

# Border Crossings

The city of cinema is woven into a tapestry of raw aesthetic and political force at the hands of Pat O'Neill in *Horizontal Boundaries* (2008), currently on view at Screening (located in Vox Populi). O'Neill presents a field of visual and auditory confrontations in which a multi-layered soundtrack is delicately woven into a landscape of rhythmic, superimposed imagery to create a dense aesthetic fabric that is as captivating and mesmerizing as it is thought provoking.

The incessant imprint of the individual photogram is the most visible horizontal boundary in the video, the border of the singular image that is stitched into the temporal continuity of a film. This reflexive strategy of highlighting the constitutive elements of the medium has, at times, become a tiresomely weak 'modernist' reflex. However, at the hands of O'Neill, it serves as a syncopated reference point grounding a complex sensory rumination on dividing lines, frontiers and boundaries. The horizontal horizon of the photogram is seconded by the boundary between the image tracks that are lain over one another, producing a depth to the imagery as superimposed visions bleed into unique constellations of 'median images.' The frontiers of sight and sound function as a third series of horizons that are repeatedly crossed and re-crossed. Indeed, Pat O'Neill and George Lockwood illustrate in arabesque detail the intimate connections and conflicts between eye and ear, synchronizing their work into a veritable audiogram at one point in the video when the sound of a dog barking rhythmically alters amorphous, black forms on a white background that appear to write sound directly into celluloid. The texture of the soundtrack, which creates the same superimposed depth as the image track, provides a fourth field of boundaries and horizons as minimalist music, mechanized sounds and staged deliveries produce an auditory collage of rare quality. These are only some of the horizons explored in the video, which powerfully meditates on the dividing lines and tensions between positive and negative, light and dark, up and down, vertical and horizontal, inside and outside...

This extraordinary formal complexity of writing with sound and composing with images avoids the mundane drivel of naïve aestheticism. To begin with, the video itself carries with it the dull shadow of the film industry that haunts the city serving as its setting. The soundtrack contains the voices of apparent figures from film noir or detective stories. A terrified woman on the telephone, who also appears in O'Neill's masterful and much more explicit *Trouble in the Image* (1995), is reminiscent of the mid-century heroines of celluloid. The *horizontal boundaries* of the photogram, constantly reframing Los Angeles, are thus means to create a productive parallax between the constructed images of the city of cinema and counterpoint images that destabilize the frames of the industry, that unstitch the continuity of the film strip.

Much more interesting than this now well-worn trope of 'discontinuity editing,' which always runs the risk of reifying a stale opposition between the industry and its 'other,' is the way in which the formal boundaries worked on in the film are intertwined with a series of thematic borders. The frontier between nature and civilization is perhaps the central limit that O'Neill works on as he juxtaposes forests, mountains and oceans to the concrete jungle of the cityscape with its gas and oil refineries. At times, he seems to

foreground the austere 'natural' beauty of L.A. by night. At other times, he stages the awesome power of nature against the frail constructs of man. At still other times, he appears to simply juxtapose the destitute ecosystem of 'humanity' to the idyllic world of nature. Rather than reifying borders, he situates himself in the ambiguous meeting ground between man and world, as if he were one of the anonymous figures on the beach where people, stripped of most of their civilizational accoutrements, drift back into the primordial soup from which they came.

The complex counterpoint of *Horizontal Boundaries* not only serves as a methodological strategy for a unique meditation on the horizons of aesthetic form, the borders of cinematic history and the dividing lines between humanity and the natural world, it also acts as a refined tool for social and political critique. The aerial views of suburban sprawl, mixed with the sound of helicopters reminiscent of the aerial attacks in Vietnam, create the impression that O'Neill is reminding us—like Martha Rosler—of the imperialist agenda upon which American suburban culture has been built. At the same time, the sensation of 'choppers over L.A.' suggests that this city's future is as precarious as the bamboo shacks left in a haze of napalm by imperial aviation. Moreover, the wind in the trees and the synchronous blurring of the image appear as agents of uniformity recalling the ultimate precariousness of human life.



The rhythmic gestures of a Latino selling sneakers similarly stage, at one level, the stark political boundaries between citizens and immigrants. At the same time, his integration into the communal fabric of the city suggests that this lone individual character (the only one in the sea of anonymous figures populating the video) is part of the lifeblood of Los Angeles. Yet, this apparent integration is held in tension by the background, which seems to suggest that the price of integration is a new understanding of "freedom": the freedom to sell cheap shoes in the street... Like the juxtaposition between war and suburban tranquility (or leisurely beaches), O'Neill is not simply inscribing a borderline. Just as the horizon of the photogram is repeatedly crossed and re-crossed in the video itself, the artist traverses and re-traverses socio-political frontiers in order to reveal their complexity.

Fortunately, this video does not resolve itself in favor of a politics of ambiguity priding itself on the trend-setting, stultifying concepts of indistinction, indiscernability, etc. On the contrary, O'Neill's attempt to problematize borders is an invitation to think and rethink the horizons structuring our world, a unique and passionate summons to reconsider the aesthetic, ontological, social and political limits of our 'here and now.'

- Theodore Tucker