers' scenario in some ways and sharpened it in others. "Until recently," Sekula says—over a montage exploring various parts of a cargo ship that ends with shadows of the steel containers reflected on waves—"it was easy to believe that the world economy was running on automatic, regulating itself with an invisible hand. Now we know that the global trading system floats on a sea of credit and that bankers can as comfortably bet on failure as they can on success." From here the film cuts to a fascinating, extended clip from one of Michael Powell's earliest features, *Red Ensign* (1934), about an independent shipbuilder attempting to save jobs during the Depression, prompting the question of who would ever think of making such a film today.

The sea of course is itself both an epic subject and the focus of countless shared fantasies spanning many centuries. The fact that we commonly relegate these fantasies to some notion of centuries past rather than our workaday present meant that when the BP oil spill occurred in the Gulf of Mexico last year, the shock for many of us was roughly akin to a rude awakening from a dream that we didn't even know we were having, so thoroughly had this three-quarters of the earth's surface been banished to the far edges of our everyday consciousness. As Sekula's narration puts it, "The sea is remembered today only when maritime disaster strikes—when the black tide rolls in. Some of the oil is recovered and burned, polluting twice over...and then we forget again."

Sekula's fascination with the sea—and with the history of our relation to it, which Burch's background in essayistic documentaries both serves and amplifies—goes well beyond the commonplace observation that we keep forgetting it. There's also the very telling perception—more apparent in Sekula's writing and in *The Lottery of the Sea* than in *The Forgotten Space*—that the sea's role in the past as a bottomless source for metaphors about depth, mystery, exploration, adventure, and infinite spaces has in some ways been replaced by our utopian images of and fantasies about cyberspace, which expressions such as "surfing the Web" only help to literalize. For part of Sekula's polemical position is that the processes of globalization, many of which depend on the sea, are partially camouflaged by many of our fantasies about the freedom and drift of digital space, so that invisible sea cargo workers in effect ride steerage while those lucky enough to have computers can at least entertain the fantasy of first-class cabins.

Is *The Forgotten Space* a documentary or an essay? Ultimately it's a bit of both. The far-flung visuals show us people and places across the globe: documentary subjects. Yet one could argue that the true subject of the essay is what drifts and doesn't drift through our consciousness in relation to those subjects—the diverse theme-park rides, including those of the Internet, that we and our culture invent and keep running in order to rationalize or screen out the more pertinent displacements of people, processes, and goods. The documentary shows, but the essay explores, stimulates, and provokes.

Apple harvest,
Betuwe, Netherlands



Explaining the Notion of the “Essay Film”

Jennifer VanderBurgh

Reporting from the Venice film festival for the November/December 2010 issue of *Film Comment*, Olaf Möller joked that “[t]o say that the subject of *The Forgotten Space* is the global transformation of labor caused by container cargo shipping, is like saying that *Wagon Master* is a Western.” The methodology of John Ford’s 1950 film, like Allan Sekula and Noël Burch’s 2010 “film essay” *The Forgotten Space*, belies such simple description. Unlike Ford, though, Sekula and Burch have aligned their film (in promotional material and other venues) with a mode of documentary which, since the 1990s, appears to be increasingly regarded as a genre: the essay film.

As Jean-Luc Godard (perhaps the most famous film essayist, and quite a fan of John Ford) has noted, cinema is “a form that thinks.”* Like a literary essay, an essay film intervenes by taking a position on a subject. “Essay” derives from the French verb “essayer,” meaning to try. An essay film is, in this broad sense, an attempt to persuade viewers of its thesis, which is usually the advancement of a social or political idea. In persuading the viewer, elements of composition in the essay film make rhetorical appeals to ethics, logic and emotion.

The ways that essay films engage ideas (rather than really telling a story) distinguish the form as a genre of non-fiction filmmaking, and a subset of the documentary. Philip Lopate identifies five features of the essay film. It must make use of words, “either spoken, subtitled or intertitled,” and this text “must represent a

single voice.” It must “attempt to work out some reasoned line of discourse on a problem,” and have “a strong, personal point of view.” Lopate’s final criteria, perhaps more, he says, of an “aesthetic judgment,” is the baggiest of all. “The text’s language,” he says, “should be as eloquent, well written and interesting as possible.”** That is to say, it should be neither didactic nor “watered-down,” but affecting and impressionistic. Often, the voice-over of the film essayist seems to be wondering out loud. In being asked open-ended philosophical questions, viewers are encouraged to make connections between things that initially appear to be unrelated. This is as much the case in the work of cinema’s most prolific essayist and one of its most distinctive voices, Werner Herzog, as it is in *The Forgotten Space*—a film that asks the viewer to consider how, for example, a diversity of experiences from Dutch apple pickers to those living in tent city California are all affected by a container ship economy.

