

Introduction

Carving Out an Island

Reality includes that which is not yet.

—Ruth Levitas



WITH ITS FIRST SHOT, Marie Menken's city symphony *Go! Go! Go!* (1962–1964) declares its intention to remake and reimagine New York. As Menken's hand waves in front of the Brooklyn Bridge, her simple human gesture momentarily blots out the huge structure. The rest of the eleven-minute film realizes this intention and the inversions of scale that accompany it by depicting a day in New York through a combination of rapid time lapse and stop-motion photography, all edited together with dazzling montage. *Go! Go! Go!* uses a fixed, often low, vantage point to elide the differences of mass and building materials that determine the relative importance of various locations in the city. When a car traverses the Brooklyn Bridge early in the film, its bulk is largely held offscreen by tight framing and an extreme low angle that focuses on individual cables, lampposts, and the interplay of stone and steel, while denying a panoramic view of the bridge's iconic frame. The same treatment that removes the bridge's landmark nature grants it to the residential neighborhoods of Two Bridges, Chinatown, and the Lower East Side, which have more screen time than the bridge and are approached from the same camera height with a straight frame

line. Menken's use of a low vantage point and medium camera distance defamiliarizes the bridge, shrinking it to a more human size and emphasizing its tactile qualities. Applied to Chinatown, these same tactics make monuments of modest apartment buildings and sidewalk stands. With one exception, Menken never offers a complete view of a given site or action, always arriving in the middle of a boat's crossing of the Hudson River or cutting away from a garden party in progress. The exception is a college graduation ceremony, which is depicted from beginning to end over the course of two minutes (figure I.1). The length of the sequence is a mystery—why does it take up so much time?

Go! Go! Go! uses the rhythms of quotidian New York and a dense, syncopated montage aesthetic to pose and answer this question, which is part of its redefinition and critique of the urban environment. These qualities establish the film as a city symphony. Beginning with Sheeler and Strand's *Manhatta* (1921) and continuing with astonishing frequency through Tan Pin Pin's *In Time to Come* (2017), city symphonies have com-



Figure I.1. The attenuated graduation ceremony in *Go! Go! Go!* (Marie Menken, Dir. *Go! Go! Go!* 1962–1964; New York: Anthology Film Archives, 2010, 16 mm.)

bined documentary, experimental, and narrative techniques to produce a typical day in the life of a given urban environment. The films marry the classical unities of time, space, and theme to highly complex montage to depict the city as a cross-section of people, phenomena, and architecture. Historically, city symphonies appear in cycles. They emerge in periods and locations in which the definition and function of the city is being renegotiated through intensive urban redevelopment.¹ These cycles cohere around avant-garde movements, which provide an industrial and institutional context that facilitates the production and consumption of city symphonies. Such movements also generate a set of aesthetic practices that associate city symphonies with larger trends across contemporary visual media.

Whatever cycle they belong to, and no matter what kind of redevelopment they negotiate, city symphonies foreground the rhythms of urban existence. Rhythm is, like narrative, a matter of pattern recognition. It is a series of weak and strong stresses that, through repetition, achieve the status of rules and thereby make meaning. Rhythm, in the realm of the urban, is the law of how and in what ways the movements of bodies and the built environment reoccur. Rhythms contain and construct the *regulation* of urban existence.² They generate and interpret the increasingly complex movements in, and imaginings of, the city in modernity. When a city symphony like *Go! Go! Go!* builds its own rhythm out of everyday New York and then breaks it with something like the graduation scene, it is asking why the ceremony justifies this rupture. For what does this elaborate ritual prepare its adherents?

Menken answers the question by juxtaposing the graduation sequence with a depiction of an office plaza. The final shot of the graduation sequence features the students moving across and down a stage from left to right. The next sequence begins with an endless stream of white-collar workers flowing left to right along a Midtown Manhattan street, then entering the revolving doors of an office building in the style of Mies van der Rohe. This transition answers the question posed by the prior sequence. The graduation, a celebratory metonym for the entire capital investment in higher education and its promised access to self-improvement, social maturity, and economic success, prepares its initiates only for a never-ending series of identical movements throughout their working life. The questions that city symphonies like *Go! Go! Go!* ask through rhythm problematize and make visible the relations of production that produce the urban everyday.

In this book I argue that the New York city symphony cycle of 1939–1964 produced a Marxist critique of the patterns and regulation of

everyday life as urban redevelopment transformed it on an unprecedented scale. During the mid-century, New York became a world capital, a cultural center, and a core of the American workforce. It also began to lose its middle-income population base to the surrounding suburbs and new Sun Belt cities, and demolished much of the housing and neighborhood structures its poor residents relied on. These changes are encapsulated by urban planning projects like the United Nations Headquarters, federally subsidized suburban developments like Long Island's Levittown, and the destruction of poor neighborhoods in the urban core like East Harlem. These projects followed different currents of urban planning, some of which had progressive goals or positive effects. Yet they all assumed and reaffirmed that capital had the ultimate right to shape the city and the lives within it. Each film of the New York city symphony cycle challenged this assumption. The tactics the films used varied with the specific kind of urban planning they addressed. They therefore display significant formal heterogeneity, ranging from abstract studies of architecture throughout the city's center, like Francis Thompson's *N.Y., N.Y.: A Day in New York* (1957), to emphatic portraits of a single peripheral neighborhood's residents, like Rudy Burckhardt's *Under the Brooklyn Bridge* (1953). Despite these diverse aesthetics, all of the films in this city symphony cycle produce a dialectic critique of a particular form of urban planning at the level of rhythm.

