

# MOVING IMAGE SOURCE

## Sea Change

The displacements of *The Forgotten Space*

by [Jonathan Rosenbaum](#) posted April 8, 2011

I'm sure that I learned a lot more from *The Forgotten Space*—an essay film by Allan Sekula and Noël Burch about sea cargo in the contemporary global economy—than I did from any other feature that I saw last year, fiction or nonfiction. In more ways than one, I'm still learning from it, and its lessons start with the staggering but elemental fact that over 90 percent of the world's cargo still travels by sea—a fact that seems all the more important precisely because so many of us don't know it.

Gary Younge recently contextualized this sort of ignorance in the pages of the *Guardian* ("Wisconsin is making the battle lines clear in America's hidden class war," 27 February):

*You can tell a great deal about a nation's anxieties and aspirations by the discrepancy between reality and popular perception. Polls last year showed that in the US 61% think the country spends too much on foreign aid. This makes sense once you understand that the average American is under the illusion that 25% of the federal budget goes on foreign aid (the real figure is 1%).*

*Similarly, a Mori poll in Britain in 2002 revealed that more than a third of the country thought there were too many immigrants. Little wonder. The mean estimate was that immigrants comprise 23% of the country; the actual number was about 4%.*

*Broadly speaking, these inconsistencies do not reflect malice or willful ignorance but people's attempts to make sense of the world they experience through the distorting filters of media representation, popular prejudice and national myths. "The way we see things is affected by what we know and what we believe," wrote John Berger in Ways of Seeing. "The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled."*

*The Forgotten Space* was filmed mainly in four port cities (Bilbao, Hong Kong, Los Angeles, and Rotterdam) and what the filmmakers call "the industrial hinterland in south China and the transport hinterland in the heart of Holland," with subtitled languages including at least two separate Chinese dialects, Dutch, Indonesian, Korean, and Spanish. Drawing upon work that Sekula has been engaged with as a photographer and writer for most of his career, the film also grew out of many years of discussions with Burch. It premiered last September in Venice, where it was awarded a Special Orizzonti Jury Prize, and I caught up with it two months later at the Viennale, at a well-attended screening held at the festival's largest venue, with Burch in attendance.

I planned to write about it for this site as soon as the first North American playdate was announced, naively assuming that this wouldn't take very long. But it wasn't until I selected the film myself for a single showing at "Film Criticism in Focus," a conference being held later this month (April 21-23) at Northwestern University's [Block Museum](#), that I had my opportunity. (I've subsequently learned that the film will be surfacing next month at Hot Docs in Toronto, and a May 15 screening at New York's Cooper Union is also set, to be followed eventually by a longer run at Anthology Film Archives.)

In fact, this was my second rude shock concerning *The Forgotten Space*. Back in Vienna, Burch explained that the film had been directly inspired by "Dismal Science," the central essay in Sekula's 1995 book *Fish Story*. I immediately went to Amazon to order a copy, only to discover that not only was the book out of print, but that the cost of single used paperback copies ranged from \$288 to slightly over \$344. (Fortunately, for this article, Sekula

sent me copies of this book and its 2002 "sequel," *TITANIC's wake*, which can't be found on Amazon at all—although AbeBooks offers new hardcover copies from France for \$50.73 each plus overseas postage, and is offering its own used copy of *Fish Story* from the UK for a cool \$515.)

Is there some connection between *The Forgotten Space* being passed over by North American venues and Sekula's *Fish Story* being available only at prohibitive prices? I think so, but ascribing this to any simple conspiracy theory involving the film's anticapitalist positions would be much too facile, even if it contains some grains of truth. I think that conspiracy theories—for all their popularity in the contemporary blogosphere and in spite of their seductiveness—are often not simply misguided and glib but also frequently unnecessary as tools for comprehending various institutional and structural glitches and lapses. (This is incidentally why I persuaded Chicago Review Press several years ago to shorten the subtitle of my most popular book, *Movie Wars* [2000], for its paperback edition—a subtitle I hadn't selected in the first place—by removing the sixth and seventh words from *How Hollywood and the Media Conspire to Limit What Films We Can See*.)

A central part of the problem, I suspect, is institutional, relating to both Burch's background as a nonfiction filmmaker in state-supported European television and Sekula's own work as photographer, writer, and (more recently) solo filmmaker within the art world, despite the fact that he stubbornly sticks to the practices of photojournalism and the principles of realism that are now commonly regarded within that world as outmoded. Throughout Sekula's work can be found a running polemical battle with the political and ideological orientations of the art world. This comes to the fore in one of the penultimate sequences of *The Forgotten Space*, focusing on Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, described in *TITANIC's wake* as "a Los Angeles export product, a leviathan of California postmodernity beached on the derelict riverfront of the economically-depressed maritime-industrial capital of the Basques" that "marks the first move in a projected campaign of economic 'revitalization,' tied, as one might expect, to land speculation and tourist promotion."

The paradox is that this Guggenheim Museum, persuasively viewed by the film as a grotesque symbol and instructive example of globalization's power to mask its own exploitation of underpaid labor, is a luxury item that inadvertently and incongruously rhymes with Sekula's own coffee-table books, now collectors' items, in glaring contradistinction to their power, thrust, and purpose. But I hasten to add that there's a crucial difference: Gehry's museum is both omnipresent and "available" to a local populace that, from what we see, feels completely disconnected from it, whereas the books *Fish Story* and *TITANIC's wake*, devoted to the histories and realities that are directly relevant to that same populace and to us, are effectively unavailable to both. So there seems to be a certain deadly logic to *The Forgotten Space* existing—or, more precisely, not existing—in the same academic and art-world context in North America that it is bent on challenging. This is a battle that Sekula was already waging in his first major collection, *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973-1983*, as the very title of one of its key essays—"Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)"—makes clear. The book is buttressed by an elegant literary-academic prose whose style might be described as a form of controlled rage (yet delivered with a measured calm whose eloquence and lyricism periodically evoke Chris Marker). Benjamin H.D. Buchloh spells it out in an essay that serves as an appendix to *Fish Story*: "That Sekula's project is engaged in the reconstruction of critical realism after and against the abrogation of photography by modernist aesthetics is first of all evident through his continuous involvement with those photographic practices that were already identified by [Alexander] Rodchenko as 'unartistic': photojournalism and the traditions of (American) street photography and documentary photography."

Of course, once Sekula's early writings and photography turn up online (assuming that this happens) and *The Forgotten Space* becomes available on DVD, these restrictions will no longer apply, though some particular qualities in each may get short-changed in the process: the interactivity of prose and image in the books matches—and in some ways surpasses—that of Walker Evans and James Agee in their radical book of the '30s about Alabama sharecroppers, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and ideally the size of the projected images in *The Forgotten*

Space should match the epic sweep of Burch and Sekula's subject, which is unlikely to happen on most home screens. (One shudders to think what this film would look like on a mobile phone.) But such things are always relative. As Sekula wrote to me recently—after pointing out that photography books are quite often very expensive once they go out of print, and that this isn't necessarily an "art world" phenomenon—"In terms of 'exhibition value,' *Fish Story* was seen by 650,000 people when it was exhibited in Documenta 12 in Kassel. The three editions of the book, two in English (1995 and 2002) and one in German translation (2002), totaled about 5,000 copies."

So it's important to bear in mind that *The Forgotten Space*, *Fish Story*, and *TITANIC's wake* are only individual manifestations of a multimedia project that has been developing over many years. And part of the problem with these overlapping works is that consumers familiar with one or even two aren't necessarily familiar with all of them. The same Internet that leads us to many previously unavailable resources may also encourage us to avoid and bypass certain others. In some ways, I prefer the books to the film because of their literary qualities and their cultural span. The second part of "Dismal Science" in *Fish Story* proceeds from a discussion of *Jaws* (novel and film) to an analysis of *Potemkin* (both the film and its historical basis), and later, on facing pages, Sekula moves from a panel in a *Popeye* comic strip to two Walker Evans photographs of sleeping tramps. But I can't compare either the film or the books—or the half-hour "short version" of his three-hour *The Lottery of the Sea* (2006), the only one of his solo films I've seen—with the exhibitions, which I haven't seen (unlike most people who have encountered this material). And despite my earlier interest in Sekula's work back in the '70s and '80s, I might not have heard about the books, the solo films, or the exhibitions if it hadn't been for my encounter with *The Forgotten Space* last year. Such are the ironies and hazards of competing and sometimes mutually exclusive niche markets.

