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Newark Deserves a City Symphony: New Work: Newark in 3D (2009)

The city-symphonies of the 1920s and 30s defined both film technique and “the city” itself as representational space. Beginning with *Manhatta* in 1921, they swept across the globe: Paris, Berlin, Moscow, etc. When I taught a class on film and urban history last semester, we began with *Manhatta*—it’s short, legible but still open to discussion, and a good way to begin thinking about montage, mise-en-scène, and how cinema narrates urbanism (for one smart, if theory-heavy analysis of the genre as revealing “the temporal movements of urban modernity,” see [Sarah Jilani’s 2013 *Senses of Cinema* article](#); a perhaps more reader-friendly, if NYC-centric, century-long overview from Jon Gartenberg can be [found here as a pdf](#))



The genre persisted in various ways after its heyday—if a basic scattershot canon might include *Manhatta*, *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, *Man with a Movie Camera*, and *A Bronx Morning*, later efforts range from Brakhage's *Wonder Ring* to Menken's *Go! Go! Go!* and *Lights*, through the recently-departed Peter Hutton (some of whose work I caught at a recent [Anthology Film Archives retrospective](#)). I've seen Amos Poe's 1970s no-wave films (great) and Hollywood crossover attempts (wretched), but not his experimental 2008 *Empire II*; David Bordwell [makes it sound interesting](#), though.

Missing from all of this, of course, was Newark, skipped over by the city-symphony movement. There was *Sightseeing in Newark* in 1926, which I [wrote about here](#) and can be [viewed here](#); it's a great document of the city, and not devoid of creative flourishes, but really a little too stilted and postcardish to qualify as a city symphony. So, no Newark city symphony.

Until 2009. Filmmaking team Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno and Jerome Bongiorno are probably best known for their documentaries, including the powerful *Revolution '67* and the education film *The Rule* (both of which deserve eventual posts unto themselves), but they've also made an eclectic array of fictional and nonfictional works—[see the whole list here](#). Marylou is from Newark, Jerome has been here for decades, and they're deeply committed to the city—so when the Newark Museum prepared for its centennial in 2009, it made perfect sense to commission them for a short cinematic celebration of the city.