The New York city symphonies articulate their critique less through an analysis *of* rhythm than an analysis *with* rhythm. The Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre calls such a method "rhythmanalysis." Rhythmanalysis inscribes itself within the socio-spatial relations being studied, a "struggle against time within time itself."³ Like other forms of dialectic, it uncovers the contradictions within a single idea, policy, or set of relations. It also surfaces the temporary resolution of those contradictions in subsequent ideas, policies, and relations. Rhythmanalysis has the power to take our perception elsewhere, to take us away from the society the relations under analysis produce to a place where we can "think that which is not thought."⁴ This mode of analysis proceeds from a body—including a filmic one—that has become hypochondriac. The body is now conscious of processes, like breathing, that are usually automatic. Rhythmanalysis disarticulates and "unwraps the bundle" of the body's internal, intimate rhythms before extending outward to encompass the external patterns in which that body is enmeshed and "unbundle" those patterns as well.⁵

Rhythmanalysis estranges the current production of space. It allows an analyst to investigate and isolate rhythms while remaining

conscious of themselves as subject to them, rather than artificially erasing themselves as the point from which the analysis proceeds. This visual intercession enables us to perceive the structuring absences that organize our reality as well as the alternative to that reality circulating within it as otherwise excluded content.⁶ Rhythmanalysis encompasses three structures of lived experience. The first is eurhythmia, the induced harmony of everyday life. The second is arrhythmia, a pause in or other interruption of this harmony. The third is polyrhythmia, a many-faceted, self-analyzing diagnosis of the everyday. Rhythmanalysis's hypochondriac nature inserts a break in the eurhythmia of a daily activity or motion, such as the pattern of traffic lights at a crosswalk. In the arrhythmic stutter of that break, the analyst pulls apart the enmeshed strands of housing prices, federally subsidized automotive manufacture, cycling lobbyists, environmental regulations, police surveillance, and neighborhood advocacy groups that collectively determine how long a red light lasts, and whether there is a crosswalk at all. Once these multiple strands are visible, the flows of capital and state power that inhere within them emerge in their contradictions: we can see the rules behind the pattern.⁷

The New York city symphonies evoke the structure of the working day via formal structures—including camera movement, editing, and optical effects—that articulate rhythm. Through these structures, the films lay bare the delimiting of daily life under capital as shaped by urban redevelopment. These formal techniques also surface an alternative social order, another world, present in the same images. In this world, bodies take their own, nonproductive time. The New York city symphonies organize what Lefebvre describes as an extraordinary sight not otherwise possible.

But look harder and longer. This simultaneity, up to a certain point, is only apparent: a surface, a spectacle. Go deeper, dig beneath the surface, listen attentively instead of simply looking, of reflecting the effects in a mirror. You thus perceive that each plant, each tree, has its rhythm, made up of several: the trees, the flowers, the seeds and fruits, each have their time . . . Continue and you will see this garden and the *objects* (which are in no way things) *polyrhythmically*, or if you prefer *symphonically*. In place of a collection of fixed things, you will follow each being, each body, as having above all its time [emphasis in the original].⁸

Developing this symphonic sight allows for a knowledge of lived reality that, “without claiming to change life, but by fully reinstating the sensible in consciousness and in thought, enables the analyst to accomplish a tiny part of the revolutionary transformation of this world.”⁹ City symphonies like *Go! Go! Go!* develop a sight through montage and other aesthetics that looks at quotidian phenomena like a graduation ceremony and separates out the various rhythms, individual and collective, short and long term, bodily and mental, caught up in them. They trace these rhythms back to the regulations that produce them but, in separating them out, they also point to a set of alternate regulations that might change these rhythms and the lives they organize.

City symphonies have historically been called “symphonies” for three reasons. First, after Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1928), which influenced many other films, even lending its name to Brazilian and Dutch symphonies made in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Second, because many early city symphonies were directly linked to various experiments in the cinematic image’s ability to reproduce or do without qualities associated with sound. In these films, editing in particular took on the work of producing rhythms more commonly associated with musicality. Third, they are called symphonies because of the films’ structure, in which the polysemic representation that results from their divergent themes, sights, and locations is rendered univocal once more through a triumphant resolution at their end.¹⁰ Lefebvre’s description of rhythmanalysis as symphonic sight provides another way of understanding the city symphony, one that ties its political critique to the kind of sight it engenders. By seeing symphonically, the New York city symphonies estrange and contest urban planning and capital’s seizure of urban space. Their tiny revolutionary transformations teach us to desire the reconstitution of society around inhabitants’ right to remake their city’s physical and social spaces—and thereby its relations of production—as they see fit.¹¹ Through rhythmanalysis, the New York city symphonies “prevent the erasure of the past and the foreclosure of the future” and turn back “the assault by the present on the rest of time” by transforming the present into a series of presences that cannot be valued through exchange.¹² The New York city symphonies ask: what would a city constituted around something other than capital be like? What would determine its rhythms? What would New York look like if all its inhabitants got to make decisions about how it looked?

