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WORLD VIEWS

Why Film Here?

DISLOCATION AND SOLACE IN THE WORK OF MARK STREET

SARAH T. MARKGRAF

Mark Street started making movies over 30 years ago—he has made over 25—and has given much more to experimental and art film than the critical record suggests. On one side of Street's group of far-ranging creations are experimental films such as *Winterwheat* (1989), *Blue Movie* (1995), and *Sweep* (1998). These works use techniques known to avant-garde filmmakers such as manipulated found footage; scratching, bleaching, and scraping of film emulsion; and hand-painting. On the other side of Street's panoply of pieces are three feature-length art films: *At Home and Asea* (2002), set in Baltimore, Maryland; *Rockaway* (2005) set in Queens, New York; and *Hasta Nunca (See You Never)* (2012) set in Montevideo, Uruguay. These pieces have developed narratives and compelling fictional characters.

Many pieces by Street fall somewhere between these ends, including diary films in which he is the main subject and narrator such as *Lilting Towards Chaos* (1990) and *A Year* (2006). Unconventional documentary works can be found here too, such as *Happy?* (2000) and *Hidden in Plain Sight* (2008) as well

as multi-screen performance pieces such as *(Re) Taking of Pelham 1, 2, 3 (x3)* (2013). Street uses both film and video formats, often in the same piece. In his words, "my work ranges from abstract hand-manipulated pieces to work that involves found footage to feature length improvised narratives. Each film attempts to investigate new terrain and avoids being confined by a specific look or mood."

Naturally, Street's body of work is difficult to categorize. Is it too experimental to earn him the "art film director" title? And, at the same time, do his feature narrative films undermine the historically limited label of "experimental filmmaker"? Street says he feels uneasy about being "contained by either world." He also claims that he feels "at once soothed and irritated by both of the worlds" of experimental and narrative film.

Maybe for this reason, Street's work can be hard to write about as a whole. He doesn't make it easy to adopt an auteurist approach, long favored by those who write about film. Because Street is a character in many of his works, they seem autobiographical, but they also seem hyperbolic. Determining the differences between



Mark Street, *Still Here* (2015), frame enlargement. All images courtesy the artist.

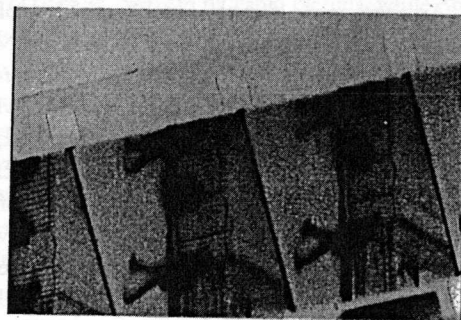
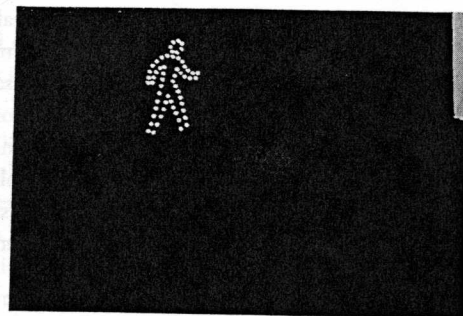
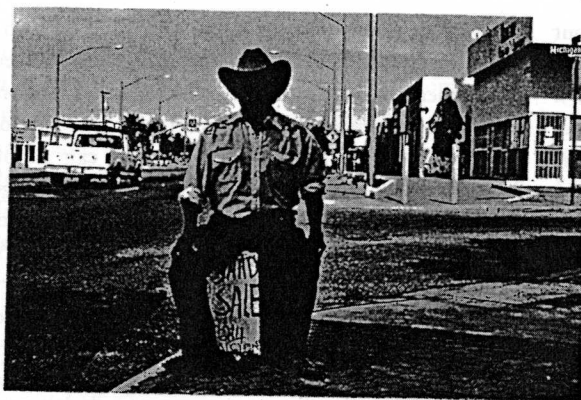
Street as character and/or narrator, Street's life as a cinematic subject, and Street the filmmaker is almost impossible.

One prominent theme in Street's works is location: the visual, psychological, cinematic dimensions of geographical place. But Street's self-conscious engagement with place (where he is, where his camera is) is often ambivalent and restless—indeed dislocated—revealing a duality that deserves some attention.

