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Some 75 years ago for the rapidly expanding city of Los Angeles began secretly buying water rights in the Owens Valley, 260 miles to the north. Two huge aqueducts now carry this water south; a once-fertile valley has become a desert; and the unique ecosystem of Mono Lake is threatened. It is possible to enjoy Pat O'Neill's *Water and Power* – an exceptionally dense and technically dazzling nonnarrative film about, in O'Neill's words, "a city that turned land into desert" – without knowing any of this but a little outside knowledge certainly helps.

Yet O'Neill's film is about much more than local California history, though it takes this water diversion as a starting point and frequently juxtaposes the urban desert of LA and the salt flat desert around the lowered Mono Lake as a reminder theme is the imposition of human-made patterns on nature, as well as the way in which, in out mechanized landscape and out mechanized perception of landscape, nature and industrial civilization have interpenetrated each other to such a degree that they have become almost inseparable. Behind the stunningly dense and seductively beautiful images that O'Neill serves up lie four separate elements that occur and recur in ever new combinations like the themes of a piece of polyphonic music: nature itself, the fixed structures we have built on our landscape, the more fleeting presence of the human body as it moves across the landscape, and the narratives, the stories, that we humans invent and act out as we course across the land.

In the single time-lapse image that begins his film, O'Neill combines three of these elements in a manner emblematic of the work as a whole. We see a twilight sky with a large hill silhouetted at left and a high bridge running across the top. The red clouds move rapidly, while an occasional human shadow flits tenuously across a tiny area at the bottom of the screen. The viewer is thus aware of two very different types of movements: the smooth and regular rhythms of nature, seen in the flow of the water-bearing clouds and the slowly darkening sky, and the more irregular and willful movements of our species. At the same time, the viewer is also struck with two very different forms: the regular, rectilinear lines of the bridge, and the irregular, craggy outlines of the hill. It is to the film's great credit that neither here nor elsewhere does it create simple hierarchies or leap to obvious value judgments. Instead, the elements are combined in ever new and increasingly paradoxical ways, posing the relationships between humans and nature as a series of questions rather than offering fixed answers.

In his first shot O'Neill relies only on the relatively simple time-lapse technique, yet much of the film depends on the technical wizardry for which he is well known (he earns his living doing special-effects work for Hollywood productions.) Thus a specially designed computer-controlled camera allows slow, regular camera movements to be combined with time-lapse photography, and the optical printer – a device that allows frame-by-frame rephotographing (the basis of much Hollywood special-effects work) - allows portions of one image to be fused seamlessly with parts of another image from a very different space.

But of course technique in itself is only a limited interest. What is amazing about *Water and Power* is the profound way in which O'Neill goes beyond simply using technique to express his themes: techniques and ideas become inextricably intertwined.

For example, as the camera pans slowly across a desert landscape, with clouds and sunlight moving in time-lapse, we sense that the camera has almost become one of the forces of nature, allying itself with the movements of planets and wind that cause the light changes we see. By contrast, O'Neill's optical-printer images evoke the machine age. Thus a brightly glowing graffiti like image suddenly appears on the wall of a building. Or, from what appears to be a mine entrance in the wall of a cliff, boulders shoot out: it's as if they're being blasted away, but they've obviously been added optically.

By making technique part of his film's subject, O'Neill displays a self-effacing honesty lacking in the work of filmmakers who wish to offer the view a definite, clear, predigested message. By appearing to suggest that at times his technique parallels nature's forces and at other times the industrialized world, O'Neill encourages the viewer to become an active participant in the perceiving and evaluating of each of his images. Active perception is also encourages by the fact that so many images present themselves as bizarre, even jarring visual paradoxes in which parts of images from different spaces are combines in unexpected ways. Indeed, each image can be seen as asking the viewer a series of questions and as asking the viewer to inquire of the image, "What am I? Of what components am I created? What meaning do those components have in the world?"