These are utopian questions, which have always sought answers in New York, particularly during the middle of the twentieth century.

Utopia is commonly understood as the representation of a place whose perfection is also the condition of its impossibility. When the term is attached to New York, it is as often used to describe the idealized view of early cinematic panoramas like Edwin Porter's *Coney Island at Night* (1905) as it is the urban planning that utterly remade the mid-century city. In these instances, utopia connotes an unrealistic, top-down project characterized by naive enthusiasm detached from extant social reality and the damaging failures that such unmoored dreams invariably generate. Yet for Marxist scholars like Louis Marin, Fredric Jameson, and Ruth Levitas, utopia is not so much a perfect place, or an impossible place, as it is the other of place. This other of place can, in fact, be generated by depictions of the everyday. For these scholars, utopia is a diagnostic procedure through which we can "imagine the reconstitution of society," as Levitas puts it.¹³ These scholars define utopia as a figuration of the infinite and the bounded, a constant negotiation between unending freedom and perfect order. Utopia uncovers the structuring absences on which contemporary social relations are founded. It asks what must be left out, what must be made impossible even to think, in order for a society to exist. By locating such an absence, utopia exposes a society's constitutive contradictions. This allows utopia, simultaneously, to indicate other ways of living, societies founded on the very relations our own makes impossible.

Utopia in this sense, as neither one place nor its opposite, but rather a location suspended between them that helps us imagine the nature of both, has a particularly close association with New York. For example, in Jonathan Demme's *Swimming to Cambodia* (1987), the humorist and actor Spalding Gray explains his arrival in New York City in this way: "I knew I couldn't live in America and I wasn't ready to live in Europe, so I moved to an island off the coast of America." In this instance, New York is not utopian in the sense of being a perfect place, but utopian in that it clarifies the contradictions and commonalities shared by America and Europe. Gray's comments, where space stands in for larger sociocultural concerns, recall Michel de Certeau's description of Manhattan from his famous "Walking in the City" chapter in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau calls the island a "stage of concrete, steel, and glass, cut out between two oceans (the Atlantic and the American) by a frigid body of water."¹⁴ Gray and de Certeau use these islanding descriptions to construct New York, especially Manhattan, as a liminal space suspended between the United States and its Other(s). Though rendered especially poetic by these authors, the idea of New York as

exceptional with regard to the rest of the nation, or even as opposed to it, is commonplace enough to inhere in advertising campaigns, critiques of infrastructure funding, and half-serious advocacy for the five boroughs' succession from the United States.¹⁵ In every case, the city's island nature is articulated to a more abstract sense of absolute borders and irreducible differences.¹⁶ These constructions resonate with Jameson's reminder that islanding is the first step toward the figuration of utopia; it is necessary that all utopias should be islands.¹⁷ Marin argues the first formal literary utopia—Thomas More's 1516 book of the same name—is a reaction to Europe's newly discovered continent, the very large island, of America itself.¹⁸ Gray's anecdote, and the discourse it typifies, suggests New York as America's own utopia.

That utopian status intensified between 1939 and 1964, a moment in American history when the federal government invested heavily in urban development while federal legislation shaped urban infrastructure and public housing. This period was atypical in its social relations and relations of production. It was notable for exceptional prosperity and social mobility, the unprecedented success and stability of labor, and an extraordinary degree of federal intervention in economics, social control, and urban planning.¹⁹ This same quarter century brought New York into an unusual alignment with the national imaginary. One of the reasons the federal government invested so heavily in the planning and remaking of New York was that it privileged the city as the face the United States showed the world as a new global capital—one that offered proof of capital's success during the Cold War. Yet cold warriors and mainstream popular publications alike also named New York as the embodiment of un-American social policies, modes of governance, and racial and ethnic identities. In a 1961 article for the *New York Times Magazine*, Jacob Javits, New York state's widely respected, moderate Republican senator, summarized this paradox. Javits stated that, although New York City "occupies a unique role as America's showcase" as "the nation's largest port of entry and the home of the United Nations," its inhabitants had to understand that to many Americans, these very qualities "simply confirm the suspicion that New York City is somehow the center of what they consider foreign or radical thinking."²⁰

The urban historian Samuel Zipp argues that, in this period, New York was both America's way forward to a globally dominant future and a deviant socio-spatial assemblage threatening the rest of the nation.²¹ New York's utopian function was evident even in the language of mid-century

planning debates, which repeatedly used island imagery to describe parts of the city. Proponents of public housing developments described them as “islands of hope” in otherwise derelict areas, while opponents claimed that these same structures destroyed the local social fabric by “islanding” themselves from the surrounding neighborhood.²² During the mid-century, New York pioneered a mode of production and a mode of vision that consistently reinscribed this island identity and utopian function through urban planning and popular culture.

