



A FILM ESSAY BY
ALLAN SEKULA
& NOËL BURCH

THE FORGOTTEN SPACE

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A FILM ESSAY BY ALLAN SEKULA AND NOËL BURCH
AN ICARUS FILMS RELEASE

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SHORT SYNOPSIS

The Forgotten Space explores the sea: that forgotten space of our modern times where globalization and the present financial crisis become visible in the most pressing way. The film follows the cargo container as it transforms urban space and countryside, bringing the sea into the interior in search of labour and customers. Is the container a Pandora's Box? Is the revolution in global transport sustainable in the long run?

FILM SYNOPSIS

To rule the sea is to ruin the world.

The Forgotten Space follows container cargo aboard ships, barges, trains and trucks, listening to workers, engineers, planners, politicians, and those marginalized by the global transport system. We visit displaced farmers and villagers in Holland and Belgium, underpaid truck drivers in Los Angeles, seafarers aboard mega-ships shuttling between Asia and Europe, and factory workers in China, whose low wages are the fragile key to the whole puzzle. And in Bilbao, we discover the most sophisticated expression of the belief that the maritime economy, and the sea itself, is somehow obsolete.

A range of materials is used: descriptive documentary, interviews, archive stills and footage, clips from old movies. The result is an essayistic, visual documentary about one of the most important processes that affects us today. *The Forgotten Space* is based on Sekula's *Fish Story*, seeking to understand and describe the contemporary maritime world in relation to the complex symbolic legacy of the sea.

ABOUT THE DIRECTORS

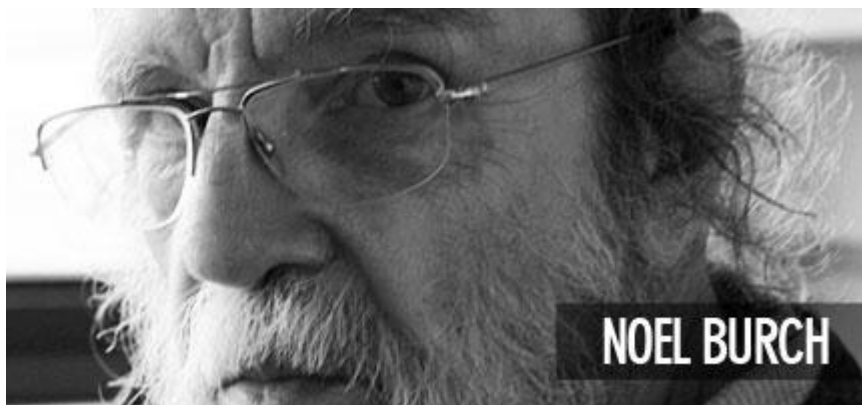


Since the early 1970s, photographer and filmmaker **Allan Sekula** has worked with photographic sequences, written texts, slide shows and sound recordings have traveled

a path close to cinema, sometimes referring to specific films. With the exception of a few video works from the early 70s and early 80s, however, he has stayed away from the moving image. This changed in 2001, with the first work that Sekula was willing to call a film, *Tsukiji*, a "city symphony" set in Tokyo's giant fish market.

Sekula was born in Erie, Pennsylvania, in 1951. 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). These works range from the theory and history of photography to studies of family life in the grip of the military industrial complex, and in *Fish Story*, to explorations of the world maritime economy. *The Forgotten Space* is a filmic sequel to *Fish Story*.

Born in San Francisco in 1932, filmmaker and author **Noël Burch** has been living in France since 1951. He graduated from the Institut Des Hautes Etudes



Cinématographiques in 1954. While primarily known for his theoretical writings, he has

always positioned himself as a filmmaker and has directed over 20 titles, mostly documentaries. Burch has been publishing since the 1960s. Among his numerous publications are his first and best known book *Theory of Film Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1973) and his robust history of Japanese cinema, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in Japanese Cinema* (Berkeley, 1979). From 1967 to 1972, he collaborated with Janine Bazin and André S. Labarthe for the celebrated series, *Cinèastes de Notre Temps*, many episodes of which are distributed in North America Icarus Films. Burch also directed seven programs which are considered to have renewed the "film-maker portrait" in the heroic years of French public television. It was during that same period that Burch was co-founder and director of the Institut de Formation Cinématographique, an alternative film school associating theory and practice.