Unlike the literary essay, though, the essay film’s medium specificity has more than words at its disposal. Images, Lopate reminds us, take cinema’s writing process beyond the literal translation of Alexandre Astruc’s term, *caméra-stylo* (camera as pen). Writing with documentary images, which are usually unadulterated and therefore easy to consider mimetic and indexical, the work of the film essayist is to bring “abstract ideas” in text or in voice-over together with images of “concrete realities.”*** In this way, the essay film elevates representations of everyday objects and practices to the registers of the symbolic and esoteric. *The Forgotten Space* does this in taking the most seemingly banal of objects—the cargo container ship—and reframing it as a metaphor of globalization.

In his book-length treatment, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (2011), Timothy Corrigan identifies early cinematic

precursors to the essay film such as D. W. Griffith's 1909 *A Corner in Wheat*, which he calls "a sharp social commentary on the commodity wheat trade," and Luis Bunuel's *Land Without Bread* (1933), as well as Soviet filmmakers, Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein.[†] Indeed, Vertov's self-reflexive practice, aware of his status as producer—quite literally, as a "man with a movie camera"—is understood to be an important condition of the essay film and remains one of its central politics. Corrigan goes on to note that Hans Richter and Alexandre Astruc began defining parameters of the genre in the 1940s, writing about how since then, filmmakers have increasingly identified their own works as film essays.^{††}

A sampling of key artists in the genre about whom there tends to be agreement includes Alan Resnais (in particular, *Night and Fog*, 1955), Chris Marker, Agnès Varda, Peter Greenaway, Jean-Luc Godard, and Werner Herzog. The case could perhaps be made for Errol Morris with works like *Fog of War* (2003). More contentious in the literature on the essay film are "populist" filmmakers such as Michael Moore and Morgan Spurlock (*Super Size Me*, 2004), whose self-deprecating, comic approaches and legible (and sometimes predictable) formal structures produce immediately understandable, readerly films that mostly encourage narrative closure. This reveals something of an expected cerebral tone for the essay film. In Corrigan's words, essay films, "lean toward intellectual reflections that often insist on more conceptual or pragmatic responses, well outside the borders of conventional pleasure principles."[‡]

In writing *Theory of Film Practice* in 1973, Noël Burch, one of the two makers of *The Forgotten Space*, argued that to "choose a subject [of a non-fiction film] is to make an aesthetic choice."^{‡‡}

Seafarer Hafid Jura
praying at sea



Almost forty years later we can see just this kind of form-content connection, and we can see it in this film essay's literally fluid transition between ideas and places. These ideas and places are linked by water, even though the ideologies embodied by the container ship refuse to be confined by that surface.

Notes:

* Quoted in Laura Rascaroli, "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 49.2 (Fall 2008), 25.

** Phillip Lopate, "In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film," in *Totally, Tenderly, Tragically: Essays and Criticism from a Lifelong Love Affair with the Movies* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 283-84.

*** Paul Arthur, "Essay Questions," *Film Comment* 39.1 (Jan-Feb 2003), p. 58.

† Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: from Montaigne, After Marker* (New York: Oxford, 2011), 3-5.

†† *The Essay Film*, 3.

‡ *The Essay Film*, 4-5.

‡‡ Noël Burch, "Non-fictional subjects," *Theory of Film Practice* (Minneapolis: Praeger, 1973), p. 166.

Aerile Jackson,
Tent City
Los Angeles



Making Political Cinema – *The Forgotten Space*

Darrell Varga

The making of independent cinema is always on some level a political act. Its existence is a challenge to the hegemony of the cultural industries, whether through its subject matter, its refusal to accede to prevailing social norms, or even by virtue of its regional location. It needs to be said, though, that plenty of independent media production is an audition to be let inside the culture machine. For the founding patriarch of documentary, John Grierson (the first commissioner of the NFB), art was to be used as a hammer, and he happily took on the role of propagandist from his ciné-pulpit. From Grierson we can still understand documentary as engaging the viewer not just as an individual but also as a member of society; he saw the medium as a means of fostering citizenship and enabling democracy. Documentary was important for the way that it shines a light on the technologies of power through which society is organized. The limits of the Griersonian approach, though, lie in its problem/solution structure, whereby film is used to identify issues and concerns and posit solutions for the betterment of existing society. Overall, then, we can think of political documentary as something that, broadly speaking, goes against the grain of the existing political system.