The New York city symphony cycle occurred in a city engaged in a frenzy of creative destruction and struggles over its own identity, struggles bound up in debates about the function and future of the urban as a global phenomenon. In 1939 and again in 1964, New York hosted World’s Fairs, both of which were held on the outskirts of Queens, and both of which imagined a better future for urban forms and city living. Between—and in part inspired by—these “worlds of tomorrow,” New York undertook an extensive remaking of its built environment and social structures through slum clearance, the erection of high-rise public housing, and infrastructure expansion, all of which were underwritten by federal policy and dollars. Such programs resulted in the erection of segregated, middle-income housing like Stuyvesant Town as well as civic landmarks like the United Nations, which plowed over the working-class Slaughterhouse District.

Urban redevelopment was only one-half of the federal government’s policy during the middle of the twentieth century. The complement to urban redevelopment was suburbanization, which historians following Kenneth Jackson’s pathbreaking *The Crabgrass Frontier* (1985) have called “the other subsidized housing.” At the beginning of this period, federal agencies and policies subsidized the movement of the white middle class to newly built spaces outside the city. Moving a key segment of the labor pool outside the city required the construction of new infrastructure such as highways, a new quotidian rhythm built around cars and commuting, and new sites where capital could accumulate.²³ By the end of this period, the city began to deindustrialize as manufacturing concerns, factories, and other companies moved to the suburbs, also drawn there by state and federal subsidies, accelerating the withdrawal of federal and state funding from the city. That funding followed the white middle class to the suburbs, helping to develop the accumulation of capital on the spot outside the city center. These policies, urban redevelopment and suburbanization, reshaped the city’s built environment while displacing

large swaths of its population and redistributing their wealth upward, dispossessing poor people, especially people of color, in the name of the public good. Over the quarter-century between the World's Fairs, urban redevelopment was responsible for unprecedented partnerships of public and private capital, the privatization of previously public space, intensified economic stratification, and increased racial segregation.

This redevelopment especially focused on mobility, both the literal movement of the workforce and the figurative movement of capital through the built environment. Signature urban redevelopment undertakings—including infrastructure projects like the Brooklyn–Battery Tunnel and the Cross Bronx Expressway, subsidized suburbanization, the modernization of workers' housing in the urban core, and the increase of green spaces in the city—all promote movement. Yet this movement was paradoxically tied to a discourse, including in popular culture, that imagined this newly freed, highly mobile, productive, and perfected city as a unified, coherent, transparent, and static image. For example, prewar planners turned to aerial photography to instantly capture the true flaws of the extant city and disclose exactly what would need to change to fix it. Postwar popular film like Jules Dassin's *Naked City* (1948) alternated elevated shots with street scenes to generate an X-ray of criminal activity for its detectives to set right. Later, even intellectuals who contested the way urban planning was destroying the city's social fabric advocated understanding and negotiating the city through an immobile mental map.²⁴ One way to understand these images is as an induced or false eurhythmia that turns the varied patterns generated by urban bodies, both human and architectural, into artificial harmony. Stilling the city's rhythms in an image abrogates the need for a truly transformed city that is valued for things other than productivity and whose rhythms are generated by the needs of its inhabitants. Mid-century planning and popular culture produced New York as a place that inhabitants always already master and control because they can visually decode and consume it.

To critique mid-century New York, to unpack the relations of production it makes possible, to indicate its structuring absences, requires setting this image into motion and examining the rhythms that constitute it. Thus, a city symphony like *Go! Go! Go!* proceeds by teasing out the tangle of spatial practices that the dominant production of space congeals into an image. It identifies the false harmony on which their unification in/as the present depends and induces a pause or fracture by reversing the relative spatial and temporal primacy of a monument like the Brooklyn Bridge and a marginal neighborhood like the Lower East Side. It subjects

the forces that compel bodies through the revolving doors of white-collar industry to an analysis that makes their contradictions and exclusions, and therefore the future and the past they deny, palpable.

As New York was redeveloped between 1939 and 1964, city symphonies proliferated within New York's experimental, documentary, and independent film communities. These communities initially emerged around Amos Vogel's Cinema 16, the country's first subscription film society, and later through the New American Cinema movement. These institutions assembled a critical density of independent filmmakers like Lionel Rogosin, Marie Menken, and Shirley Clarke. They enabled the collective, direct distribution of their work. As Lauren Rabinovitz has shown, members of the New American Cinema sought to generate a New York-based production, distribution, and exhibition network that offered an alternative to Hollywood, garnering larger audiences and popular exposure for independent cinema.²⁵ In part because of this goal, filmmakers and gatekeepers in the community understood not only the short experimental subject but also the documentary and the independently financed and distributed fiction film as key aspects of the New York avant-garde. This openness to mixed and multiple film forms suggests why the city symphony, which has always been a hybrid mode, was a core component of the New York avant-garde during this period.