This questioning process is created largely through the way O'Neill combines his images and image parts. Whole images are most often combined in slow dissolves rather than juxtaposed in an abrupt cut. When used to combine images from disparate spaces, a cut is likely to suggest that a strong comparison is being drawn between the two images; an abrupt, forceful cut can appear to be telling a viewer what to think about the relationship between the shots. O'Neill's lingering dissolves work quite differently. They often stop for a number of seconds at midpoint, when the two images are of equal brightness, resulting in a superimposition. Within one dissolve, for example, an aerial shot of a salt desert in seen superimposed on an aerial shot of LA at night. The effect is to encourage the viewer to see elements of each image in the other – to see in the variegated texture of the salt flat some of the pointillistic texture of city lights – and to begin to ask what relationships might exist between the two views.

One's sense of this paradox is encouraged by the fact that while the images are at first glance very different – white salt flats versus night lights – the dissolve also suggests ways in which they resemble each other. One question that one is encouraged to ask is of cause and effect – did the city cause the desert? One may be tempted to proceed next to a moral judgment, but the seductive beauty of each image prevents their juxtaposition from leading to any simply moralistic conclusion.

Even more complex are juxtapositions of parts of two images combined in a single shot. There is a black-and-white room interior in which shadowy figures flit about in rapid

time-lapse, while on the room's walls reddish images of desert hills appear. While no simple cause and effect is suggested here, the film's central antinomies – human and nature, inside and outside – are almost magically evoked. A series of rhythmically regular static images of landscape fragments has placed within them a black-and-white picture of disembodied feet. Here O'Neill clearly identifies the act of filmmaking – of creating rectangular frames around landscape – with the scientific pursuit of measuring, cataloging.

From the opening image, which contrasts the right angles of a bridge silhouette with an irregular hillside and moving sky, rectangles and right angles are emblems of industrialized civilization. Windows, buildings, the anatomy book – all form shapes that are opposed to the organic wholeness of land and sky. Very early I the film there is a pan along a huge horizontal pipeline (carrying Owens Valley water, perhaps?) that is soon superimposed on and eventually dissolves into a complex urban grid of streets and buildings with people bustling rapidly about. Cause and effect are again suggested – the urban scene is itself made possible only by structures such as pipelines, which bring in water, oil, gas – but there is also the optical juxtapositions of rectilinear forms, which recurs again and again. An urban street walled with high buildings displays a bustle of activity in time-lapse, which soon gives way to an enormous throng of marathon runners all moving in the same direction – one of the film's many examples of gently humor. Here, as in the neon like urban graffiti or the boulder explosion, the humor involves a joke on human ambition, on our desire to assert our presence in the world, to create something permanent out of our desires.

By the film's end O'Neill's time-lapse, which may at first seem like a banal trick to make urban bustle seem even more bustling, is revealed to be something far more profound. The same time-lapse that makes the movements of sun and clouds visible comes to seem as "natural" as real film time, a way of making visible those grand movements that bring us air and water, heart and light , day and night, and make life on earth possible. It is in *their* time scale – which, the film seems to be arguing, is clearly as legitimate as our own – that our own body movements seem frenetic and fleeting. Which leads us to perceive a further irony – that the huge buildings beside the runners, built by fellow humans, are (barring an earthquake) likely to outlast all of us. The point is that the ways in which we altered the land are far more lasting than the fleeting movements of humans and their vehicles that those alternations support.

The last of the film's four elements is the series of short, playful stories written by O'Neill and presented throughout the film in the form of printed titles. This mode of presentation is another way in which the filmmaking process is presented as one of the human impositions on nature that the film depicts, for the use of printed titles is an obvious cinematic device, as opposed to the more usual way of developing a narrative through the naturalistic depiction of character actions.

The first story, which is preceded by a title that reads "The Nineteenth Century," announces an important aspect of the film's theme, the occupation of the west by civilization : "settlers live in a town built on land they took from the Indians. The Indians

want their lands back." But O'Neill's attitude toward how narrative fits into the scheme of things is best demonstrated in a later story. The titles describe a wildly melodramatic fiction; intercut with them is a series of camera movements over a distant urban landscape. The camera moves in a series of straight lines, vertical and horizontal changing directions abruptly at right angles as it describes a rectangle. Narrative, whether an invented fiction or an accurate description of the complex interrelationship that form much of the fabric of our lives, is a human conception, even an imposition on the once-empty spaces of the planet. Our narratives are simply another way of charting a course across the terrain, like the roads and pipelines we build. They are mental constructs, imposed grids, not unlike the bridge silhouette with which the film begins.