SELECTED SCREENINGS

Orizzonti Jury Prize, Venice Film Festival, Italy

Special Mention, BAFIFI, Argentina

DocLisboa, Portugal

IDFA, Canada

HotDocs, Canada

ZabrebDox, Croatia

Jeonju IFF, Korea

FilmFest Muchen, Germany

Kiev FilmFest, Russia

CPH:DOX, Denmark

Glasgow Film Festiva, Scotland

Liverpool Biennial, United Kingdom

Tate Modern, United Kingdom

San Francisco Art Institute, USA

LACMA, USA

The Museum of Modern Art, USA

Anthology Film Archives, USA

ESSAY FILM

Forty years ago I may have been the first to launch the concept of the essay film. I was still intellectually juvenile and quite "apolitical" and the notion was hazy in my mind. I set the essay film against "documentary" in the classical sense, that supposedly objective rendering of reality, my bad objects were Flaherty, Grierson and the GPO. An essay film was about getting across ideas. And it was also about inventing complex forms, structured ambiguities, about getting away from a certain linearity, common I felt to standard documentary and "Hollywood" alike. It's worth noting that most of the models I chose were much further to the left than I was : Franju's *Hotel des Invalides*, Rosi's *Salvatore Giuliano*, Godard's middle period, Dziga Vertov and also certain experiments in French public television... Essential to the notion was the admixture of materials and stylistic approaches, fictional footage mingling, perhaps "invisibly", with cinema-vérité, library shots, hidden camera-work, etc. Such discontinuities were meant to create, somehow or other, the famous "distanciation" theorized and practiced by Brecht. At least that is what I began claiming after I was radicalized in '68. However, mainly I see it today as a modernist stance: involvement in a film (or a play or a novel) was in itself a bad object, a "Hollywoodian" relationship between screen and spectator. I was rationalizing what was in fact a pure aesthetic preference based on the leftist idea that the "transparency" of mass cultural artefacts "alienated" the mass audience...

The essay film caught on during the seventies and early eighties. In France, I was first able to put it into practice with André S. Labarthe, Janine Bazin and Jean-André Fieschi for *Cinéastes de notre temps* (1966-71) and in the mid-eighties again with a social history of early cinema in six episodes for FR3 and Channel 4. But it was mostly in England that the essay film developed, during those early, heady years of Channel 4, and of audacious funding programs at the Arts Council and the BFI Production Board. I was personally able to make three such hour-long films there, but so did many others, including several of my former students at the Royal College of Arts (Ed Bennett, Anna Ambrose, Phil Mulloy...). And I remember being naively peeved when *The Impersonation*, which I co-directed with Christopher Mason for the Arts Council, won a

prize at the Melbourne festival for “best experimental film.” Why “experimental” I wanted to know? For me, this was the way a “documentary” should be...

Today this kind of film is out of fashion, ratings are king, audiences are meant to be too dumb to follow anything the least bit complex...

And so *The Forgotten Space*, which has been an attempt to carry on with that unfinished business, was made against the grain. When it occurred to Allan and I to make a film drawn from “Dismal science” the main essay in his *Fish Story*, of which I had become enamoured while translating it into French, we both had in mind something along those lines, mingling little fictions, and even surrealistic “collages”, with cinema-vérité reportages, library shots, etc. This proved a difficult agenda for all sorts of practical reasons and because of various artistic and ideological frictions within a complex co-production structure.

I think what principally remains here of the basic concept of the essay film is a rather rambling structure, very largely discontinuous and often digressive. It is certainly a film which should keep spectators on their toes but is, hopefully, nowhere opaque. Subject-matter such as this, the evils of productivist, “globalized” capitalism, even if looked at solely in terms of maritime shipping and adjacent activities, is so vast that it can only be sampled... in such a way, we hope, as to suggest the extent of the horror... and the logic of the problematic mutations under way... It is a film which has to be continued by other means...