Radical political filmmaking has long been identified with movements of resistance against colonial rule and capitalist exploitation in places of underdevelopment. This kind of work is not really invested in auteurism and the art cinema tradition. Here,

The empty village,
Doel, Belgium



cinema is a weapon and is made with an awareness of the historical context and material conditions of exploitation. In this way, it is also quite distinct from political discourse within mainstream media, as that system is predicated on an ideal of “balance” that also functions to regulate the allowable limits of discourse. Political documentary is distinct from reportage because of its subjective point-of-view, and it’s defined in part by its position at the margins of the culture industry. Unsurprisingly, then, it’s a form of representation often taken up by marginalized social groups in order to relate first person experiences. *The Forgotten Space* takes up the charge of radical filmmaking but shapes its politics within an aesthetics of space and duration.

The film’s key recurring image—a wide shot taken from the bridge of a cargo ship overlooking the thousands of containers on board and cruising through the ocean—invites us to contemplate the movement of goods and people across the ocean and the way capitalism produces spaces in service of production. In North America, we know the image of the container as the remains of an economic relationship where raw materials are shipped east to be returned as manufactured goods. Many of the containers make the trip once since the economics of shipping make it inefficient to have them return empty, and since North America has forgone its manufacturing industries (one container is exported for every two that arrive). The film tells us that paper bound for recycling is one of the biggest American exports. What gets forgotten in this global economy are the marginalized Asian factory workers, the displaced farmers whose land is occupied by shipping needs, by truckers kept waiting an unpaid in long lineups to load cargo, and in an environment where the majesty of the ocean is transformed into a traffic strip.

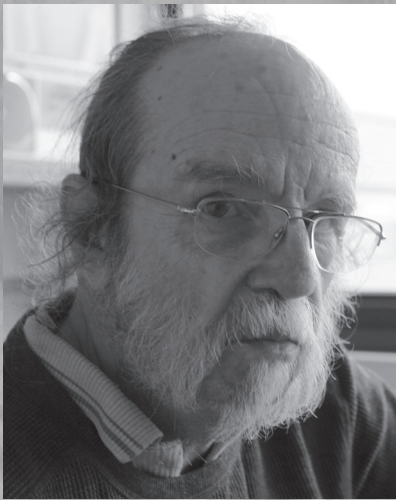
The forgotten space of the film's title is the steel box that transformed international shipping—meaning that it has fundamentally transformed capitalism itself. The film tells us the story of the rise of the shipping container, but this is not an informational program with an implicit structure of ideological inevitability. Instead, the film details the material conditions of work for 1.5 million seafarers, the conditions on 100,000 shipping vessels and the spatial dynamics of the port. Under conditions of capitalism, nature and the landscape are not simply given; they are produced (built, organized, populated or cleared, temporally structured, contaminated, and eventually abandoned) in service of the specific needs of the market. We can see this in the Highland clearances, or in American slave trade. The ship becomes the factory warehouse in the displaced zone between production and consumption, and in the relentless pursuit of surplus value the factory itself has become like a ship, stealing away to find invisible labour. Early in the film we see vast shots of the technologized work stations inside a modern ship, but no one is in the shot—as if the ship is piloted by the so-called invisible hand of the global economy. An archival clip from Michael Powell's *Red Ensign* (1934), where we see a noble industrialist trying to get more ships built in order to save jobs during the depression, reveals the lie of contemporary ideology, since now surplus labour is accepted as a natural condition of the economy and the cargo boxes are “like gangster suitcases filled with dollars.”