On one hand, many of Street's pictures openly express uneasiness about literal location, which generally also means psychic location. His apartment is "paradise" only when "everyone is out," he says in *Lilting Towards Chaos*, an early diary film full of alienating places and experiences for Street in his twenties. And in *A Year* he asks as a middle-aged man "Where do I want to be? Every place feels hollow." On the streets of Santiago, Chile, he feels "more and more removed." Unlike many people, Street says he is drawn toward "a kind of discomfort ... and a desire to be somewhere where I [am not] ... wanted. Once I'm wanted, I flee."

On the other hand, relief and satisfaction, though fleeting, can be found in the same works—sometimes even the same moments—that create anxiety. Despite how "hollow" every place feels in *A Year*, in that movie Street also shows a deep attachment to urban spaces. *A Year* and other works show that Street can draw viewers in "by the beauty of the world and the encounters that await," as expressed by a character in *Hasta Nunca*. The beauty that awaits, however, is not always the expected kind.

Dislocation is the very subject of *Why Live Here?* From the start, it offers visual snippets—atypical postcards—from three different places: San Francisco, Butte, Montana, and somewhere in Florida. At the same time, three characters (two men and one woman, each having just moved to one of those spots) take turns describing their strange and largely dissonant relationships with their new homes; the narratives contain tangential links to one another though these characters apparently do not know each other. The non-touristy visual depictions of each city work in tandem with the stories of alienation told by each character.



Mark Street, *Still Here* (2015), frame enlargements.

Street is one of the characters in the movie, while the other two are fictional.

The man who is not Street reveals that he is returning to Butte, Montana, his childhood home, admitting in voiceover to valuing his “roots” and “wanting to be from somewhere,” although we hear a slightly sad sound in his voice. The pictures we see of Butte are mostly lonely (industrial areas, barbed wire fences, a junkyard—all with a strikingly beautiful mountain in the distance) but also sad (a struggling calf being roped and trussed at a rodeo). Even though this character talks about looking “at the terrain with some kind of terror,” he also says that “we live where we live because we like it or we don’t hate it enough to leave.” Is his move back to Butte to work for his father a sign of progress or regress in his life? It does make him “feel like a kid again,” but the ambiguity in the images of the place (the beauty in the mountains, the sadness in the roped calf) renders the question unanswerable. Figuring out how to survive with some sort of dignity intact—respect and acceptance from his relatives, for example—seems more to the point.

“Could I live here?” the woman who has moved to San Francisco asks, the question all three characters

face. Her first sights of the city come from a “self-guided neon tour” at night: the signs she sees are bright and fun. She says she is avoiding landmarks because she needs create a new image of the city for herself. Although she feels dislodged from a sense of home, she describes her psychic state clearly and confidently, realizing that there are “new codes to pick apart” in any new city, but also “limits to all places.” When the novelty of the city wears off (it is “like any other place”), solace follows. Finding ordinariness in the city—such as a sidewalk overcrowded with people—is her answer to survival.

The third character, Street, is the trickiest of the three. He has moved to “the land of displaced folks:” somewhere in Florida. He is determined to distance himself from it through ironic commentary. But at the same time, he explores the place. The image of Street standing alone in a pool seems lonely and alienated, but he’s literally immersed in his new home. He and his camera move through a construction site, a golf course, a dog race, a realtor’s open house—and some lovely tropical trees. These visual passages show he’s out and about (making art) rather than holed up in his apartment. Street is reluctant to like where he is,

but he occupies it decisively anyway, curious about the place that makes him uncomfortable ("I'm amazed by everything," he says, but "it also makes me sad"). At the end of *Why Live Here?*, about to leave Florida, Street surprises us by saying that he'll miss it and its craziness. He is "already nostalgic." However, he follows this up with "maybe I should get some Hawaiian shirts and stay," undermining any sentimental attachment he might have developed to the place.

An even more directly autobiographical piece, *A Year* depicts moments through a year in Mark Street's life. It was made almost 20 years after *Lilting Toward Chaos*, which was set in San Francisco where Street went to graduate school. Now in New York, his dislocation is mostly psychological (although he exiles himself to New Orleans briefly towards the end of the movie). Street wonders at the beginning of *A Year* "what happened to that guy?" while showing vintage video of himself in his twenties at a San Francisco bar, smiling. In *Lilting Toward Chaos*, he wonders if he is living the right way. Now, in *A Year*, he asks when middle age officially starts, something likely to puzzle viewers as well, since childhood, adolescence, and old age are easier chapters to identify within a life.