The New York city symphonies formed an intensive cycle of films between 1948 and 1964, with progenitors released earlier in the decade and at the 1939 World's Fair itself. City symphonies were some of the most popular films screened at Cinema 16 and found a surprisingly broad audience beyond it. Films like *N.Y., N.Y.* were extensively reviewed in the *New York Times* and played to sold-out audiences at the Museum of Modern Art. Others, like Shirley Clarke and Willard Van Dyke's *Skyscraper* (1959), represented the United States at festivals and world's fairs. The makers of the New York city symphonies defined themselves and their films against Hollywood, and against America as a set of standard visual iconographies attached to purportedly shared values as depicted in Hollywood's product.

The New York city symphonies thereby contributed to the utopian nature of the relationship between New York and America during the mid-century. Their use of rhythm analysis, however, raises them to the level of utopian critique. They think, they criticize, they do, in the way that Gilles Deleuze understands cinema itself—rather than its creative personnel or its audiences—as capable of directly theorizing social reality.²⁶ In his study of montage in politically engaged postmodern and

postcolonial cinema, Christopher Pavsek makes a similar claim, that such utopian films think or hypothesize through their aesthetics, with the inherent contradiction of “thinking in images” granting them the power of a negative dialectic.²⁷ Pavsek argues that cinema and utopia’s privileged relationship extends into a mutual project: “the promises of cinema will be realized only when the promises of emancipation that slumber uneasily in the history of humankind have also been met.”²⁸ Like the films Pavsek studies, the thought process of the New York city symphonies occurs in their aesthetics; they theorize social reality through their development of rhythmanalysis. Their symphonic sight picks apart the quotidian rhythms and epochal trends that make up mid-century New York and diagnose what that city must render impossible in order to exist. The films make intelligible what the current production of space otherwise forbids from thought: a city to which capital has no right. The New York city symphonies illuminate the structuring absences and constitutive contradictions of the mid-century production of American urban space. They surface this epoch’s organization around the rescaling of capital to the national level, the channeling of property and capital into the hands of white elites, and the reinscription of the urban center as a space of exchange. They also indicate the rules and patterns that would coalesce an alternative to this space, one planned around urban inhabitants’ right to their city.

The term *right to the city* is used by contemporary Marxist urbanists like the critical geographer David Harvey, and was originated by Lefebvre in the 1960s.²⁹ For Lefebvre, to have “the right to the city” is to have the ability and the power to determine what urban space is for, to direct the processes and policies of urbanization and development, and to have unfettered access to the places that result. Since the Enlightenment, capital has reserved this right for itself. As a result, the purpose of the city is to increase the exchange value of the urban ensemble, both individually and collectively. This means that the maximization of exchange value shapes urban development and determines the circumstances under which public and private spaces may be accessed. This rule generates the patterns of everyday life, including the terms under which inhabitants of the city interact with the state, with capital, and with one another, as police and citizens, landlords and tenants, and competitors for jobs, homes, and education.

What could a city be if its spaces were constructed as something other than real estate? If ownership of a place meant more than title to its maximum possible ground rent? For Lefebvre, this alternative city

would be organized around encounter. For “the masses [to] have the right to the city” they require the right to encounter one another outside the demands of exchange value—demands so central to the rhythms of daily life in the city that it is difficult to imagine interactions that do not depend on them. A city organized around the right to encounter one another would not always consist of encounters that were frictionless, or kind, or peaceful. They would include theater and riots, people’s markets and public comment sessions alike. Lefebvre’s point is that the rules and rhythms that coalesced the relations of production, as well as social relations, would be fundamentally different from what they are now. A city based on the right to encounter one another would be a collective work of art always in progress, what Lefebvre calls an *oeuvre*. This masterwork is produced through formal and informal festivals and public performance as well as the various rhythms engendered as we go about our quotidian activities with one another; the work of art is our artful urban living.³⁰ The New York city symphonies indicate what this work of art might look like through the gaps left by the rhythms of the current city, the one structured by exchange. They identify the ways in which this extant city depends on the exclusion, the structuring absence, of the rights of inhabitants to shape their city, and the contradictions that arise from this.

Constructing the City Symphony

Cycles of city symphonies arise during historical moments in which the definition of the city is being renegotiated, often due to new forms of urbanization and their impact on daily life. These cycles are linked institutionally and aesthetically to avant-garde groups, as well as to the film forms and languages developed by those groups. In the 1920s and early 1930s, city symphonies were produced across many countries, including the United States, The Netherlands, Brazil, and Japan. They coalesced as a distinct cycle in continental Europe, where countries like France and Germany not only produced their own films but also popularized those of others.³¹ This cycle includes the best-known examples of the form as a whole: Ruttmann’s *Berlin* and Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Films in this cycle display a classically “symphonic” logic, combining experimental and documentary techniques with footage of monuments and marginal areas alike to produce a “multipartite but unified

and coherent performance.”³² These films are aligned with diverse avant-garde movements and styles, including Constructivism, Surrealism, and Impressionism, and espouse politics as divergent. However, from William Ulricchio’s 1982 account to Steven Jacobs, Anthony Kinik, and Eva Hielscher’s 2018 study, scholars agree that the films in this cycle “all insist that they be understood as one day-in-the-life of the city in question.”³³