These vessels are fuelled by international trade agreements that provide for the displacement of production from the site of consumption. A key example of the production of space under capitalism, the exploitation of ship labour under the post-war American invention of the flag of convenience, signifies a world of relentless toil, like 19th century sweatshops but fuelled entirely by

bunker oil, the most toxic form of petroleum. We see frozen cod fillets fished in the North Atlantic shipped to China for processing and then back to the North American market. “Keep on Shopping” says Bush the lesser, after the disaster of the World Trade Center. A clip from Joseph Von Sternberg 1928 film *Docks of New York* (known in French as *Les damnés de l’océan*) has footage of the dredging of the harbour, images that are followed by shots of a tent city—another forgotten space—set up for the contemporary damnées, the subaltern unemployed of the modern port metropolis. The tent city is near the ostensibly common space of the port, but a security guard tells the filmmaker to stay off the property. Sea Cadet training in Hong Kong performs the illusion of a tradition of labour but it is an exercise in discipline and drudgery for the purpose of providing cheap labour for the service industry. Korean crews on a ship eat subsidized rice from California while Korean farmers go bankrupt. And we keep returning to that shot from the bridge, of row upon row of containers lunging through the sea, even as we come to learn that 10 per cent of the world ship fleet is idle. This becomes even more absurd after Sekula and Burch show us an image of over a 100 idle American locomotives.

It is in the materiality of culture that the political documentary lives. It is its images of the material reality of places that reveal the lies of ideology hidden in the conditions of production—of the ships that will forever rust, of the lie of Frank Gehry’s Bilbao, the port town transformed with public money into a private museum. These lies are made from the titanium Gehry bought cheap from Russia when its economy was collapsing, hidden in the container that carries the seeds of capitalism’s own destruction.

Noël Burch



Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, and *The Forgotten Space*

Jerry White

“Today I totally reject the prescriptive formalism of that first book and profoundly regret that of all my writings it is by far the best known.”

— Noël Burch, in a lecture on *The Forgotten Space* for the Jeonju Film Festival.

Noël Burch, co-director of *The Forgotten Space*, is talking there about his 1969 book *Praxis du cinéma*, translated and published (by Praeger) as *Theory of Film Practice* in 1973. This is indeed a well-known book, and served as a real touchstone for a lot of 1970s film theorists. The book’s English-language translator and editor, Annette Michelson, suggested one reason for this in her introduction: “*Theory of Film Practice* is at every point derived from and confirmed by the perception that film develops not through the constraints and conventions of an industry, but in opposition to them” (xii). That opposition to film as an industry, that desire to see it as a form whose inherent complexity and diversity is obscured by historians’ relentless tendency to see it as an industry, gives a good sense of the way in which the book is driven by an unusual combination of high formalism and Marxism. Burch has remained tenaciously committed to the latter throughout his life, but he’s got pretty mixed feelings about the former, and as a result he has tended to either downplay or reject the importance of *Praxis du cinéma*. The quote that opens my text here is taken from a lecture Burch gave about a year ago, but he was saying as much even in 1973, when *Theory of Film Practice* was issued in English. “I would

say the book tends to decline more or less steadily as it progresses,” he wrote in the preface, “especially from Chapter 8 on.” If you ask me, though, that’s about when the book starts to get really juicy. That’s especially true of Chapter 10, which is titled “Nonfictional Subjects” and is the part of the book that intersects the mostly closely with *The Forgotten Space*.

This is where Burch lays out his sense of what documentary cinema can really do when its filmmakers are engaged enough. He’s especially fond of the documentaries of Georges Franju. Contrasting his work with “old-school” documentaries with pretensions to objectivity, he writes there that “*Le Sang des bêtes* and particularly *Hôtel des Invalides* are no longer documentaries in this objective sense, their entire purpose being to set forth thesis and antithesis through the very texture of the film. These two films of Franju’s are *meditations*, and their subjects a *conflict of ideas*” (159). Those italics there are Burch’s, and they give a sense of how important these ideals are for his sense of what cinema, and especially documentary cinema, can do. Cinema is a time-based medium and thus ideally suited to meditation. But the one thing that makes cinema different from other time-based arts is editing, and it’s editing, the ability to juxtapose different images by way of illustrating conflict or connection, that the great Soviet silent filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein always argued was central to what cinema is. This combination of meditation and argument is also central to what *The Forgotten Space* is.