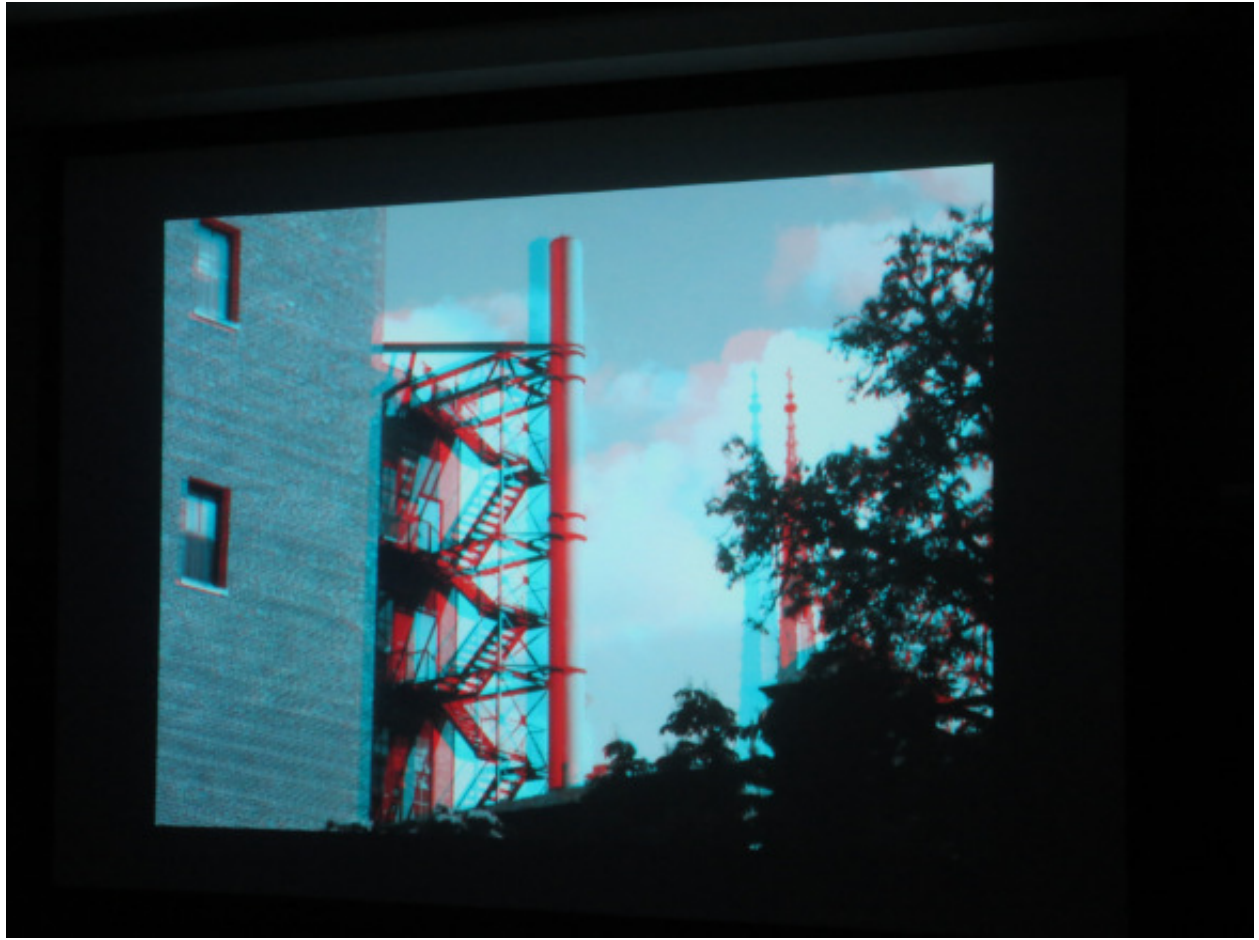


The result, *New Work: Newark in 3D*, finally gives Newark its belated city symphony, capturing the city's vibrancy and beauty in gorgeously-composed shots featuring both its iconic architectural and urban-design highlights, and also the everyday vitality of the city in action.

New Work isn't online, but there's a [great ten-minute short about it](#) (longer than the film itself!) in which the Bongiorno discuss *Manhatta* as an influence, with some comparative clips from both—even a winking tribute here, with the NYC skyline that opens the 1921 film hovering in the background, as seen from Newark.

You can get a great sense of the rich visual texture here, but you miss the interplay of sound and image. *New Work* runs to the strains of the Newark Boys Chorus School and the Cathedral Choir and bop narration from local poet Jon Curley, rolling out Newarkific verse about “Amiri B. and me” that perfectly punctuates the scenes and brims over with love for the city.

You get the visual *texture* here, but you also lose the *depth*. It took me years to catch *New Work*—I kept missing its exhibition cycles at the Newark Museum, and when it did a run at the Newark airport (really innovative programming, [discussed more here](#)), I schlepped from terminal to terminal with my incredibly patient partner after flying home once on a loooong red-eye but wound up hopelessly lost. When I finally did see it, it was in my class, looking like this:





With handy 3D glasses passed out to the class, it looked amazing—we were already in Newark, but we were really *in* Newark! Best I can approximate, though, is this (there are also some great shots from its [debut at the museum](#)):

politics; *Manhatta* is nothing if not fairly blithe in its applause for industrial development. In my class, we talked about how to read Mencken's *Go! Go! Go!* politically, and while the students agreed that there was something radical in her feverish jittery mode of looking that destabilized convention, her suspiciously white and bourgeois New York City played into a concurrent conservatism. More to the point, Newark hardly lacks for critique; this city has been shat on and willfully misunderstood since 1967, and so in local context, an up-with-Newark filmic narrative actually is oppositional to the dominant story of doom, gloom, crime, and decline.