The city symphonies of the first cycle—including New York-set films like *Manhatta* and Jay Leyda’s *A Bronx Morning* (1931)—established the genre’s core semantic and syntactic properties. These films include: poetic or observational documentary style; experimental montage, superimposition, and stop-motion effects; interpolated and often allegorical fiction content; twenty-four hour, day-in-the-life structure; concentration on the working day and typical forms of labor; a section focusing on leisure activities; a kaleidoscopic visual logic that evokes the overwhelming sensorium of modernity and articulates its characteristic fragmentation to the films’ own montage aesthetic.³⁴ The first cycle films use these tactics to establish themselves as the proper cinematic form of urban modernity, capable of parsing this new epoch and offering its audience comprehension, or even control, of it. They foreground many of the “shocks,” from the assembly line to a newly electrified landscape, which assaulted the modern urbanite, and teach the audience how to negotiate these jolts.³⁵ Laura Marcus associates the 1920s city symphonies with a larger tradition in modernist culture of using rhythm to access, articulate, and celebrate aspects of bodily and “savage” existence that otherwise resist rational discussion or figuration.³⁶ This can include a problematic but still often sympathetic ethnographic gaze that penetrates and celebrates subcultural and minority spaces. However, the primary function of the first city symphonies was ultimately tutelary, instructing the audience on how to negotiate the physical reality of the modern city through the visual reality of film.³⁷

This function, and its stakes, are especially evident in *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*. Ruttmann’s film begins with a predawn sequence set in the natural world. A train then departs this rural area for the city. The train encounters increasing signs of urban modernity along the way. The pace and complexity of editing accelerates until the train arrives in a cathedral-like station in the urban center. The opening simultaneously suggests the primordial landscape along the Spree before the city and its environs were built, a heavily telescoped history of urbanization, and the rhythms of the daily commute. The day that follows is organized around the mechanization and gendered division of industrial labor and domes-

tic space, privileging the pace set by men who labor outside the home and the consumption by women this enables. *Berlin's* five acts depict preparations to leave the house, morning shift, lunch break, afternoon labor and consumption, and the nighttime leisure activities the wages earned in the previous acts make possible. Throughout, a "cross-section logic," which uses montage to concatenate many spaces articulated to social difference, predominates.³⁸ For example, in the lunch sequence, multiple classes and social groupings are observed, each in their proper place with their proper food: the rich in decadent dining halls lingering over multicourse meals, lower-middle-class workers enjoying a convivial discussion while eating sausages in beer gardens, and beggars bolting crusts of bread on church steps. The film implies that this spatialization and *naturalization* of class is the proper way to view the city and fend off modernity's disorienting effects through an afternoon scene in which a woman, fascinated and disconcerted by a pinwheel in a shop window, commits suicide.³⁹ The 1920s films' "perspectives, skewed angles, rapid and rhythmic montage, special effects, and iconography became a kind of shorthand for modern metropolitan life."⁴⁰ They strongly influenced the American city symphonies made in New York, Chicago, and elsewhere in the early 1930s, which tended to "realize urban views" that directly referred to their European predecessors.⁴¹ The original cycle and its offshoots were engaged with the kinds of urban structures that dominated the 1920s, and this engagement informed their aesthetics.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the next city symphony cycle's aesthetics are quite distinct from these first films; they changed along with the kind of urban development they engaged. The second city symphony cycle emerged in the 1940s and 1950s in concert with the rise of the New York avant-garde and what would become New American Cinema. These films engage, display commonalities with, and comment on the late modern period. Late modernity comprises the years 1939–1964, between the slowing and stabilization of modernity's technological and economic innovations in the late 1930s and the acceleration of global flows of capital and a service-based economy in the mid-1960s. Late modernity in the United States is characterized by the rescaling of capital to the regional and national level through the production of debt-financed infrastructure like the federal highway system. It is also shaped by the federal underwriting of suburbanization and ghettoization through the Federal Housing Act of 1949, the race, income, and ethnicity-based exclusionary policies imbricated with this and other housing policies, and the role urban planning played in them.⁴²

This new embodiment of capital, racial discrimination, and state power was produced by and reproduced in spaces in which time pooled and evaporated unevenly, in which premodernity and the slow onset of a postindustrial mode of production built an uneasy, conjoined existence. Modernity proper, stretching from the 1890s through the early 1930s and attaining its most typical characteristics in the 1910s and 1920s, is a concentrated space bound together through evolving technologies and infrastructures, an ever-accelerating mechanistic force. Late modernity, by contrast, is organized by a time that is out of joint, by the proliferation of nonsynchronous spaces. Edward Dimendberg describes late modernity and its spaces “as a tension between a residual culture and urbanism of the 1920s and 1930s and its liquidation by the technological and sociological innovations accompanying World War II, as well as the simultaneous dissolution of this new social compact of the 1940s and 1950s by the society emerging in the 1960s, in which the simulacra and spectacles of contemporary post-modern culture are clearly visible.”⁴³