This is a film that works through juxtapositions; Sekula and Burch have created a dense texture of different places, different ships, different kinds of workers and different kind of managers to give a sense not only of the complexity of our current globalized sea-system, but of its brutalising and dehumanising quality as well. This

meditative sense gives *The Forgotten Space* an expansive quality, and watching it you feel as though you understand global shipping in previously-unimaginable new ways. But it is not a documentary in the objective sense. The film is an argument, a *cri de cœur* that is just as wrenching and visceral as anything in *Le Sang des bêtes*.

What Burch is longing for in *Praxis du cinéma / Theory of Film Practice*, and what you can see in other films he made too, is a kind of filmmaking that makes arguments about the meaning of various episodes in our shared history, and which makes those arguments at the level of form. We can see this – literally see it – in my favourite Burch film, *Correction Please*, or, *How We Got Into Pictures* (1979). Here he explores the shifts in the aesthetics of pre-1905 cinema by both inserting early films and re-creating some of them, subtly shifting their composition and editing patterns as the film moves forward. We see cinema here in a new way, as its visual elements move to and fro in suggestively unpredictable ways; in the process we come to see history in a new way too, as a series of rhetorical gestures defined by an impossibly complex diversity of assumptions, and not at all a fixed “story” that is handed down by authorities (industrial or otherwise). Something very similar is going on in *The Forgotten Space*, as we see the comings and going of various models of movement, of commerce, of organisation, and are forced to the realisation that this space that so defines our globalised world is the product of conflict, a conflict that is by no means over. And as in *Correction Please*, we are forced to this understanding by a complex mixture of images, interviews and off-screen narration. We come to this realisation, in short, through a dense and gloriously complex montage of the basic elements of cinema: image, sound and voice.

And so it’s no surprise to find this kind of filmmaking outlined quite precisely in Burch’s best-known book, and in that part that

lies beyond Chapter 8 no less. In that “Nonfictional Subjects” chapter, Burch writes of Jean-Luc Godard’s films that:

...they are steps towards a cinema of the kind long ago dreamed of by directors as dissimilar as Jacques Feyder, who hoped to adapt Montaigne’s essays to film, and Eisenstein, who wanted to make a film based on Marx’s *Capital*: a cinema of pure reflection, where the subject becomes the basis of an intellectual construct, which in turn is capable of engendering the over-all form of and even the texture of a film without being denatured or distorted. (162)

Burch talks a bit in the preface about the word “texture”: the French word “facture” is what he had used in his original *Praxis du cinéma*. Another possible translation of “facture” is “workmanship,” and thus we approach the nub of the matter, the real connection between *The Forgotten Space* and *Theory of Film Practice*, between formalism and Marxism. It is about the *work* of the work. Relations between labour and capital, between seafarers and the factory-like ships on which they serve, are the product of negotiation and conflict and struggle towards a particular outcome, towards a particular view of the world, and you feel that struggle not just at the level of what’s being said but at the level of *how* it’s done as well. Sure isn’t that true of cinema as well?

Contributors' Notes

Noël Burch left the United States for France in 1951, and has lived in Paris since then. His books include *Praxis du cinéma* (1969; *Theory of Film Practice*, 1973) and *Pour un observateur lointain* (1983; *To The Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in Japanese Cinema*, 1979). His films include *Correction Please, or, How We Got Into Pictures* (1979) and *Red Hollywood* (1996). He is also well-known for his television series on film history, including the five-part *What Do These Old Films Mean?* (1985) and his many contributions to the seminal French television series *Cinéastes de notre temps* (1967-72, with Janine Bazin and André S. Labarthe).

Jonathan Rosenbaum is the author of many books on cinema, most recently *Goodbye Cinema, Hello Cinephilia* (2011). He is the former film critic for the *Chicago Reader*, and maintains a website at www.JonathanRosenbaum.com.

Allan Sekula lives and works as an artist and writer in Los Angeles, where he teaches at the California Institute for the Arts. His books include *Photography Against the Grain* (1984), *Fish Story* (1995), *Dismal Science* (1999), *Performance under Working Conditions* (2003), *TITANIC's wake* (2003), and *Polonia and Other Fables* (2009). In 2007 he was a United States Artists fellow, and in 2010 he and Noël Burch won the Special Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival's "Orizzonti" competition for *The Forgotten Space*.

Jennifer VanderBurgh is Assistant Professor of English at Saint Mary's University.

Darrell Varga is Canada Research Chair in Contemporary Film and Media Studies at NSCAD University.

Jerry White is Canada Research Chair in European Studies at Dalhousie University.