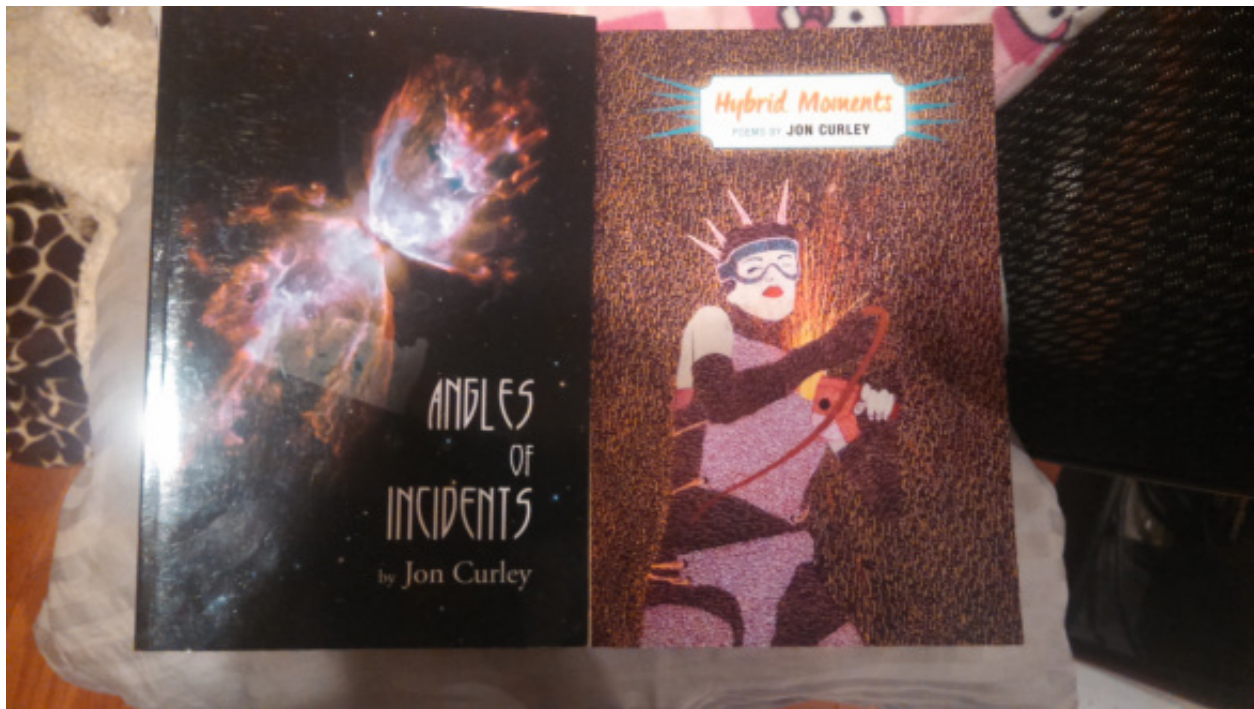


actual Harper's article, 1975, which concludes, "the city of Newark stands without serious challenge as the worst of all." uh, take *that*, Detroit and Baltimore!

We can also contrast another film the Newark Museum sponsored, for the city's 250th anniversary in 1966: *This is Newark, 1966* was a cold and chilling aerial view of a city defined exclusively by urban renewal projects and an expanding skyline, voided of its black just-turned-majority. While much of *New Work* looks at structures, the Bongiorno also pay heed to people—it sounds an obvious point, but the impact is pronounced: here, Newark is a city built on the interplay of people and place, sound and image, skyline and street view. It's warmer and more humanistic than the earlier film, by far.



I should note, I'm a bit of a partisan here: not just a Newark booster myself (though one concerned about social justice and extremely wary of “Next Brooklyn” tropes or the inexcusable “quality of life” police harassment of black and brown youth downtown so clearly intended to soothe the presumed anxieties of white middle class residents or potential ones), but also a friend or at least acquaintance of the Bongiorno and Jon Curley, too—whose books, by the way, are fantastic and themselves awash in Newarkphilia too.



“May the laureate’s soul city/gather its gospels of ghost spells/and make that Black Art, Black Magic,/the joint compound for the newfound/New Ark. In Ras Requiscat!”
–“Slip Pages,” Hybrid Moments

While visiting my class, the Bongiorno discussed filmmaking, Newark, and their politics (on my final exam,

more than one student quoted Jerome on the most pressing issue facing urban America: “poverty, poverty, poverty!”). They also shared a scene from their [forthcoming feature *The Black Monk*](#), based on a Chekhov story. It’s an audacious experiment: much of the action in the 16-minute scene confined to a living room, with characters arguing about gentrification, poverty, and politics. Yet it works—if it’s a talky, didactic film, well, so was *Waiting for Lefty* as a play, and as an agitprop polemic it still forces the viewer to engage with the various positions (which shift over the course of the scene). I’m excited to see how the finished film in its entirety works to expand the canon of Newark leftist cinema!





I'm grateful to Marylou and Jerome for swinging by; I was really delighted to bring some politically-engaged working filmmakers to my class, and also to finally catch *New Work*—and in 3D, at that! It's a really wonderful love note to Newark, and highly recommended next time it screens.

In accordance with my [Blogging against Trump](#) commitment, I've pledged to donate \$100 to an organization fighting against the onset of fascism in the United States spearheaded by our racist, misogynist, popular-vote-losing authoritarian-in-chief every time I post here. For this one, a thematically relevant group is obvious: the [Anti-Poverty Network of New Jersey](#). You can become a member for extremely few dollars, and help

support a group doing the important work the Democratic Party seems to have largely abandoned (a factor that, along with grotesque racism and sexism, led to the Trump catastrophe). Check out the Bongiorno's work, and support grassroots activism against poverty!

Outtakes:

