

***Manhatta*: The Art of Visual Metaphor**

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Introduction

Manhatta (1921), a ten-minute experimental ‘city’ film produced by photographer Paul Strand and painter Charles Sheeler, strives to capture the rhythmic and graphic patterns of the emerging metropolis, New York City. Due to the hybridised artistic institutions of photography and painting that create the film’s extraordinary aesthetic, *Manhatta* is often cited as the first significant text in the history of American avant-garde cinema. In the film, a cyborgian naissance threatens the city’s landscape; the skyscrapers, boats, trains and steam shovels seemingly move without human intervention – an emotionless dystopian world of machines and metallic surfaces. Beyond its visual aesthetic, the film is also unique in its form with the individual thematic sections of the film introduced by a line of Walt Whitman’s poetry (1819-1892), written during his time residing in New York and its adjacent boroughs in the mid-nineteenth century.

Bearing in mind the title *Manhatta* is ‘borrowed’ from a Whitman poem, albeit slightly altered (Whitman used *Mannahatta*), Whitman’s pertinence to the film has, in existing discussions, been marginalised. These discussions have prioritised *Manhatta*’s modernist aesthetic as their subject matter, collectively citing Alfred Stieglitz’s 291 gallery and New York art magazine, *The Soil*, as two possible stimuli for its production.¹ Therefore, this paper aims to give room to Whitman by interpreting *Manhatta* as an extension of his poetry. As a cross-medium translation, *Manhatta* also provides a unique opportunity to discuss the film’s treatment of metaphor in comparison to its literal predecessor; in particular, the film camera’s ability to manifest in pictures the heterogeneous nature of modernism alluded to in Whitman’s poems.² Due to its inherent reliance on the visual, doubts have been cast as to the capability of cinema to achieve metaphor. Thus, it is with hope that a fresh analysis of *Manhatta* may contribute towards invalidating any such doubts.

Whitman’s complex relationship with New York was governed by deep ambivalence; his cynicism for the city’s capitalist culture was finely balanced by his steadfast belief in the city’s working class – the bedrock of democracy – and the dynamism of the streets where he lived. Indeed, the intertitles used to guide *Manhatta*’s narrative are excerpts from Whitman’s early writings; together, they encapsulate the ingenuous poet’s naïve optimism for the city and its residents. In *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* (1856), which provides two intertitles for *Manhatta* and is one of Whitman’s most celebrated pro-

¹ I refer here to the two most recent articles about the film: J. Horak, ‘Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler’s *Manhatta*’ in *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde 1919-1945*, (ed.), J. Horak, (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), pp. 267-286, and J. Suárez, ‘City Space, Technology, Popular Culture: The Modernism of Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler’s *Manhatta*’, *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 36, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 85-106.

² To avoid any misunderstanding, ‘metaphor’ is defined in this paper as “the presentation of one idea in terms of another, so that either our understanding of the first idea is transformed, or so that a third idea is created”. T. Whittcock, *Metaphor and Film*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 5.

modernist poems, he reveals his love of ports and rivers: “Flow on, river! Flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide! Frolic on, crested and scalloped-edg’d waves!”³ Late in life, Whitman commented, “My own favourite loafing places have always been the rivers, the wharves, the boats.”⁴ The movement of the masts, the merchandise and the beauty of the ships which directly contributed, and lent an impressive character, to New York’s vibrant power and energy, provided Whitman with a feeling of pride in man’s progress. This feeling of pride he would later reluctantly question, as he succumbed to the truth that the motivating forces behind the power and ambition of nineteenth century America were all symptomatic of his worst fear: undemocratic capitalism.

In 1856 (pre-Civil War), around the time Whitman penned *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, his positive attachment to New York enabled him to embrace aspects of modernism that later he would find intolerable. In the poem, Whitman sympathetically describes the desolating moments of loneliness that afflicted him in a crowd: “Saw many I loved in the street, or ferry-boat, or public assembly, yet never told them a word.” Whitman turned this negative, destructive experience into a constructive discovery of the uniqueness of the human soul. As M. Wynn Thomas duly observes:

On the one hand, he (Whitman) registered the vivacity and loving intimacy that there was in the intermingling of close contact bodies, on the other hand, he deliberately traced the growth of suspicion that through it all, the essential self remained ingloriously isolated.⁵

At this point in his ever-changing relationship with the city, man’s tendency to be emotionally impenetrable was, for Whitman, the trait that most explicitly exposed the cracks of modernist culture; yet, the all-embracing, socially indiscriminating love he had for his fellow citizens was, for the time being, his overriding emotion.