While he has the benefit of hindsight ("I've been anxious for 25 years. Maybe I don't want to get better"), Street is still restless, alienated, and troubled, seemingly on a daily basis. ("I've got to get the right balance between inside and outside"). His later life, however, includes a loving family, as well as a stable living situation in Brooklyn. This all appears to offer more potential for comfort than life in San Francisco in *Lilting Toward Chaos*, where feeling like an "intruder" in someone else's apartment is "great." *A Year* is haunted by the question of whether Street's "quaking fear of the ordinary" will prevent him from occupying a settled space with a sense of well-being.

Street continues in *A Year* to experience similar kinds of losses to those in *Lilting Towards Chaos* ("I just got used to Spring and it's already gone"), but his special attachment to urban spaces seems a regular source of solace. A trip out of Brooklyn and into the country leaves Street "untethered." He says he can't wait to get back to New York City to the noise. His main complaint: "I don't know how to look at a quieter picture."

Instead, he is looking for comfort in the city, as expressed in one of the many silent intertitles in *A Year*. These visual representations of his words (white words on black background) make them very clear and strong. "Sometimes a walk in the city is all I need," Street writes.

Viewers are shown what he might encounter on such a walk. We go from one visually interesting urban subject to another: ephemera such as graffiti or street vendors, both no less lovely in their photographic presentation than anything "goddamn high culture" can supply (Street's reference to Lincoln Center). In one passage, a modest string of Christmas lights is shown wrapped around a sad urban tree. Street lets us feel that we're being let in on a visual secret.

Just when we think we've located a place of happiness for Street in the urban street, however, he writes that his ultimate aim is to be "transported away from" himself as he moves through urban space. He "finally feel[s] at home on the outside." He slips from our critical grasp, eluding categories of containment.

Maybe as compensation—or consolation—for all the difficulties expressed in it, *A Year* calls upon a range of cinematic techniques through the course of the piece: live action diary film style, hand-painted and otherwise abstract animated passages, film stills, different types of slow motion and dissolve shots, and intertitles. Street moves from soft dissolved jump cuts to slow motion streaks of color that appear like abstract paintings. The images he presents are sometimes as serene and serious as many a well-composed photograph, or they can be full of friction, fun, or poignancy such as the image of Street talking to his mother on the phone while holding a gigantic stuffed teddy bear. This formal variation adds different registers and types of ornamentation to what seems a spare narrative of one man's anxiety-ridden year.

The purely abstract passages in *A Year* are colorful, vibrant, and joyful. They are very different from what is being said in the diary film part of the movie. Are the abstract moments in the movie meant to be a place of comfort and solace? They could be seen to occupy a serene place on the margins of the diary dimension of the film, and we have heard from Street that outskirts are where he feels the most comfortable. On the other hand, these abstract passages could be seen as a form of contrast, challenging the narrative part of the movie by suggesting alternative ways to make art and view life; if so, *A Year* is a work with deeply divided aesthetics.

The elegant *Hidden in Plain Sight* is a video essay that meditates on the contrast between feelings of connection as a participant in a new place and feelings of distance as an observer in the very same place. The movie focuses on four not exactly tourist-oriented cities to which Street has spontaneously traveled: Marseilles, France; Dakar, Senegal; Hanoi, Vietnam; and Santiago, Chile. It is divided into seven chapters, each focusing

on a concept related to travel, such as "Wandering" or "Learning to Look." Street interweaves compelling urban images in one location with those in the other cities and back and forth without apparent logic, although we do begin and end in New York. The piece also includes intertitles that express Street's thoughts, describe certain details in a scene, and provide poetic statements about travel and location.

Hidden in Plain Sight distinguishes itself from the ambivalence of *Why Live Here?* and the anxiety of *A Year*. Here, Street seems to navigate place and its potential discontents more easily. The tone is often self-reflective as Street considers the contrast between the literal closeness that capturing images by a video camera requires as well as the psychological distance that can be felt when gathering images as an observer in a new and unfamiliar city.

Street switches between invisibility as filmmaker and frank admission of his presence. "Sometimes when I stand on a street corner and watch, I am immersed," Street writes in Santiago, yet "other times I feel more and more removed." We see sequences that have been shot by a more than likely unnoticed camera (a dog sleeping by a bright graffitied wall in Santiago; people with their backs to Street at a fruit stand in Hanoi), but we also see the noticed camera such as when kids in Dakar are staring at and touching Street's running camera.

Street finds the past haunting: Allende's final words coming back to him when he's in Chile, and Ho Chi Minh making his presence known in Hanoi. The past is introduced not so much to turn the film political but to invoke a lost feeling, a feeling of confusion about being in a place of heinous historical events and not knowing how to situate oneself in relation to it. It is the opposite of nostalgia.

But the serious registers often give way more light-hearted ones. In the chapter titled "Details," we find a playful pull between the spontaneous and the planned. We see unexpected or marginal images such as "a clown after work" or "numbers on walls," but each image is prefaced by an intertitle (just quoted) describing what detail we are about to see. In Marseilles we find a similar contrast between order and chaos. Street wonders "why do I need this way of ordering the landscape?" The statement is followed by a symmetrically framed sequence of a building in Santiago with beautiful blue columns evenly placed at its entrance; two children cross in front. There are many other such pleasingly composed sequences. But there are plenty of less ordered and more spontaneous passages such as two people in Hanoi off to one side of the frame, poorly lit,

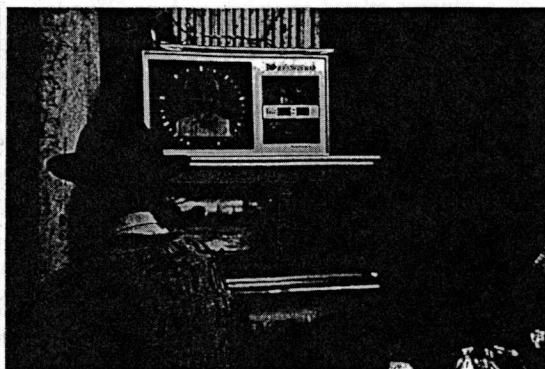
hard to see, intent on eating noodles while loud traffic goes in every which way behind them.

The theoretical and poetic passages presented in intertitles in *Hidden in Plain Sight* frame Street's visual offerings in suggestive ways. They also indicate Street's broad knowledge of what important writers such as Henri Lefebvre have had to say about the poetics of space—especially pertaining to the urban street. "Whoever sets foot in a city is caught up in a web of dreams," we read by Pablo Neruda, while Andre Breton tells us that "the street is the only valid field of experience." Whether this movie exemplifies any of these qualities (or any others mentioned in the many other theoretical and poetic intertitles) will be up to the viewer. The quotations have been placed in the movie mainly to add a deeper dimension to the collage of other intertitles and images, not to define or contain what we see.

There is another overall significance to these passages: no quotation mentions the lone *filmmaker* who confronts the urban street. Street cannot be Baudelaire's flaneur or the Situationist drifter. He has a camera and he uses it. There is a tradition of a man with a camera capturing the overall look and feel of a city (it is called the "city symphony") from Dziga Vertov and Walter Ruttmann to Hilary Harris and Dominic Angerame. Street is different from these others in at least one way: his city symphonies are often about places he has traveled to rather than lived in. While we see our share of fond images of New York in this and other of Street's works, the city symphony made about an unfamiliar city is an original twist. Street also makes the sometimes uncomfortable duality between observing and participating with the unfamiliar urban subject a self-conscious part of the piece, often through the nuanced but powerful use of intertitles.

At the end of *Hidden in Plain Sight*, Street returns to New York "with fresh eyes": "the details merge and the familiar starts to seem unexpected." He states that he had to go away in order to see New York again. This underscores the constant subjectivity in our visual experiences of the familiar world around us, contrary to our general insistence (and genuine belief) that we always see our world objectively. *Hidden in Plain Sight* is a strong affirmation of fearless, spontaneous travel.

Street has made many other works not mentioned here that share some of the same themes. For example, *Fulton Fish Market* sets about conveying the ineffable feeling of a (now absent) place through non-narrated visual imagery that resonates in us somewhere between documentary footage and art film. In Mexico in



Mark Street, TOP ROW *Hidden in Plain Sight* (2009), BOTTOM *Still Here* (2015), frame enlargements.

Excursions, Street describes himself as “a tremendous explorer” with his “own distancing apparatus.” And *Rockaway* traces the poignant and confusing in-between space three girls occupy before they finish high school and move apart for college. These and other pieces need their own more fully developed commentary.

Street writes that his work is confronting “notions of home and community in an age of unprecedented transience and instability” The technological context of the works discussed here is surely relevant. The cultural zeitgeist of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is marked by questions about what location even means as well as by the ability to travel great distances without leaving home—also an unclear signifier.

Even after such links are drawn, however, we find that the presence of Street as character and filmmaker in his movies is tenacious enough, independent enough,

even perverse enough that his work goes against the grain of historical explanations that reference social media and the Internet; base and superstructure. Street’s pieces are rare triumphs of individual expression within a world—whether described as “experimental film” or “art cinema”—that seeks all-encompassing theories to contain what sometimes—what ideally—cannot be.

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