The New York city symphonies are produced by and against late modernity, and so it is not surprising that they disarticulate the rhythms that characterize the best known 1920s films. This second cycle affirms that, although city symphonies have been closely associated with European modernism, the form has always had an affiliation with American—especially New York-based—independent cinema. As Jacobs, Kinik, and Hielscher show, *Manhatta* has a strong claim not only as the first city symphony but also as the film that, through its successful and much imitated international distribution and marketing, truly provides the paradigm of the form.⁴⁴ In addition, several important New York-set city symphonies of the late 1920s to early 1930s indicate the importance of this form to the “lovers of cinema” who made up the prewar American film avant-garde.⁴⁵ The mid-century New York films, then, built upon a local symphonic tradition, but emerged out of a more organized and institutionalized avant-garde than their predecessors. They also tended to respond thematically and aesthetically to the 1920s European films rather than their more proximate ancestors.

The late modern New York cycle consists on the one hand of films like *Under Brooklyn Bridge*, and, on the other, films like Shirley Clarke’s *Bridges-Go-Round* (1958). The former explore marginal areas through an observational documentary style and a focus on the human body while the latter engage the urban center through an abstract-expressionist experimental aesthetic and a focus on the built environment. *Go! Go! Go!* typifies this second group, and one of the major effects of

its stuttering time-lapsed and single-frame images is to disarticulate and abstract human figures until they appear to be part of the city's architecture, as with the office workers discussed earlier. Whether concerned with the margins or the center, every film in the New York cycle tests the norms of the 1920s city symphonies. They distort their predecessors' grand panoramic views and pretenses to encompass the city through a curated selection of "typical" sites and sights. Instead, they emphasize, and empathize with, the exceptional and the grotesque. Fittingly, films of this cycle derive their impressions of the city's nature as much from sustained observation of and interaction with specific people or places as from adherence to a regimented temporal schema that allows for uniform spatial concatenation.

Following these two most coherent cycles, important city symphonies can be found in the work of California-based filmmakers like Bruce Baillie, Dominic Angerame, and Pat O'Neill through the 1990s. These filmmakers often focused on historical and geographic scale, as with Baillie's studies of the industrial spaces around San Francisco in *Castro Street* (1966) or O'Neill's evoking of the environmental pressures that reveal Los Angeles as an integral part of a regional ecology in *Water and Power* (1989). More recently, Singapore and China have been home to city symphonies like Tan Pin Pin's *Singapore GaGa* (2005) and Cao Fei's *Haze and Fog* (2013), respectively. These films engage with exceptionally rapid urbanization, its disruption of traditional social bonds, and the transformations of national space under globalization. The history of the city symphony maps the changing loci of political-economic and cultural power, forms of urbanization, and independent film across the span of the past 100 years.⁴⁶

In addition to the cycles and clusters described above, city symphonies are central to commercial cinema's urban vocabulary across many different popular genres. Much of the lexicon of the cinematic city can be traced to the city symphony. Just as city symphonies crystallize a number of early cinema's attempts to represent the modernizing cities with which they were mutually constitutive, during and after the 1920s cycle popular genre film and art cinema alike drew on the form's established grammar to organize their urban depictions.⁴⁷ Thus, Scott Bukatman discerns a symphonic logic in MGM A-pictures such as Vincente Minnelli's *The Clock* (1945) and in the world-building of science fiction films like Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), while Tom Gunning detects it in film noir like John Auer's *City That Never Sleeps* (1953). These scholars align such films with the symphony tradition because of

their construction of the urban as a space of chance encounters among a diverse cross-section of people and places, as well as their foregrounding of quotidian rhythms.⁴⁸ Similarly, popular film critics use “city symphony” as a shorthand to describe commercial features that place narrative and thematic emphasis on urban environments and communities, as well as the impressionist editing style used to shape them. For example, reviews of independent films like Jim Jarmusch’s *Paterson* (2016) and Kenneth Lonergan’s *Margaret* (2011) describe them as displaying the logic of—or simply as being—city symphonies.⁴⁹ Outside their distinct cycles and attendant avant-gardes, city symphonies pervade the mediascape to the extent that they have become the default, even expected, language with which to denote an urban environment.

Given the city symphony’s complex history and highly varied syntactic and semantic form, it is no surprise that studies of this genre conflict in terms of corpus and definition, perhaps even more so than studies of popular genre film. For example, Scott MacDonald understands the city symphony as part of a larger impulse within independent film to record, memorialize, and critique place. For MacDonald, the city symphony is “a film that provides a general sense of life in a specific metropolis by revealing characteristic dimensions of city life from the morning into the evening of a composite day.”⁵⁰ This definition is widely shared across writing about city symphonies. It echoes John Grierson and Siegfried Kracauer’s midcentury discussions of the form, which address the first city symphonies of the 1920s. It also informs Jon Gartenberg’s survey of city symphonies in New York from 1905 to 2008.⁵¹ Beyond this shared definition, however, major divergences in corpus and emphasis emerge. These range from Gartenberg’s extremely inclusive definition to Stavros Alifragkis and François Penz’s highly exclusive one. For Gartenberg, city symphonies are not part of historically determined cycles but instead a constant impulse within and aspect of the production of moving images in New York. They include early *actualités* and panoramas like *Coney Island at Night*, feature films like Ray Ashley, Morris Engel, and Ruth Orkin’s *Little Fugitive* (1953), and contemporary documentaries like Mark Street’s *Fulton Fish Market* (2003). For Alifragkis and Penz, by contrast, the term *city symphony* properly applies to films made during the original cycle. These authors understand the city symphony predominantly as an historical form that “makes it possible to construct a cinematic rhetorical argument about the city without resorting to traditional dramatic action, based on main protagonists.”⁵²

Like the above accounts, I understand the city symphony's core features to be the temporal boundaries of the day, spatial and narrative organization through montage, and emphasis of signifiers of modernity. However, my corpus and definition are based on a claim Penz made elsewhere with Andong Lu. Describing the frustration of trying to pin down the city symphony and its canon, Penz and Lu stated: "It is as though every film is having to reinvent the genre."⁵³ This exasperated insight guides how I understand city symphonies and which films I discuss. I ask how and why each city symphony reinvents its genre in terms of semantics, syntax, and industrial/institutional concerns. I highlight those films that most radically and comprehensively "reinvent" the genre, through new subject matter, formal strategy, industrial/economic context, or political orientation. Furthermore, I understand *the films themselves*, rather than programmers or scholars, as reinventing the genre, by which I mean that the critical work the films do is internal to them. I am chronicling the work that they do as historically specific representations of particular contradictions of capital as manifested in the rhythms that constitute the everyday. I ask less what a city symphony is and more what a city symphony does. As rhythmanalysis, a city symphony engages the rules and regulations that organize daily life. That life, and those rules, vary with urban development, and so too does the city symphony. Tracking changes in the city symphony's form discloses evolutions in forms of development; the films' aesthetics change to preserve their function. When a given city symphony has to reinvent its genre, the dimensions of that reinvention tell us something about how the city is being reinvented. At the same time, because city symphonies contribute to urban redevelopment as part of visual culture and challenge it as utopian critique, their reinventions also reshape the city.

These aesthetic and functional aspects are informed by questions of reception and generic evolution. That is, to what extent were the films produced within the city symphony tradition, marketed through it, and consumed with reference to it? To what extent is each film central to the form's dialectical elaboration of itself? For example, Lionel Rogosin's docudrama *On the Bowery* (1956) depicted a weekend in the life of indigent alcoholics in the eponymous neighborhood. It was made within an avant-garde film subculture that privileged the symphonic form and was consumed within a popular culture that acknowledged, positioned, and responded to it in the context of the city symphony, as contemporary reviews and interviews make clear.⁵⁴ The reception history of such films

highlights the heterogeneous nature of city symphonies. As Jacobs, Kinik, and Hielscher argue, these films have been consumed in multiple contexts, from political clubs to Hollywood editing suites. Those contexts change which aspects of the films—their documentary footage, their montage editing, their use of social types—are emphasized by viewers, which in turn impacts future programming and production.⁵⁵

The New York city symphonies were in some ways the most popular of the films made by local avant-garde institutions. They helped attract large audiences to Cinema 16 and other film societies. They also familiarized mainstream critics like the *New York Times* writers Howard Thompson and Bosley Crowther with the genre, which in turn gave the films commercial exposure and success unusual for independent cinema.⁵⁶ This popularity meant that the feature-length fiction city symphony *Little Fugitive*, about a boy who runs away to Coney Island, registered with viewers familiar with New York's street photography tradition as a documentary of the daily lives of poor children, and yet was reviewed by popular publications like *Life* and *Newsweek* as boasting "one of the best child actors to come along in years" and crafting a charming, "rich and funny" plot (figure I.2).⁵⁷ Readers of the specialist journal *Quarterly Review of Film, Radio, and Television* encountered the first description in a writeup of *Little Fugitive's* debut at the Venice Film Festival, and commercial theatergoers saw the second on lobby cards that proclaimed the film "an all-American hit!" In this case, the film's use of symphonic montage and equation of its protagonist's circadian rhythms with the city's enabled its popularity with and consumption by varied audiences. On a textual level, these same symphonic aspects articulated a rhythm analysis that excavated the regulations urban planning and capital imposed even on a space of leisure like Coney Island.

Little Fugitive reminds us that, while the fictional aspect of city symphonies is well known—ranging from scripted content in Alberto Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures* (1926) to the soundstages of Cao Fei's *La Town* (2015)—predominantly narrative works generally have not been considered part of the canon.⁵⁸ In postwar New York, the confluence of increased location shooting by Hollywood productions and the importance of fiction feature films to the local avant-garde intersected with a robust cycle of city symphonies. As a result, many popular independent and genre features—including *On the Bowery*, *Little Fugitive*, Shirley Clarke's *The Cool World* (1963–64), and *Naked City*—drew on the grammar, themes, and politics of the city symphony. These films' relationship to the city symphony should be understood as a spectrum, one that takes