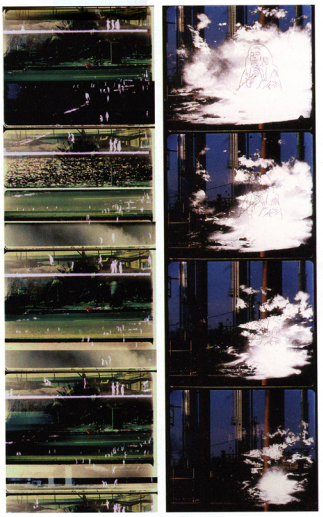
Imposing Technologies

DAVID E. JAMES ON PAT O'NEILL



Pat O'Neill, *Horizontal Boundaries*, **2008**, strips from a color film in 35 mm, 23 minutes.

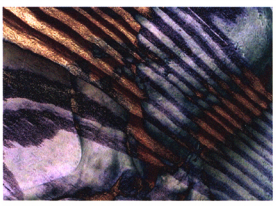
AMONG THE VARIOUS "LAST" FILMS that have punctuated the transition from celluloid to digital media, Pat O'Neill's *The Decay of Fiction* (2002) has a singular authority. At once a metanoir and a portrait of Los Angeles's Ambassador Hotel, with its fabled political and showbiz ghosts, it mobilized some of the most sophisticated visual effects ever to hit the screen. In adding many kinds of magick of its own to the tropes of Surrealism and other European modernisms as they had been reconstructed in the traditions of US avant-garde cinema, *The Decay of Fiction* epitomized the narrow possibilities for avant-garde film at the turn of the millennium and summarized the multiple forms of its dialogue with the medium's industrial use. But as the summa of O'Neill's nearly fifty years of innovation in both experimental and commercial filmmaking, it found itself in a historical cul-de-sac. Over the decade leading up to the film's release, special effects devised by generations of industry workers and especially Linwood G. Dunn's techniques of optical printing had been reproduced by digital software programs. The procedures that O'Neill had used in a professional career that included work on *Star Wars* (whose success in 1977 inspired the revival of special effects in Hollywood) and which he had also turned to a uniquely personal avant-garde expressivity demanded hours of tedious manual labor; now they could be performed overnight on Final Cut Pro, and once-prized optical printers were stacked on pallets for the wreckers. O'Neill's two newest chamber works—*Horizontal Boundaries* (2008) and *Starting to Go Bad* (2009), which receive their world premieres at REDCAT in Los Angeles on May 10—reflect his encounter with this crisis.

> The crisis underlying O'Neill's turn to video seems not just the latest but also the last of the series of shocks that have rattled avant-garde film since the mid-1970s.

More severe and hermetic than any of his previous films, the twenty-three-minute *Horizontal Boundaries* is composed from footage of Southern California landscapes: the beach, the desert, the Southern Sierra, and Los Angeles city streets and industrial suburbs. Some shots are stationary, some mobilized by long lateral pans, and some generated by computerized geometric camera movements of the kind that, inspired by Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale* (1971), O'Neill made his own in *The Decay of Fiction* and in his earlier feature-length 35-mm work, *Water and Power* (1989). Superimposed up to three deep or flipped into negative or drained of color almost to the point of appearing monochrome, the layers slip separately as if each were on a television with a faulty vertical hold, foregrounding the frame lines as a purely formal or abstract syncopation. Roughly in the middle of the film, superimpositions of more disparate imagery are introduced: a gorgeously colored industrial complex, a rising theatrical curtain, drawn animation of a person speaking on a telephone, and an extremely slow zoom into an abandoned house, backed by the shadowy silhouettes of downtown LA. None of these opens into the interludes of sunshine or narrative that buoyed the two features; and despite an Irish jig played by longtime collaborator George Lockwood on fiddle, the accusatory tones of *Dragnet*'s Sergeant Friday in the sound-track collage augment the visuals' obscure ominousness, as if to suggest that the interpenetrating scenes of wilderness and urbanity somehow trace an awful historical crime.

Made up of 35-mm footage shot in locations similar to those used in *Water and Power*, *Horizontal Boundaries* stands as a retrospective coda to the two features and as a glance back at the summary achievements of O'Neill's engagement with film and optical printing. *Starting to Go Bad* is a compilation of three short works from 2009, *I Open the Window*, *Starting to Go Bad*, and *I Put Out My Hands*; shot and composed entirely on digital video, they are not dependent on one another but are nevertheless designed to be seen in a specific sequence.