—Noël Burch

NOTES FOR A FILM

Our film is about globalization and the sea, the “forgotten space” of our modernity. First and foremost, globalization is the penetration of the multinational corporate economy into every nook and cranny of human life. It is the latest incarnation of an imperative that has long been accepted as vital necessity, even before economics could claim the status of a science. The first law of proto-capitalism: markets must multiply through foreign trade or they will stagnate and die. As the most sophisticated of the 17th-century defenders of mercantilism, William Petty, put it: “There is much more to be gained by Manufacture than Husbandry, and by Merchandize than Manufacture. A Seaman is in effect three Husbandmen.” (*Political Arithmetick*, 1690).

The contemporary vision of an integrated, globalized, self-regulating capitalist world economy can be traced back to some of these axioms of the capitalist “spirit of adventure.” And yet what is largely missing from the current picture is any sense of material resistance to the expansion of the market imperative. Investment flows intangibly, through the ether, as if by magic. Money begets money. Wealth is weightless. Sea trade, when it is remembered at all, is a relic of an older and obsolete economy, a world of decrepitude, rust, and creaking cables, of the slow movement of heavy things. If Petty’s old fable held that a seafarer was worth three peasants, neither count for much in the even more fabulous new equation. And yet we would all die without the toil of farmers and seafarers.

Those of us who travel by air, or who “go surfing” on the Web, scarcely think of the sea as a space of transport any more. We live instead in the age of cyberspace, of instantaneous electronic contact between everywhere and everywhere else.

In this fantasy world the very concept of distance is abolished. More than 90% of the world’s cargo moves by sea, and yet educated people in the developed world believe that material goods travel as they do, by air, and that money, traveling in the blink of an eye, is the abstract source of all wealth.

Our premise is that the sea remains 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.

The factory system is no longer concentrated in the developed world but has become mobile and dispersed. 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 labor. 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.

The function of sea trade is no longer a separate, mercantilist enterprise, but has become an integral component of the world-industrial system. We are distracted from the full implications of this insight by two powerful myths, which stifle curiosity. The first myth is that the sea nothing more than a residual mercantilist space, a reservoir of cultural and economic anachronisms. The second myth 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 vast reserves of sentimental longing for things which are not really dead.

Our response to these myths is that the sea is the key to understanding globalized industrialism. Without a thoroughly modern and sophisticated "revolution" in ocean-going cargo-handling technology, the global factory would not exist, and globalization would not be a burning issue.

What began in the mid-1950s as a modest American improvement in cargo logistics, an effort to achieve new efficiencies within a particular industry, has now taken on world

historic importance. The cargo container, a standardized metal box, capable of being quickly transferred from ship to highway lorry to railroad 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, slide toward obsolescence as ships become more and more gargantuan. Super-ports, pushed far out from the metropolitan center, require vast level tracts for the storage and sorting of containers. The old sheltering deepwater port, with its steep hillsides and its panoramic vistas, is less suited to these new spatial demands than low delta planes that must nonetheless be continually dredged to allow safe passage for the deeper and deeper draft of the new super-ships.

Ships are loaded and unloaded in as little as twelve hours, compared to the laborious cargo storage practices of fifty years ago. 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, of intense class struggle 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?

If the cargo container represents one instrument of maritime transformation, the companion instrument is not logistical but legal. This is the flag of convenience system of ship registry. Here again, the Americans were in the lead, seeking to break powerful maritime unions in the wake of the second world war. If globalization is understood by many in the world today as Americanization, the maritime world gives us, then, these two examples of the revolutionary and often brutal ingenuity of American business practices. The flag of convenience system allows for ships owned in rich countries to be

registered in poor countries. It was created to obscure legal responsibility for safety and fair labor practices. 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.

