James, David. "Pat O'Neill: The Most Typical Avant-Garde Filmmaker." History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles. U. California Press, 2005. 428-440.

PAT O'NEILL: A MOST TYPICAL AVANT-GARDE FILMMAKER

One can write an entire history of Southern California around the terms Water and Power.

CAREY MCWILLIAMS, *SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA*

When O'Neill was a small boy, his family left Bakersfield, where he had been born in 1939, for Los Angeles, and he grew up in the suburb of Inglewood.[7] As a youth he made occasional excursions to view the Beat scene at Venice Beach and gained an informal cinema education at Raymond Rohauer's Coronet Theater, where the Surrealist classics made an especially strong impression. He studied design and sculpture in the art department at UCLA, but when he entered the graduate art program, he shifted his interest first to still photography and then to film, building himself rudimentary optical printers and eventually buying a war-surplus contact printer. His first film, *By the Sea* (1963), a study of the beach culture in Venice made in collaboration with a computer graphics pioneer, Robert Abel, and several other shorts brought him into contact with Peter Mays, David Lebrun, and others in the UCLA and Topanga Canyon circles of psychedelic filmmakers. But influenced by the visual artists associated with the Ferus Gallery, he established his own, much more hard-edged though equally colorful and expanded style with *7362* (1967), named after the high-contrast film stock it used. Structurally and iconographically reminiscent of *Ballet mécanique*, it rhymed kinetic graphic shapes with the abstracted and multiply rephotographed imagery of the movements of a dancing woman and the pistons of oil derricks.

By this point, his innovative technical skills had made his special effects work in demand for commercials and independent features. In these and in his own shorts

made concurrently, he perfected techniques of superimposing layers of disparate imagery, step-printing and other forms of image manipulation, and also began to experiment with mattes; either rectangular or molded on the shape of images already present in the footage, these were windows through which wholly heterogeneous visual effects are introduced into the main film frame. As his commercial work prospered, he founded his own production company and leased a professional optical printer. But this business floundered, and, disillusioned with commercial work, in 1970 he took a position in the film department at the newly opened Cal Arts. While teaching there for six years and using the school's optical printer, he made a series of increasingly sophisticated short films that inspired a generation of students. He also joined with some of them to found Oasis Cinema, the independent filmmakers' screening society. After a serious illness, he left Cal Arts and founded another company, Lookout Mountain Films, named after the road high in the Hollywood Hills where he lived and, as his business card then read, "at the very periphery of industrial entertainment." Employing former students as animators, he divided his time between commercial work, doing special effects for other independent filmmakers (notably for the black filmmakers at UCLA, for whom his vibrant effects were mobilized as a visual equivalent to jazz),[8] and his own films. His own aesthetic came to full maturity with a series of magisterial, uniquely styled shorts, including *Saugus Series* (1974), *Sidewinder's Delta* (1976), and *Foregrounds* (1978).

All three are essentially landscape films in which views of the deserts and mountains of the Southwest are interrupted by enigmatic fragments of modern life and the peripheral detritus of the movies. In both their iconography and structure, they recall prewar Surrealism, especially Salvador Dalí's painting *The Persistence of Memory,* and indeed an image virtually identical to the dead branch holding the folded clock in the center of that work recurs in two of them. Lasting around twenty minutes, each assembles a number of discrete shorter pieces about three minutes long; each film was ordered by a feel for its overall shape, but none displayed any strong iconographic or thematic unity. The films thus resemble record albums, dossiers containing a number of "singles," short units that are complete in themselves but since they share a general aesthetic could easily have appeared in different combinations. The separate units are composed from material from a variety of sources. Some are newly photographed landscapes, such as a storm in Monument Valley or a huge boulder in the Mojave Desert, either shot in real time or animated by time-lapse photography that produces kinetic cloudscapes. Some are nondramatic domestic or urban scenes, unremarkable in themselves but in their apparent arbitrariness pregnant with an elusive significance, such as a man (the filmmaker himself) fiddling with a testicle-like pair of lusciously ripe persimmons or sawing a log. Some are fragments of old feature or instructional films, again suggestive of fugitive implications. And some are abstract and often richly multilayered animated interludes. The visuals are accompanied by equivalent sound collages consisting of natural noises, fragments of conversations, bits and pieces from odd corners of the mass media, or music of various kinds. In many of them a continuous section of original