Although *Mannahatta* (1860) only provides three intertitles for the film, its importance to Strand and Sheeler is palpable. For Whitman, and perhaps for the filmmakers as well, the use of the aboriginal name of New York is a deliberate attempt to distance themselves from the colonial modernisation of the city. The renaming also allowed Whitman to refashion the city on his own terms; he amalgamates the city’s natural elements, the sea, snow and sun, with the man-made elements, such as the boats, skyscrapers and vehicles. In doing so, he uses *Mannahatta* as a philosophical space in which he can group together all of the contradictory elements in his conception of contemporary America and attempt to make sense of them, both outwardly as a citizen and inwardly as a social spectator. For Whitman, even the sordid, ugly and brutal aspects of city life were redeemed by the energy that flowed from the soul of the working class. Thus, it appears the contradictory elements he tirelessly contemplated were rooted in his romantic delight for the plenitude, mystery, and variety of the created universe.

³ Quoted in H. Blodgett & S. Bradley, (eds.), *Leaves of Grass*, (London: University of London Press, 1965), p. 164.

⁴ Quoted in H. Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden: Volume 2*, (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961), p. 71.

⁵ M. Wynn Thomas, ‘Walt Whitman and Mannahatta-New York’, *American Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 4, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, Autumn 1982), p.368.

After the publication of *Leaves of Grass* (1860) Whitman's deepening bafflement with capitalism's disregard for egalitarianism resulted in his affirmations becoming increasingly hollow and his poetry consequently vapid. By the time Whitman came to write *Human and Heroic New York* (c. 1867), the passion had gone from his affair with the city, and had been replaced by pious, wishful sentimentality. The views expressed in *Democratic Vistas* (1871), written only a few years after *Human and Heroic New York*, are Whitman's most anti-modernist of all; his bitterness towards the Civil War, Lincoln's assassination and his ever-weakening body, reveals a revulsion that extends far beyond the boundaries of New York:

I say that our New World democracy, however great a success in uplifting the masses, in materialistic development, products, and in a highly-deceptive superficial popular intellectually, is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects.⁶

Whitman clearly craved that uninhibited contact with the teeming life of the city and the world that inspired the gloriously fresh poetry of his younger years. But the older Whitman, ailing as well as aging, and palpably mistrusting the energies that animated contemporary life, could no longer give his imagination his unqualified support. It is at this point, in view of Whitman's breakdown with New York, that Strand and Sheeler's film, *Manhatta*, is most appropriately introduced. The tension between *Manhatta's* modernist perspectives and a romantic longing for a world in which man, regardless of his progress, remains in harmony with nature encapsulates Whitman's capricious relationship with the city. The intertitles are excerpts from Whitman's endearingly optimistic early poetry, while, in contrast, the haunting and poignant images of the film are more suited to Whitman's later work, as if manifested by the bitter, aging mind of the poet himself. Thus, without an appreciation for Whitman's later work, *Manhatta* can appear contradictory:

Despite the lines from Whitman's poems, *Manhatta* is not really Whitmanesque in feeling, because it either omits the people of New York or sees them as molecules in a crowd ... with none of the social richness that stirred Whitman's soul. Strand and Sheeler's *Manhatta* is a hard, clear, abstract place.⁷

Arguably, *Manhatta* is Whitmanesque in feeling, depending, of course, on how deep into Whitman's soul one is willing to look. In *Our Real Culmination* (c. 1880), one of the final essays of *Specimen Days and Collect*, Whitman notes:

⁶ Quoted in E. Holloway, (ed.), *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Selected Prose and Letters*, (London: The Nonesuch Press, 1947), p. 666.

⁷ R. Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America*, (London: Harvill Press, 1997), p. 383.

Exceptional wealth, splendour, countless manufactures, excess of exports, immense capital and capitalists, the five-dollar-a-day hotels ... form, more or less, a sort of anti-democratic disease and monstrosity.⁸

The dystopian world constructed in *Manhatta* – a landscape abundant with symbolism and metaphor – is the “anti-democratic disease” Whitman describes. With every shot of New York’s bustling streets, towering skyscrapers and glistening horizons, the references to the cinematic images described in Whitman’s poetry are frequent and carefully considered, not least in *Mannahatta*, which, on reflection, provides *Manhatta*’s authors with a kind of storyboard or shot list for their film.