And I can't deny that Burch's own work has added important elements to the mix. As an American-born but French-based critic, theorist, film historian, and filmmaker who has developed radically away from his formalist and modernist beginnings in the '60s (as exemplified in his book *Theory of Film Practice* and his film *Noviciaŕ*) toward content-driven leftist work in both writing and film, he has remained an original and provocative thinker, even though his political orientations are far more French and generically Marxist than Sekula's, for better and for worse. (To cite one example of what I mean, in France it usually isn't considered necessary to conceal one's political motivations in order to produce work that functions politically—as do such North American films as Ron Mann's *Go Further* and Thom Andersen's *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, at least in their opening stretches.) Due to various complications in production, Burch and Sekula wound up directing some portions of the film separately and other parts together; Sekula wrote most of the narration and Burch carried out most of the editing.

What emerges is a free-ranging film essay with a lot of fresh documentary material about what globalized sea traffic does to the lives of some workers around ports in Southern California, two separate regions of China, Holland, and the Basque region of Spain. The film's most haunting and persistent image is the multicolored and anonymous rectangular steel containers loaded on the ships, evoking giant versions of children's building blocks while never betraying what their actual contents might be—an apt illustration of the concealments and shiny surfaces of the globalized economy itself.

The global crisis that intervened in the midst of the film's production obviously complicated the filmmakers' scenario in some ways and sharpened it in others. "Until recently," Sekula says—over a montage exploring various parts of a cargo ship that ends with shadows of the steel containers reflected on waves—"it was easy to believe that the world economy was running on automatic, regulating itself with an invisible hand. Now we know that the global trading system floats on a sea of credit and that bankers can as comfortably bet on failure as they can on success." From here the film cuts to a fascinating, extended clip from one of Michael Powell's earliest features, *Red Ensign* (1934), about an independent shipbuilder attempting to save jobs during the Depression, prompting the question of who would ever think of making such a film today.

The sea of course is itself both an epic subject and the focus of countless shared fantasies spanning many centuries. The fact that we commonly relegate these fantasies to some notion of centuries past rather than our

workaday present meant that when the BP oil spill occurred in the Gulf of Mexico last year, the shock for many of us was roughly akin to a rude awakening from a dream that we didn't even know we were having, so thoroughly had this three-quarters of the earth's surface been banished to the far edges of our everyday consciousness. As Sekula's narration puts it, "The sea is remembered today only when maritime disaster strikes—when the black tide rolls in. Some of the oil is recovered and burned, polluting twice over...and then we forget again."

Sekula's fascination with the sea—and with the history of our relation to it, which Burch's background in essayistic documentaries both serves and amplifies—goes well beyond the commonplace observation that we keep forgetting it. There's also the very telling perception—more apparent in Sekula's writing and in *The Lottery of the Sea* than in *The Forgotten Space*—that the sea's role in the past as a bottomless source for metaphors about depth, mystery, exploration, adventure, and infinite spaces has in some ways been replaced by our utopian images of and fantasies about cyberspace, which expressions such as "surfing the Web" only help to literalize. For part of Sekula's polemical position is that the processes of globalization, many of which depend on the sea, are partially camouflaged by many of our fantasies about the freedom and drift of digital space, so that invisible sea cargo workers in effect ride steerage while those lucky enough to have computers can at least entertain the fantasy of first-class cabins.

Is *The Forgotten Space* a documentary or an essay? Ultimately it's a bit of both. The far-flung visuals show us people and places across the globe: documentary subjects. Yet one could argue that the true subject of the essay is what drifts and doesn't drift through our consciousness in relation to those subjects—the diverse theme-park rides, including those of the Internet, that we and our culture invent and keep running in order to rationalize or screen out the more pertinent displacements of people, processes, and goods. The documentary shows, but the essay explores, stimulates, and provokes. ■

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