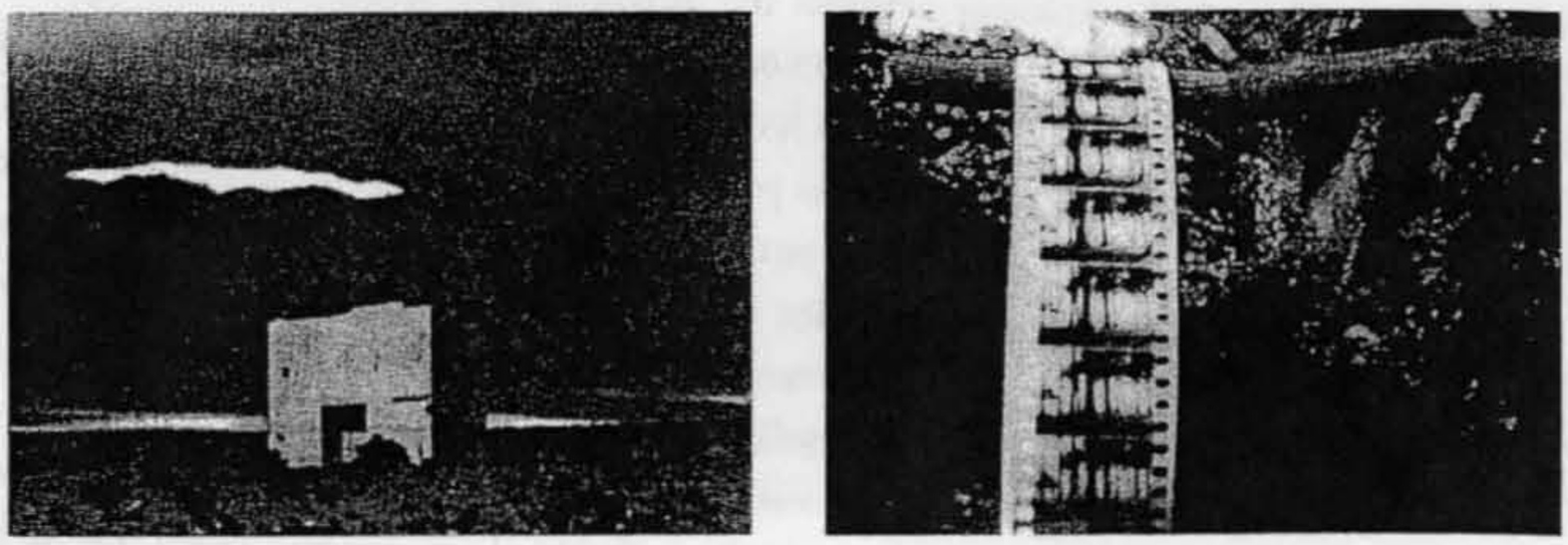

FIGURE 80.
Pat O'Neill: *(left) Sidewinder's Delta* and *(right) Foregrounds.*

footage—usually a landscape of some kind—is the dominant image, the main frame into which other screens are inserted or on top of or within which other scenes are layered. The result is a sandwich of autonomous diegeses that are themselves internally transformed by dazzling special effects.

A couple of examples: A section in *Sidewinder's Delta* begins with a stationary shot of the eastern edge of the Sierra Nevada in which time-lapse photography makes the clouds of heavy storm rush across the mountains, dramatically transforming the light. A cut to an old-fashioned record player prompts the song "Breaking Up Is Hard to Do," which continues through the section, and the visuals return to a scene very similar to the first, except now the valley is dominated by a large semitransparent ruined building. The pixilated clouds, which can be seen though the building, continue at the back of the frame, yet trucks on a roadway, which disappear behind the building, appear to move at normal speed. These spatial contradictions are exacerbated when a brick on a string begins to swing like a pendulum around the building. A creaking sound, perhaps made by the string, is superimposed over the record, then the first brick is joined by another. Gunshots are heard, and one of them appears to hit the string, for, in a brief close-up, the brick falls into the desert sand. Another section, one from *Foregrounds,* begins as a close-up on a forked branch apparently somewhere in a forest, from which hangs a loop of 35 mm film. Distinctly visible, the frames of the film appear to be moving, for the row of palm trees they contain shifts from frame to frame. One realizes that the shot derives from a lateral traveling shot in front of a row of palm trees that has somehow been planted onto the hanging loop; as in the Dalí painting, a piece of folded time hangs over a dead branch. But as one ponders this "impossible" effect, the entire frame cuts to the traveling shot itself, a high-contrast shot of black palm trees before a pink sky, evidently made from a car driving along oceanfront palisades in Santa Monica. Subtitles declare it to be "The Western Edge of the Continent." And indeed O'Neill had gone about as far as he could in this mode.