The visual quality of Whitman’s poetry (“Numberless crowded streets, high growths of iron, slender, strong ... Uprising toward clear skies ... City of hurried and sparkling waters! City of spires and masts!”) is integrated into the aesthetic of *Manhatta*; however, the images that reflect this quality in the film are more sinister in tone than Whitman’s early poetry and, in terms of their metaphorical content, are far more analogous to his later work.⁹ For example, the most unequivocal observation one can make in the film is the anonymity of New York’s residents. The use of the camera re-presents them as serialized and streamlined; they are turned into abstractions, reduced to pattern, movement and type. Unlike Whitman’s poetry, rarely do Strand and Sheeler invite the spectator to perceive any facial details or witness a social exchange between family, work colleagues or strangers. The intrinsic bond between any two given human spirits was an obsession for Whitman – an energy he alluded to in a number of poems, including the 1860 sentimental piece, *A Broadway Pageant* (“When the facades of the houses are alive with people – when eyes gaze, riveted, tens of thousands at a time.”) and *To A Common Prostitute* (1861), in which Whitman exhibits a strong psychic affinity with a New York social reject.¹⁰ Thus, there is ample evidence in Whitman’s body of work to suggest he valued the city space as an unprecedented solvent of traditional social ties and a promoter of unconventional relationships. It is on this point that *Manhatta* appears to be at its most distant from Whitman, as, even in his post-war poetry, there is a sense of spectatorship in Whitman’s accounts of urban life – people that show curiosity and pay attention to what others are doing. In *Sparkles from the Wheel* (1871), for example, Whitman joins a group of children watching a knife-grinder at work. Beyond this act of observation, however, Whitman communicates the anomie of the modern city by describing a craft rapidly being replaced by wage labour and the assembly line values of speed, profit and accuracy. Therefore, at its core, the New York of *Manhatta* is never truly distant from Whitman’s at all.

In his analysis of *Manhatta*, Jan-Christopher Horak takes Strand and Sheeler’s representation of New York’s residents a step further by augmenting the film as one of extreme metaphorical power: “The inhabitants ... are reduced to antlike movements, insects crawling between skyscrapers.”¹¹ Man’s

⁸ Quoted in F. Stovall, (ed.), *Prose Works 1892: Volume II*, (New York: New York University Press, 2007), p. 539.

⁹ Quoted in Blodgett & Bradley, (eds.), *Leaves of Grass*, p. 475.

¹⁰ Quoted in Holloway, *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry*, p. 747.

¹¹ Horak, (ed.), *Lovers of Cinema*, p. 279.

pursuit of a technological world has diminished his own importance and indeed efficacy; he is aloof and apathetic. This conclusion is cemented by a second scene in which a group of construction workers' tools are swung to a monotone rhythm; they show no emotion to each other or, assuming they were aware of it, to the camera. They are, in reality, components of a machine, indifferent and cataleptic to their subjection. Strand and Sheeler's employment of high-angle cinematography further emasculates the residents. The camera, occasionally observing them through the gaps in between stone columns, affirms the potential for the urban architecture to one day become a place of captivity. The trap of the modern age, encapsulated in metaphorical cinematic terms, perceptively reflects the aging Whitman's outbursts against the city, which were not simply demonstrations of pique, nor romantic misanthropy, but were the result of chronic disappointment at what his city had become, most notably, an aristocracy of wealth. The "i-dollar-try" that had propelled America forward – reliant on a widening discrepancy between the upper and working classes and supported by corrupt politics – left Whitman wholeheartedly deflated. The reality of commercialism had finally provided him with closure; the burning flame of his youth, which inspired so much creative engagement, had been extinguished. Within its ten-minute lifespan, *Manhatta* uncovers all of the underlying complexities that simmered beneath Whitman's sanguine exterior.

