

The Downtown Review

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... but today the air has grown so dense that delicate things are literally not recognized.

Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*

Ernie Gehr's Geography

at the Collective for Living Cinema,
January 13, 1979

Outside

outside myself

there is a world

he rumbled, subject to my incursions

—a world

W.C. Williams

In a predominantly pre-cinema place and time, San Francisco in 1902 or '03, a camera was mounted on a trolley for a five minute tracking shot of Market Street, seemingly recording its entire length. Ernie Gehr re-photographed a print of this film at about five frames a second (my guess), transforming this archeological treasure into a work, albeit a found one, uniquely his own.

As the camera moves relentlessly forward, pedestrians scurry back and forth crossing the street on what appears to be a typical business day. They are mostly men, mostly in dark suits. Bowler hats are popular. Occasionally a woman appears in one of the long corsetted dresses of the era. The camera passes numerous horse-drawn wagons. Fragile-looking automobiles weave in and out, entering the frame from behind the camera, passing arbitrarily on the right or the left, going on ahead, eventually out of sight. One man hurriedly runs across the street with a sack of grain (?) and jumps onto an already moving flatbed. Some, mostly the young boys, gaze at the camera in curiosity, others ignore it or haven't noticed it at all. A precursor of the modern panel truck passes the camera from behind and swerves in front, and as it does so, for a breathless moment, an oil-cloth rear-flap is brushed (or blown) aside to reveal the face of a boy who is startled and fascinated by the no-doubt queer contraption which someone is steadily hand cranking. What "it" is may indeed be beyond his momentary realization. At the very least, it was still a novelty at that time.

Eventually it becomes apparant to the viewer that this single shot, which comprises *Geography* in its entirety, is going to last a long time, go the distance, so to speak. This single track is it. In the far background, in ghostly grey tones, a tower presents itself as a possible destination, though one can't guess that the shot could last that long. It does. With suspense reminiscent of seeing *Wavelength* for the first time, the tower looms larger and larger until we can at last vaguely identify it—a ferry dock. Signs on oncoming trolleys have clued us in ahead of time. A plaque on its facade will eventually confirm our speculation, informing us that the building was built in 1896 by the Harbor Authority—a detail suggestive of the bay extending from its other side which we

will never see, but perhaps now imagine. The vividness of this scene has been *that* stimulating.

There are at least two senses of "geography" in the film: the three-dimensional illusory space which is explored by the forward-tracking camera and the two-dimensional frame, its "flatness" all the more evident in that the image is changing at a slow rate. The eye has time to wander round the "map" of the frame, perhaps noticing the many scratches on the actual surface of the film, or perhaps exploring the vast detail in the representational image, for example, above the street level, the distinctive facades of turn-of-the-century buildings. One can't help but observe the laws of Renaissance perspective with the opportunity for an intense scrutiny of the image which the film offers. In the foreground, the lines and figures move more rapidly (that is, travel across a greater amount of the area of the frame) than those in the background. We are excited by both the sense of depth and the clear awareness of how it is achieved. And the peculiarities of the illusion are so wonderfully more apparant in the grid which is an American urban landscape. In this respect, the cross-streets are significant road markers. One might even recall the predilection for checker-board floors in 15th Century Italian Oil Painting.

This film presents an evocation of "past" on many levels, all of which are in opposition to the heightened "present" of seeing the film go by frame by frame. The viewer is torn between the excitement of invading a strange world of curious historical interest and realizing how painfully provisional that invasion actually is. Besides the obvious fact that 1902 was three-quarters of a century ago and that the typical American city changes drastically in that time-span, there is the point that the film is "pre-earthquake" (noted at the screening by Gehr himself with a wry smile). A brief and tragic moment literally destroyed much of what we see. And I would maintain that the original film was pre-cinema. As we watch people go about their business in 1902 from the vantage of the video age, we feel like trespassers, if not Martians. There is something askance. The world isn't quite conscious of film yet.

Through the not fully comprehended seduction of the photographic image (emphatically here, a *moving* image), there is the melancholic despair of a lost past so lifelike. I personally recalled the remarks of Howard Carter when he first entered the tomb of Tutankhamen (another bit of archeology) and noticed the fine condition of the treasures, some with fingerprints 3000 years old, and even a bowl of mortar complete with spatula used to seal the burial vault. Under the spell of objects clearly containing visible signs of life, the labor of the ancients seemed to have taken place only a few hours before.

The photographed human figures in *Geography* seem all the more alive because they are pursuing their affairs regardless of the camera. In fact, one

tends to reflect on any number of activities which one really never sees, or sees briefly, which, once out of the frame, are gone forever. Things don't come into a palpable existence until they become the subject of the camera's recording apparatus. And can we infer anything of their existence once they are off-camera? They might just as well have never existed at all. The limitation of the camera frame, becomes, metaphorically, the pathetic limitation of our access to the past. There is a world inaccessible to sensual contact which must be recreated by an act of the imagination from a narrow perspective: a "subjecting" movement through time and space.