Though the linkages between the different short films that make up these assemblages are weak, within each section the formal manipulations are wholly integrated in the iconography. Like a series of haiku, each film poem is a consummate display of lyric sensuousness conjured from the perceptions of everyday life, generating a visual intensity and complexity that though entirely cinematic had never before been achieved in the medium. Occasional similarities with other films do occur; the section from *Foregrounds* discussed above, for example, has elements in common with Beydler's films, but the differences between Beydler's ad hoc methods and O'Neill's cutting-edge technical mastery and the sheer visual depth and richness of his images swallow the similarities. Combined with his multiple methods of condensing space, his ability to segment the two-dimensional film frame and at the same time generate autonomous strata within it—as if he were endowing it with a third dimension or disassembling the layers of the emulsion itself—is without peer. Nevertheless, the overall effect of the films is elusive. The arbitrary and acausal juxtapositions made both within the material of the imagery of each shot and by the nonrational montages of shots that are not in themselves necessarily unnatural do not seem to generate a unifying theme or logic; instead they are subsumed within pleasure and astonishment at the sensuous plasticity of the images and the sophistication of O'Neill's techniques. In their combination of virtuoso craft and apparent lack of the overall cohesiveness that would allow interpretation, these films resemble John Whitney's *Catalog*, the sample reel that assembled the various animation processes he had perfected.

Though the collection of the very brief sections into approximately twenty-minute films placed these works within the short-film format of the tail end of underground film, O'Neill's location in Los Angeles, away from the critical centers of the avant-garde of the time, and the evaporation of the theoretical and institutional infrastructure supporting the counterculture limited the social impact of his work, even though by the mid-1970s his reputation was international. Oasis Cinema, which had provided a supportive local context, closed in 1981 (with a one-man show of his recent films); other screening possibilities were also in decline, so the meager fees for rentals did not remotely return production costs. But in any case, the degree of precision he was seeking in his animation was impossible in the small and relatively unstable 16 mm frame. O'Neill decided to turn to 35 mm and to longer films that might gain some form of theatrical distribution. Like Curtis Harrington or the semi-independent artisans of the 1920s, he had to turn toward the commercial chasm, which for him meant finding some way to extend the lyricism of the lapidary shorts into long poems, a major undertaking since the compositional principle of his entire oeuvre to date had been Surrealist montage from which narrative had been completely excluded. Over the next twenty years, O'Neill continued to work in the industry on special effects for commercials and for feature films (including *Star Wars: Episode V—The Empire Strikes Back, Star Wars: Episode VI—Return of the Jedi,* and *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace*), and in the same period, he produced three major 35 mm films of his own that deployed his unique

aesthetic and technical skills over longer formats. These were *Water and Power* (1988, 55 min.), *Trouble in the Image* (1996, 38 min.), and *The Decay of Fiction* (2002, 73 min.), all made in collaboration with the sound designer George Lockwood. All were films about the Southwest, the natural landscape and its transformation by human industry, as perception of them had been fashioned by film.

Water and Power is composed from extended landscape shots of the California wilderness and of urban Los Angeles, made mostly with a specially designed computerized motion-control device that permitted O'Neill to make very exact tracking and panning shots and to duplicate those motions exactly, so that additional material could be precisely layered into the original take. Many of these shots, especially those of the desert, were made with time-lapse photography that produces dramatic light and cloud movements, so that under everything else the film is a climatological symphony composed from accelerated cycles of water moving across the sky. Borne on the restless trajectories of camera movement, the shots are also mostly linked to each other via lap dissolves, so every space in the film seems to be itself in incessant motion and in the process of transforming itself into another. As a result of this continuity, for the first time in his mature work, O'Neill creates the implication of a coherent diegesis sustained through the film's separate parts. Within these flowing vistas, recurrent dissolves from shots of the desert into shots of the city produce a loose nature/city cycle through the film that emerges as a deep structure to both its separate sequences and its overall thematics. The desert is always reasserting itself beneath the urban fabric that has been superimposed on it, even as the city spreads out to colonize the wilderness. These transitions between the natural and the urban are often bridged by scenes of an artist of some kind—a dancer or musician—or by an interior redolent of human creativity and craft—a workshop or an abandoned industrial space turned into an artist's loft. Presiding over the transformation of the wilderness into the city, these scenes figure the creativity of the human agents who transform nature into culture, and prime among them are filmmakers, whose art also determines the way nature is visualized.