The film then constructed like a series of dense, interlocking, and ever widening circles – each leading to another, all leading to another, all leading toward a larger view, but never arriving at a dingle static message or answer. O'Neill was able to shoot it in 35-millimeter – rare for independent avant-garde films – which allowed him to create images of even greater visual lushness and inner complexity than in his earlier 16-millimeter work. Each of his images combines several elements in a new and surprising way – so that when it first comes into view, the viewer is somewhat startled, doesn't quite know how to take it. The density of imagery then works to keep the viewer constantly at the limits of perception: it's as if every image is seen long enough for it to come into being. Once the image has become an "is," O'Neill goes on to another. The point of this is in part to provide continuing interests, to prevent us from coming to static conclusions. But there is a grander point as well: the continual shifts and surprises that lie at the heart of the film's form make a kind of grand metaphor for the never-ending change that underlies nature, civilization, and the multiply symbiotic interactions between them. While the topographic diversity and cluttered human presence of California may have been particularly suggestive of such a form, in truth it could apply to any place in which civilization and land interact. The similarities and differences between various human and natural forms are reflected at every level of the film, in each individual image and juxtaposition, in the small invented storied presented in intertitles, even on the sound track, a collage like mixture of natural sounds, synthesized sounds, and music.

While I am usually of the opinion that the is much to be learned from great films and little be learned from bad ones, even a dreadful film can prove instructive when its failures or stupidities take on a particularly clear form. Such was the case with a big independent "hit" of a few years ago, *Koyaanisqatsi*, a film that has superficial thematic resemblances to *Water and Power*. Images of "beautiful" natural settings lead into images of (supposedly) ugly urban civilization; but the director is so inept that the urban images are often more beautiful than the postcard like nature shots. By contract, O'Neill perfectly balances beauty and desolation in his desert images, and when dissolving to LA at night, he suggests no simple hierarchies.

But there is one sequence in *Koyaanisqatsi* that I really learned something from . A montage of modernist, "international style" skyscrapers - all of which we are presumably supposed to see as ugly - culminates in some footage of a group of vacant building being blow up . I was able to make an interesting connection here, for I happened to recognize

the building begging demolished as the legendary Pruitt-Igoe low-income housing project in Saint Loiuse, which was such a failure that it was eventually blown up a the suggestion of it residents. The architect of this project, Minoru Yamasaki, was also the architect of New York's World Trade Center, on of the buildings seen in the montage that precedes the demolition. But the important point is that there's no sign that Godfrey Reggio, the film's director, had any sense of that connection in the way that he edited the sequence. Many architects and architectural historians regard the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe as a kind of death knell for the modernist aesthetic, a sign of its failure. But Reggio's montage-analysis is not an analysis at all; it's more a series of epithets, as in "See all these ugly boxes." Because there is no sense that the filmmaker knows the specific of his material, the audience is encouraged to react to it only on a gut level and not to think about it in a serious way.

Water and Power proceeds from a profound awareness of what the things it depicts are, what they mean in the world, how they function. The pipeline at the beginning is, as I guessed, an aqueduct that carries Owen Valley water to Los Angeles. The salt flats, while not created by the Owens diversion, were in fact created by an earlier agricultural diversion. Throughout his film O'Neill encourages the viewer to think about where images come from, what they mean, and most importantly how they interconnect. In one particularly emblematic image, a figure in the foreground is seen turning a large clock, moving its hands rapidly forward, while a crowd moves rapidly in the background. This is another of O'Neill's quiet jokes, about the cinematic manipulation of time, the camera's ability to speed up motion. Bit it is also much more than that. The clock becomes a metaphor for all human impositions on nature – and for the natural movements of sun and clouds that time-lapse can help us see. This image connects to all the inside-out-side juxtapositions of the film, even through the clock outside. The clock is an architectural element in the way s window frame is, and it connects to the whole theme of the human measurement of nature.

While O'Neill's proenvironment sentiments are clear, the film never resolves itself into any of the simpleminded dualisms of a "message" picture. Instead, it treats filmmaking as a process of perplexed yet joyous inquiry into the origins and meaning: Where do things come from? How do they affect each other? What is the position of each object in the universe? One feature of a certain kind of bad film is that it fails to even ask interesting questions, while great films frequently ask the great questions and ask them well. Indeed, I can think of no higher praise for a work of art than this.