Though O'Neill has been producing digitally composed, large-scale ink-jet still photographs since the mid-1990s, the digital moving-image works indicate a new direction in his technological reorientation. Consisting of imagery shot on low-resolution consumer video, initially Hi8 and then Mini-DV (which O'Neill began using in 1993), these are likewise sophisticated reworkings of mostly landscape imagery. However, they were photographed not in the western United States (as the footage used in *Horizontal Boundaries* had been) but in Europe, when O'Neill accompanied *The Decay of Fiction* to museum screenings and film festivals in Manchester, UK; Rotterdam; London; Pesaro, Italy; and many other places. On these trips, much like any other tourist, O'Neill photographed streetscapes and hotel rooms, people and animals, paintings and sculptures, and views from planes and trains, continuing to cast himself as a kind of reporter on these scenes, "an individual who wanders the land and from time to time stops to comment on it."[1] (James Benning's new work *Ruhr* [2009] reflects the same skein of determinants: Also shot abroad rather than in the US, and on video rather than film, it too consists of the filmmaker's perceptions of Europe, specifically Germany, where his work is better recognized than it is domestically.)



From top: **Pat O'Neill**, *I Open the Window*, **2009**, still from a color video, 19 minutes. **Pat O'Neill**, *Starting to Go Bad*, **2009**, still from a color video, 30 minutes. **Pat O'Neill**, *I Put Out My Hands*, **2009**, still from a color video, 10 minutes.

O'Neill's mode of commentary is montage: the sequential juxtaposition of one scene with another but also, more saliently here, the use of multiple superimpositions, both forms being accompanied by similar sound collages. These visual compositings—again, significantly easier to effect using digital editing systems than film technology—have become O'Neill's master trope, displacing the mattes that in his earlier works subverted the ontology of the picture surface and created perceptual and thematic tensions between diverse iconographies. Though fragments of narratives and personal asides superimposed as verbal text imply a perceiving subject attempting to negotiate these tensions, and even appear to motivate or explain some of the unstable, oneiric juxtapositions, the dominant effect is that of their objective and heterogeneous autonomy. As Adorno remarked of Surrealism's "booty" of images, they may not be neutralized into "ahistorical images of the unconscious subject," but rather remain as "historical images in which the subject's innermost core becomes aware that it is something external, an imitation of something social and historical."[2] For O'Neill, that exteriority is—again and ever—the Möbius-like interpenetration of art in nature.

Though celluloid has recently displayed some postmortem twitches of life, especially in artists' installations, the crisis underlying O'Neill's turn to video seems not just the latest but also the last of the series of shocks that have rattled avant-garde film since the mid-'70s, when agitational identity politics coincided with the emergence of videotape to superannuate medium-specific structural film. This sequence of crises in production has precipitated parallel reconstructions in the other regimes of avant-garde cinema, especially those of exhibition venues and evaluative criteria; we no longer see what we think of as avant-garde film in the same places or the same ways as we did. Though the collapse of the funding and exhibition mechanism of underground film is easily exaggerated (there never was that much of it, even in the best of times), O'Neill's mid-'80s turn to 35-mm and feature-length work was itself somewhat belated, the shift to films designed for theatrical distribution and hence financial return having been initiated by the "New Talkies" of the '70s. Like the mid-'60s shift of a phylum of 16-mm avant-gardists to 8 mm, O'Neill's recent return to short, more personal, and clearly artisanal works entails a reassertion of the amateur pole of the amateur-commercial dialectic that he has lived, to the great benefit of each area. But recently the boundaries between the different modes of production have become unprecedentedly porous, not least in respect to screening possibilities. The costs and profits of *Avatar* will ensure that, for the immediate future at least, expensive special effects will dominate the theatrical big screen; but other, much more accessible forms of the technological developments that film manifests also occupy the digital flat screens that have become ubiquitous in our everyday visual environment.

O'Neill has yet to design works for cell phones, but the scale and modesty of *Starting to Go Bad* do imply the propriety of domestic reception on the home television or computer. Some of the same homespun priorities also inform his other response to the end of film: his return to sculpture and the other art forms in which he initially worked. His 2004 career retrospective at the Santa Monica Museum of Art revealed a large though largely unknown oeuvre of drawings, collages, and still photographs; but in his show at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery in Los Angeles in 2008, he presented both sophisticated digital installations, some of whose iconography resembled that used in *I Open the Window* and other of his films, and handcrafted sculptures that wryly invoked obsolete film technologies and equipment. One of the latter, *Yeah*, 2007, was a wooden ladder, originally made by his father, a carpenter, placed against the wall like a John McCracken plank. Noticing the ladder's resemblance to the material format of film, its rungs rhyming visually with the frame lines' "horizontal boundaries," O'Neill had painted it white overall and then inscribed one of the stringers with the patterns of an analog sound track. Though such a film will never pass through a camera or projector, it resonates in the mind both as a condensed image of the artist's personal and art-historical sources and as a surreal figure for the machines and materiality that once sustained the medium. □

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NOTES

1. David E. James, "Interview with Pat O'Neill," *Millennium Film Journal* 30/31 (Fall 1997): 127.

2. "Looking Back on Surrealism," in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, trans. Sherry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 89.