The land- and cityscape shots are all inhabited and enlivened by other interpolated material, but here, instead of being ad hoc and autonomous as in the shorts, these scenes imply connections among themselves and especially with the bits of narrative that now appear in O'Neill's work for the first time. Many hardly more than vignettes, the narrative fragments appear in several forms. Some are spoken by a voice that distinctly resembles his own; and others, accompanied by movielike sound effects, are introduced via printed intertitles in an otherwise black field and drastically interrupt the sumptuousness of the rest of the film, obliging the spectators to imagine appropriate visuals. One such condensed narrative, for example, reads: "Settlers live in a town they built on land they took from the Indians / the Indians want their land back / they burn a few farmhouses / a lawman and his posse ride all night." Essentially western narratives or old-timer's yarns, these are sometimes presented as scripts and therefore link up with a third way in which narrative enters the film, that is, specifically as the movies:

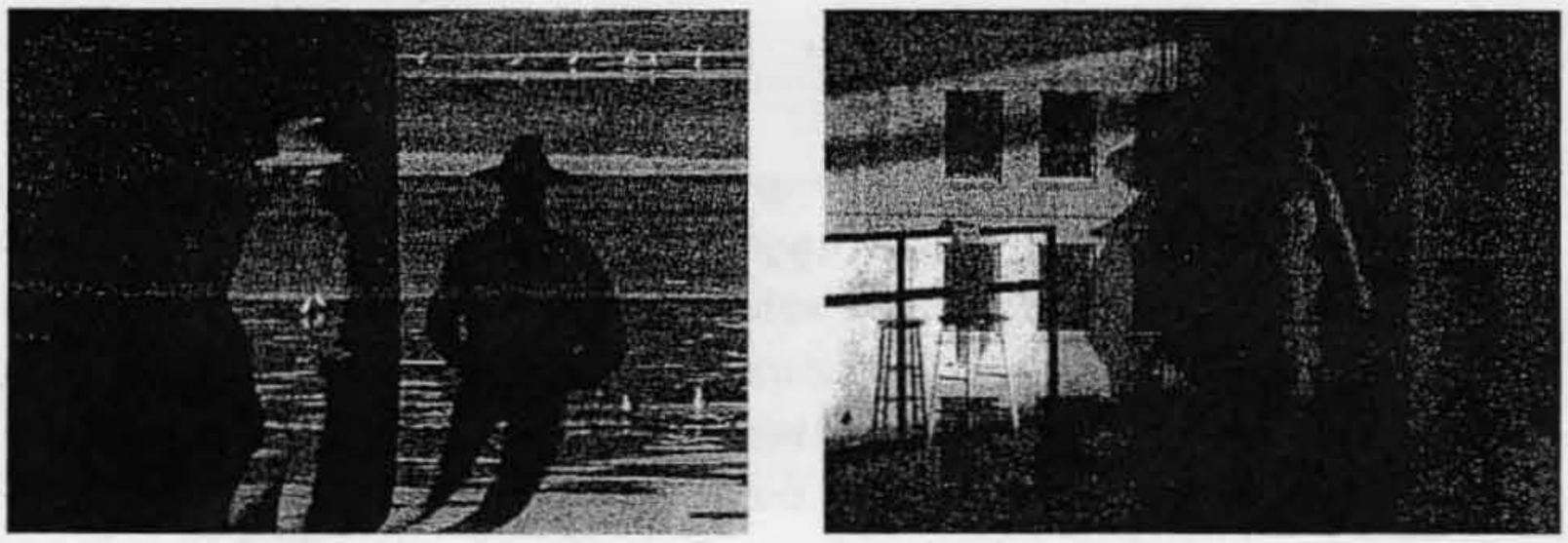

FIGURE 81.
Pat O'Neill, *Water and Power.*

fragments of Hollywood films, including *Detour, The Last Command, The Lady Confesses, The Docks of New York,* and *The Ten Commandments,* that are aurally or visually interpolated.