The tension between the visual and written elements in the film is ultimately alleviated by shots of New York's natural elements. Inspired by Whitman's obsession with the nature of the city, Strand and Sheeler do visibly what Whitman attempted to do in his poetry: they give the city life. However, this cyborgian naissance is not as threatening as one may expect from a modernist film text:

The abstract crowds appear as an organic accretion on the city's surface. Their biological regression is perfectly consonant with the film's eventual assimilation of the artificial modern environment onto nature, to the day cycle and the quietude of the sunset.¹²

Skyscrapers no longer appear as man-made icons of capitalism, but as mountain peaks and deep canyons, and trains and road vehicles flow like rivers in between them. Indeed, the film's final image is not of the cityscape, its man-made technological structure or urban squalor; Strand and Sheeler conclude their film with two shots of the sun setting behind the harbour, which, alongside the film's dawn-to-dusk fictional span, signify the integration of the natural world, mass society, the city and technology into a harmonious unity. In this amalgamation of city and nature, *Manhatta* retells the early dreams of Whitman, who, as a promising young journalist closely involved with the changing life of New York, saw his observations grow into a spiritual vision that valued people not for conventional reasons but for the precious singularity of life that each possesses. Contained within the film's dystopian vision of capitalism, there is hope that the innocence of nature will eventually conquer all.

¹² Suárez, 'City Space', p. 104.

The city was for Whitman the place in which the natural emotion of man most torrentially displayed itself. In turn, the residents of *Manhatta* might therefore be the bearer of a unified civilisation. This dream of unity seemed especially urgent in America at the turn of the twentieth century, when the destruction of traditional rural communities, the relocation of large numbers of people, and foreign immigration brought together vastly different population groups. This insinuation of a unified populace is the closest Strand and Sheeler come to endowing it with any kind of power. The closing shot of the film, the sun setting over the city's harbour, introduced by the words "Gorgeous clouds of sunset! Drench with your splendour me or the men and women generations after me," displays a flawless consistency between the visual and literal elements without a touch of the sardonicism that has directed the melancholic complexion of the film up to this point. Strand and Sheeler no longer serve to simply alleviate the tension between the image and verbal text; they serve to resolve it. In similar vein, therefore, to Whitman and his poetry, *Manhatta* could be best described as a film with remedial powers, created with a curative purpose for its authors, and thus facilitating a new intimacy with nature and conquering the neurosis instigated by the New World's hunger for capitalism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is necessary to revisit the question posed earlier: can cinema, as a visual medium, actually construct metaphor? This suggestion has been met with considerable hostility from some literary critics. Jonathan Miller, for example, regards metaphor as a quality exclusive to prose:

It is only in language that one can state an explicit comparison between one thing and another ... Although a picture can be viewed with the knowledge that a metaphorical implication is intended, there are no communicative resources within the pictorial format for making such implications explicit.¹³

In response to Miller, it can be argued that film, like literature, possesses rules and conventions that have evolved through the practice of the art, and which have come to condition the latest expectations with which the spectator scans and interprets the image. The language of cinema dictates that, in order to fully absorb any double-meanings that the images may hope to articulate, the spectator must not only draw on prior experiences of film interaction, but also on experiences with the objects that are central to each shot's metaphorical intention,. Therefore, the communicative resources Miller refers to *are* present, embedded within the film image itself, and used to facilitate the link between the filmmaker's conception of the metaphor and the spectator's interpretation of it.

The metaphors presented in Strand and Sheeler's film are conspicuous in their literality and depth. Despite the tension between the image and written text, Strand and Sheeler's use of the film camera, alongside the

¹³ J. Miller, *Subsequent Performances*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 226. Other objections to the existence of cinematic metaphor include R. Arnheim, *Film*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1933), p. 265, and G. Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1957), pp. 19-20.

carefully selected and placed intertitles, not only offer the cinema spectator an insight into the world Whitman once belonged to, but also the one he feared for the future; a world that was drifting slowly away from democracy rather than towards it. The cinematography that reduces New York to a world of ants trapped in a self-built maze, and makes the natural elements of the city appear interchangeable with its synthetic structures, creates a landscape of metaphor as intelligent technically as it is ideologically perceptive.

Thus, *Manhatta* finds a way of exposing the faith Whitman had in his city's democratic potential while paradoxically defining New York as the very antithesis of everything he believed in. Consequently, the film simultaneously unveils the two sides of the Whitman contradiction; it is both modern and anti-modern. *Manhatta* presents the distinctness of Whitman's complex relationship with modernism and translates his ethos from a mode of written abstraction into a series of spectacular visual symbols. Strand and Sheeler's ability to reproduce something essential about the work of Whitman renders it much more than merely an 'adaptation'; it is a product of reverence for art and exists exclusively as attestation for cinema's metaphorical capability.

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Translating Judaism(s)