A consequence of the global production-distribution system is that links between port and hinterland become all the more important. It is not just the port that is transformed, but the highway and rail system, the very transport infrastructure of a country or a continent, as evidenced by the Betuwe line in Holland or the dangerous saturation of truck traffic in Alpine tunnels.

The boxes are everywhere, mobile and anonymous, their contents hidden from view. One could say that these containers are "coffins of remote labor-power" carrying goods manufactured somewhere else, by invisible workers on the other side of the globe. We are told by the apologists of globalization that this accelerated flow is indispensable for our continued prosperity and for the deferred future prosperity of those who labor so far away. But perhaps, this is a case for Pandora, or for her more clairvoyant sister, Cassandra.

Our film moves between four port cities: Bilbao, Rotterdam, Los Angeles, and Hong Kong. It visits the industrial hinterland in south China, and the transport hinterland in the heart of Holland. Of the four port cities, three can be classed as "super-ports," the largest in the world. Here we encounter functional hypertrophy. Bilbao, a fading port with a brave maritime history, has become the site of radical symbolic transformation of derelict maritime space. In Bilbao, functional atrophy coexists with symbolic hypertrophy, a delirium of neo-baroque maritime nostalgia wedded to the equally delirious promise of the "new economy."

—Allan Sekula & Noël Burch

FILM CREDITS

Original Title: *The Forgotten Space*
Mode: Documentary
Running time: 112 minutes
Format: Color and Black & White
Screen ratio: 16 × 9
Language: English, Dutch, Spanish, Korean, Bahasa Indonesian, Chinese
Subtitles: English, Italian, Dutch, German
Sound: Dolby digital
Year: 2010
Script & direction: Allan Sekula & Noël Burch
Producers: Frank van Reemst & Joost Verheij
Co-producers: Vincent Lucassen & Ebba Sinzinger
Directors of photography: Attila Boa & Wolfgang Thaler
Sound engineer: Eckehard Braun & Joe Knauer
Editor: Menno Boerema
Narration: Allan Sekula
Sound design: Mark Glynn
Music: Riccardo Tesi & Louis Andriessen
Supported by: KOR, Eurimages, CoBO Fund, ORF, ÖFI, VPRO, MEDIA program
Production company: Doc.Eye Film
Co-production company: WILDart FILM

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The New York Times

AWASH IN CAPITALISM, A CHANGING EARTH

FEBRUARY 14, 2012

BY A. O. SCOTT

In *The Enchafèd Flood*, his resonant study of “the romantic iconography of the sea,” W. H. Auden noted that, in the opening verses of the Book of Genesis, the vast watery expanses of the world served as a “symbol for the primordial undifferentiated flux, the substance that became created nature only by having form imposed upon or wedded to it.”

The Forgotten Space, an engrossing and provocative essay film by Noël Burch and Allan Sekula, approaches the sea from the opposite direction. Neither as chaotic nor as romantic as it may have appeared to our ancestors or to Auden, the modern sea of this documentary has come fully under the sway of global capitalism.

Maritime trade is almost as old as humanity itself, of course, but Mr. Burch, a film critic, and Mr. Sekula, a historian and photographer, are concerned with its present manifestations. *The Forgotten Space* offers a more politically inclined, less dashing exploration of some of the territory navigated by the journalist William Langewiesche in his amazing 2006 book, *The Outlaw Sea*.

The filmmakers are especially interested in the impact of shipping containers — those brightly colored, corrugated metal boxes that have changed the way goods are transported around the world — on land. The consequences of containerization reach into every aspect of modern life and, in Mr. Burch and Mr. Sekula's view, are almost never benign.

A visit to Rotterdam in the Netherlands discovers an impressively automated port with a diminished work force, most of whose members labor in isolation in front of screens rather than wrangle cargo with hands and hooks. Containers are lifted by cranes onto barges, railroad cars and trucks to be hauled inland, and every phase of their journey seems to involve the exploitation of labor and the degradation of the environment.

Small farms in the Dutch countryside have been chopped up to make way for a new publicly financed, privately managed freight line. In Southern California drivers find their standards of living eroded, now that they are independent contractors rather than unionized workers. The Indonesian and Filipino crews on board the giant container ships, and the workers in the Chinese factories that fill them, come from a vast pool of the poor and the displaced, willing to work long hours in harsh conditions for a chance to buy into the consumer economy they serve.

The Forgotten Space is unabashedly polemical and rigorously pessimistic, a sustained Marxian indictment of 21st-century capital. The narration, by Mr. Sekula, is at times lyrical and rarely subtle, but the film is most graceful and moving when its argument slows down or wanders into an interesting tangent.

At other points, like an extended rhetorical attack on the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, Spain, the filmmakers seem to be riding an ideological hobby horse down a dead-end street. But they have a good visual instinct for the sublimity, as well as the ugliness, of the industrial and postindustrial environments, and a patient and generous interest in what people have to say about their own lives.

Various experts offer informative analysis, but the testimony of seamen, factory workers and residents of a California homeless encampment is at the heart of the film's guiding ethical and aesthetic principles, which have to do with the defense of human dignity in the face of a system that so often appears hostile or indifferent to it.



FEBRUARY 15, 2012

BY MARK HOLCOMB

Epic in scope, intellectual agility, and the potential to induce panic and despair, this documentary exploration of global trade as an emblem of economic apocalypse avoids (just barely) doom-mongering by virtue of its compassion and visual grandeur. In a similar mode to William Vollmann's sprawling exposés of capitalistic folly,

filmmakers Allan Sekula and Noël Burch focus on the workers—shipping employees, truckers, and manufacturing laborers from places as far-flung yet interconnected as Holland, California, and Spain—whose days are dictated by the seemingly mindless transportation of goods. These people are as much "forgotten spaces" as the blasted zones surrounding the sea lanes, rail lines, and trucking routes they work on or otherwise serve, and Sekula and Burch beautifully contrast the richness of their lives with the movement for movement's sake that fuels (and, by introducing new markets to Western notions like minimum wage, thwarts) rampant globalism. No prescriptive pandering is offered, thankfully. But by methodically exposing the physical impossibility of perpetual growth, the film reveals how absurdly self-defeating human and ecological exploitation through mechanization has become. Capitalism can't help but eat itself, Sekula and Burch suggest—we might just have to endure "a world of relentless toil" before the chewing stops.

the guardian

ALLAN SEKULA: FILMING THE FORGOTTEN RESISTANCE AT SEA

APRIL 20, 2012

BY SUKHDEV SANDU

Water has always played a large part in the photographer Allan Sekula's life. As a student in San Diego at the end of the 1960s, he used to wander downtown and gaze up at the flophouse hotels through whose windows he could see money being exchanged between prostitutes and sailors. "It was [Edward Hopper](#) on military steroids," he recalls. "That was the time of Vietnam, and there were even mutinies on some ships – especially among African-American sailors who were protesting against racism in the navy. Young guys my age from the west coast were being dehumanised and turned into a few good men.

"They'd come to the fence of the Marine Corps Recruiting Depot and say: 'If I can get over this fence will you meet me at the laundromat down the street in an hour with a car?' We managed to get some of them out. But often the shore patrol and navy

police would come and pull them away. They'd be taken to briggs, assigned to a motivation platoon, and beaten up. The depot was next to an international airport on the waterfront, and some of the recruits were so desperate to escape they'd tried to get away by running across the runways, where they'd be hit by planes and be killed. This never appeared on the news."

Sekula, who had grown up in the Los Angeles harbour town of San Pedro, was learning that the maritime world, far from being a realm of pleasure cruises and play, was riven by struggle and class conflict. Since then much of his extraordinary body of experimental work has been devoted to chronicling the social, economic and political dynamics of life on the oceans. His latest exercise in hydropoetics, a cine-essay entitled *The Forgotten Space* that he co-directed with Noël Burch, uses the statistic that 90% of cargoes today are carried by ship as its cue to develop a wide-ranging thesis about containerisation, globalisation and invisible labour.

Seas are fascinating, Sekula argues, because of the counter-orthodoxies and refutations they offer to modern political thought. "In Alain Tanner's *Les Hommes Du Port*, a documentary about dockworkers in Genoa, he says: 'The time of the sea runs counter to the lie.' He doesn't say what the lie is. But you know: it's everything about neoliberalism. The sea is all about slow time – things move slowly, there's a lot of waiting – and as such it contradicts all the mythologies of instantaneity perpetuated by electronic media."

Sekula believes that seafaring work, like many other forms of manual labour, is ignored by many journalists whose own class status predisposes them towards fixating on white-collar and mental labour. But, as *The Forgotten Space* shows to haunting effect, this invisibility is also structural: containerisation has depeopled the bustling port cultures of previous eras and left in their wake automated landscapes.

Sekula, who was born in 1951 and whose grandfather migrated to the US from Poland, thinks that America has a particular amnesia regarding its relation to the sea. "We've always focused on the frontier hypothesis of US history. In spite of the takeover of the

Panama Canal and the annexing of Hawaii, the sequential opening of western space has mainly been seen as a matter of terrestrial dominion. Today the function of the US navy is to protect the sea lanes of the world – that's free trade. And it's America's technical and legal innovations that have made the globalisation of sea trade possible."

This kind of systematic analysis, allied with deep, almost ethnographic research, is also present in Sekula's influential book *Fish Story* (1995), which he describes as "a sort of experimental essay in words and pictures that sometimes reads like fiction, sometimes like an essay, sometimes journalism, sometimes prose-poetry". Its photo-text form recalls earlier investigations of immiserated labour such as George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) and James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), both of which Sekula admires.

"I'm more sympathetic to traditions of critical realism than a lot of people in the art world," he admits. "They treat journalism as a bad object and always think that when they intervene it's without the naivety of the journalist. That doesn't seem fair to what the best journalism and non-fiction has been."

Sekula's search for what the film historian Edward Dimendberg has called an "honest materiality" is informed by his own upbringing in San Pedro (a working-class town). His first major work, *Aerospace Folktales* (1973), featured interviews with his father, a chemical engineer at Lockheed, who had lost his job. "Being working class gives you a bitter sense that all the promissory notes of the American Dream are rarely cashed in. You see failure and blockages all around you."

At San Diego, he took classes with the Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse and conceptual artist John Baldessari, and studied alongside Martha Rosler, who would later come to prominence for her interest in questions of geopolitical infrastructures and social exclusion. He also read essays on photography by John Berger and Roland Barthes, and as a result began to theorise his future work. "I wanted to explore the discursive split between art and documentary, the myth of Alfred Stieglitz against the

myth of Lewis Hine." (Stieglitz was a revered figure in the development of art photography. Hine, by contrast, used his camera as a tool in the service of social reform.)

Sekula was sceptical of the romanticism and love of metaphors he discerned in the work of Stieglitz. "I saw the path of symbolism as one that led to hermeticism or a retreat from the social," he recalls. "I was trying to defend a critical social realism." His success at doing this, both in his often-cited study *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photoworks 1973–83* (1984) and recent films such as *The Lottery of the Sea* (2006), has won him many admirers. Among them is the American maritime historian Marcus Rediker, co-author with Peter Linebaugh of *The Many-Headed Hydra* (2000): "The old national stories just aren't making much sense to people any more. Once you start thinking transnationally, you're led to the sea: the ship is the first great instrument of globalisation. Allan's idea that you can observe the compression of time and space in the modern world from the decks of a containerised cargo vessel is brilliant."

It's certainly an idea that has considerable potency in the present climate, when growing numbers of people all around the world are questioning the capitalist orthodoxies they've been fed by economists and politicians. In Barcelona last year, a gallery that screened *The Forgotten Space* was visited by many of the *indignados* who were protesting nearby. In Oakland, Occupy activists planned to show a pirated version of the film on a temporary screen they installed after blocking some of the streets in the port area.

This kind of resistance reminds Sekula that his collaborator Noël Burch had "hoped the film could 'be completed by other means – and of necessity it would have to be completed by different means'. He meant by self-organised political means on the part of the people. The sea has often been thought of as recuperative; that more and more dockers and working people are insisting on not being moved on or not being swept away by the forces of efficiency and rationalisation gives me grounds for optimism."

ARTFORUM

SEAFARERS ALL

FEBRUARY 14, 2012

BY BENJAMIN YOUNG

Exploring the maritime world as the unseen matrix of globalization, Allan Sekula and Noël Burch's *The Forgotten Space* (2010) begins as an investigative documentary and concludes as a mythopoeic essay on modernity and the sea. Along with the quickening staccato of the accordion sound track, the film's rhetorical intensity slowly builds as metaphor and allusion are interwoven with the facts and conditions of global trade.

In one of the final scenes, we learn that Doel, a small Belgian village, is being demolished to expand the port of Antwerp. In one shot, we see a street that dead-ends in a dike wall protecting the low-lying town from the ocean. The giant steel tower of a cargo crane slowly crosses through the background; like a scrim, the dike hides the ship on which the crane is being transported. To the viewer, the crane seems to stand still while the ground seems to move beneath one's feet. It's a disorienting effect, a haunting visualization of Marx and Engels's dictum that, under capitalism, "all that is solid melts into air." Only here amended: Everything bound to the earth is forced to sea.

At a folk festival in the doomed town, a close-up shows an artisan's hands and tool as he hollows out the inside of a wooden shoe. Picking up on its shape, the voice-over likens it to a lifeboat crafted from past tradition; in a dizzying metaphoric twist, it comes to stand in for the village as whole and, by extension, all the lands of the globe that might be submerged under shifting economic tides. The film's conclusion is torn between the manifesto-like call for "the lowly crew to seize the helm" of this provisional craft, and the open question about how to extend hospitality to those bankrupt and shipwrecked refugees who might arrive on our shores.

Through visits to four port cities, viewers learn that nine-tenths of the world's freight is

moved by 100,000 ships and 1.5 million seafarers. Rotterdam, Los Angeles, and Hong Kong are each expansive megaports that handle huge amounts of containerized cargo. Surveying their environs reveals some of the costs of ever-expanding trade, from pollution to standardization to the automation that increases productivity but keeps wages low and eliminates jobs. In the formerly industrial town of Bilbao, the Guggenheim museum exemplifies the replacement of the working port by a tourist economy that floats on a forgetting of industry and nostalgia for the sea. Its emblem is Frank Gehry's sinuous, piscine building, whose titanium scales never rust—"a lighthouse that shines only when the sun is out" and blinds viewers both to industrial history and to the realist and modernist sculptures by native Basques and Spaniards at the city center. When ocean waves overwhelm the sound track as museum visitors wind their way through rusting, rolled steel sculptures by Richard Serra (himself a former shipyard worker), it amounts to a return of the repressed.

The film continually returns to the cargo ship on the open ocean, but it also tracks the ways goods move inland. The camera takes us inside the cramped cabs of the crane operator, the barge captain, the train engineer, and the truck driver, to listen as they explain the demands of their jobs. People are paired with machines to which they sometimes become appendages, now all part of a global, mobile factory. The voice-over emphasizes that factories have become like ships, continually moving production to countries with low wages and few environmental protections. And ships, now mammoth floating buildings, become factories and warehouses.

We also explore the domestic spaces that support this form of trade, visiting the inside of a seafarer's hostel in Hong Kong. Security guards keep the crew from entering a homeless camp in California, so the filmmakers interview the unemployed on the sidewalk. Viewers tour the massive spaces inside a Chinese appliance factory in Shenzhen, and accompany two female workers to their tiny dorm and then out into the city as they go shopping. Despite the exploitative conditions, these women are some of the most hopeful figures of the film—not only in their youth and enthusiasm, but because of the collective power they might someday wield.



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