In published notes, O'Neill has sketched a synopsis that careens from topic to topic—from an eighteenth-century animal fable to a futuristic space station—and is hardly less disorienting than the film itself. It concerns a character named Haskell, who in the movie's opening shot commits suicide by plunging from a bridge; in the film this event is immediately followed by a fragment from the sound track from the noir classic *Detour* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945), in which Al Roberts, the protagonist, has a nightmare about a would-be con artist, also named Haskell, whom he has accidentally killed and whose identity he assumes until he is arrested for murder at the end of the film. In O'Neill's synopsis, a detective investigating Haskell's death visits his wife, who lives in a trailer in the desert near their mine with her lover, Rudy, who tells old tales on topics ranging from ghostly critters to corruption in the Russian army. Scenes from various westerns follow, which in turn lead the story back to the studio, where shooting is under way on the crowd scenes for the Biggest Picture of All; the movie is sponsored by four multinational corporations, led by a Seoul businessman, Kim Chong, who is actually Haskell, "very much alive and . . . deeply involved in the picture business."[9] *Water and Power* itself neither clearly elaborates its own relationship to *Detour* nor proffers even such a minimally skeletal narrative as O'Neill's synopsis. Nor does it imply narrative as its compositional principle (except ironically in misleading subtitles recalling the false chronologies of *Un chien Andalou*). But though the notes are probably his post facto transcriptions rather than a script for the film, they do correspond to scenes in the finished work: Rudy's luminous critters appear as points of radioactive light scooting over the moonlit desert rocks, for example, and the corruption in the Russian army is illustrated by scenes from one of the prototypical Hollywood Extra films, *The Lost Command* (picked by O'Neill at random from a barrel of found footage and used before he knew

their source!), that are floated in over time-lapse photography of a dry lakebed in the Central Valley.

However obliquely, these sporadic references accumulate something of a historical account of the making of modern California, the transformation of the wilderness into the present megalopolitan clusters. The beginning of this process is noted in Francis Drake's sighting of the California coast, and O'Neill tracks it through the intervening centuries. The fundamental enabling event of modern Los Angeles was the Owens Valley Project, which (as also told in Polanski's *Chinatown,* a fundamental intertext for this film) brought the water necessary to turn the desert into a city, but only by also turning the previously fertile valley into a desert. Though conceived by businessmen, this landmark of corrupt urban politics was in fact implemented by the city's Department of Water and Power, and the pipelines of the California Aqueduct are as symptomatic a leitmotif in the film as they are in Benning's *California Trilogy.* This crucial event in the human engineering of modern California modulates into contemporary parallel developments that have transformed the city into the prototypical postmodern conurbation. Traces of its role in the post-Fordist economics of the Pacific Rim, the explosion of its pivotality in transnational finance capital, and the massive importation of both Third World workers and Third World labor relations are all glimpsed in *Water and Power:* in the juxtapositions of the different downtown skylines, for example, and in the fragments of a history of capital restructuring stretching from Drake to Kim Chong's shady transactions in the movie industry (which remarkably anticipated the intervention of Korean capital in Hollywood only a few years after the film when, for $300 million, Cheil Jedang, one of the largest Korean *chaebols,* became the second-largest investor in the DreamWorks Studio).

But in addition to generating a California narrative, these odd yarns and historical references imply a narrator. And in addition to evoking the suicidal avant-garde trance film protagonists of *Meshes of the Afternoon* and Brakhage's *Anticipation of the Night,* Haskell's death at the beginning of the film recalls the structure of *Detour* (an extended flashback of Roberts's last moments before he is arrested for murder) and of *D.O.A.* (a story told by a man who is already dead) but also of Vidor's *The Bridge* (the entire film is imagined by the spy at the moment when he is hanged); all these suggest that the film may be an extended flashback of Haskell's final recollections of his life. But if he is the film's subject, Haskell/Kim is also a persona that O'Neill himself assumes or (again, as with *Detour*'s protagonist) has forced on him. Himself an old-time western craftsman, he too has killed off his old identity as an amateur underground filmmaker out in the desert and assumed a new life in a new mode that is "deeply involved in the picture business." Echoing his migration through the different modes of cinematic production of his own life's work, these surrogates also sustain the implication that, however disguised, O'Neill's own subjectivity is the principle that motivates and controls the film's diverse and otherwise incommensurate film styles and ontologies. In the earlier shorts, he often hinted at his own presence as author in, for example, shots of an editing glove whose fingers snap like a magician's, or the figure of a projectionist recruited from an

old instructional film, but otherwise he was hidden below the sheer *technē* of his special effects. In *Water and Power* he does appear briefly in propria persona as a frantically pixilated ghost superimposed over a nighttime pan across the lights of industrial Los Angeles. But he is also omnipresent in the various narrative personae, the hobo storytellers and modern jazz musicians—not to speak of the filmmakers implied behind the found footage—all the voices assimilated into the lyricism of his encyclopedic, if metonymic, epic.