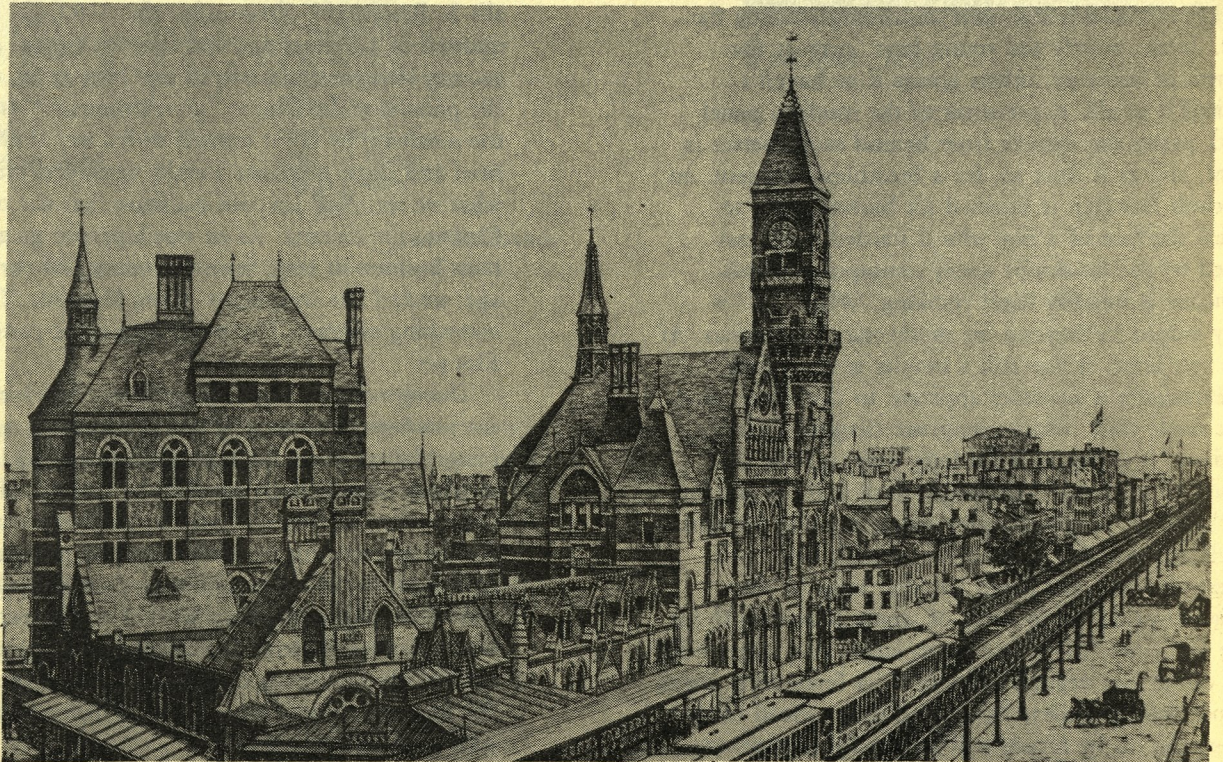
The sensual information we do receive is a pale shadow of reality anyway. Although the slow beat of the film allows us to pick up small details we might have missed at a normal frame-change rate, we also see how distinctly filmic the image is, filmic in terms of a seventy-five year old artifact. There are no fine gradations of greys (most likely present originally), no color, no sound, and no smell! In fact, what was on these people's minds at the time? Our curiosity for the past is aroused by this film, just as our distance from it is underscored.

As with many independent works of the last fifteen years or so, the duration of a film can be simply the duration of a single camera take which is either panning, zooming, or tracking. This structure points to the ever-present paradox of our notions of time and space. How can we separate them? Time can only be sensed as a movement through space, space as a move-

ment in time. Time, then, in Gehr's film, has been given a spatial dimension, a "geography." The space which disappears behind the camera, with its invisible human activity still going on, is a fading past. The activity in the background is a perpetually unfolding present, as the camera brings new objects and people into focus as it travels forward. Not without a snicker at the conceit perhaps, we can even speak of the hazy future.

But in 17th Century fashion I am going to extend my conceit through one more turn. Indeed, it is regrettable that John Donne isn't around anymore to appreciate *Geography*. Gehr has drawn emotional power from poignantly reminding us that in any representational film, the viewer sits before a screen on which a world is projected which he would like to enter, or at least sense in an unmediated manner. The moving camera underlines the notion of an entry, but this world only pretends to be limitless beyond the horizon line. At the end of the film, the vanishing point has been destroyed by the wall of the ferry building which fills the frame. Of course it has been an illusion. There was never any *real* entry, just as there was never any real movement forward (something reminiscent of Gehr's *Serene Velocity*). Under the spell of film, we may be momentarily confused as to why this is so, why the distance between our world and the world of the screen cannot be breached. We could call the surveying of this "distance" a plotting of the film and the film-goer and it is only one of Gehr's many lessons in *Geography*.

John Pruitt



Jefferson Market, 1860