O'Neill continued to experiment with multileveled collages of western landscapes, animation effects, found footage, and verbal narrative fragments in his next release, *Trouble in the Image* (1996), a delirious tour de force of technical innovation. Though less clearly segmented than the shorts, it was something of a return to the dossier format in that it did not consolidate its parts under a single thematic momentum, as the filmmaker apparently recognized in subtitling it "Works on Film, 1978–95." The animations included rotoscoped outlines of human agents superimposed over and hence populating the landscapes, and the voice-over narrative fragments invoked the format of a Hollywood script by specifying camera movements and similar directions. In retrospect it seems clear that if O'Neill was not feeling his way toward making a Hollywood film, then he was searching for a way in which his work could find its own coherence as a sustained reflection on Hollywood, perhaps on the western. But in fact the genre that framed his next masterpiece, *The Decay of Fiction* (2002), was the western's urban cousin, film noir. Where the mind of Haskell, the noir protagonist, had subtended *Water and Power*, this film's unity is spatial; it all takes place in a single building, one of Los Angeles's most celebrated and historic, the Ambassador Hotel.

Designed by Myron Hunt and opened in 1921, the Mediterranean-styled luxury hotel was a catalyst in the city's westward expansion along the Wilshire corridor, fabled in Los Angeles's show-business and political lore from the 1930s to the 1960s. Several Academy Awards events, including the first using the Oscar statuette, were held there, and its nightclub, the Coconut Grove (originally decorated with papier-mâché palm trees from the set of *The Sheik*), was one the city's grandest; Richard F. Nixon delivered his Checkers speech there, and Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated in its kitchen in 1968. Since closing in 1989, it has occasioned several civic scandals, and though otherwise disused, has been the location for more than a thousand movies. In addition to the public knowledge of the building in which O'Neill shared, it also has more personal connections for him, since an uncle had been a musician there. A landmark in the city's architecture and spatial development, the Ambassador provides, then, an interface between O'Neill's personal history and an incomparably rich assemblage of the motifs of the city's cultural identity; in it, Los Angeles history is sedimented in ruins.

Confined inside the Ambassador, *The Decay of Fiction* is structurally simpler than any of O'Neill's previous mature films. It is composed of three main devices that together figure the positioning of individual subjectivity in the interaction between place and cinema. Its foundation and dominant feature is place, manifested in an again fluidly linked series

of time-lapse, traveling-camera shots of the hotel filmed in color. This architecture, itself half-film and half-plaster, is pervaded by the second device, shadowy human dramas that rise up from half-remembered, half-imagined movies. And generated among these, the third reality eventually appears, eruptions from the filmmaker's unconscious.

O'Neill's camera follows as during the day the shadows move across the rambling structure and its surrounding lawns and tracks through the now-decaying and deserted corridors, restaurants, and ballrooms, descending to its underground kitchens and prying into its rooms. Into the elegant geometric ballet of these sequences, O'Neill introduces a distended filigree of narrative vignettes, fragments from the lives of the hotel's guests, filmed in black-and-white and in real time: the manager, the maids and kitchen staff, the performers and the audiences, the crooks and the cops pursuing them. Though the architectural structure looks solid and permanent, the human figures that appear superimposed in it are transparent and insubstantial; haunting rather than inhabiting the abandoned rooms and corridors or the empty swimming pool, they are a brilliant filmic realization of the hotel's memories, the ghosts of its long-departed guests. But if these electric shadows once passed through the hotel, their real home was film noir—the genre in which Hollywood's engagement with the city was most compelling. Their characters and clothes and the narratives in which they flicker into life all resonate with noir conventions; and fragments of fugitive conversations and even shots from *Sudden Fear, Possessed, His Kind of Woman, Detour* again, *The Big Combo*, and a dozen other noirs echo through the architecture of this film and float through its emulsion.

Some of the characters recur to form tentative narrative links: Jack, the shady manager, for example, lost his temper once too often and has been fired, but though the waitresses commiserate, he still has to meet his nefarious connections. Elsewhere, planning to con a john, a hooker is dolling herself up to impersonate a European aristocrat who has had a schizophrenic breakdown; an agent is having trouble with his torch singer and the management; cops are ever immanent; and in the wake of the Kennedy assassination (heard as an offscreen radio broadcast), the traumatized kitchen staff gather to comfort each other. The melodrama of these phantom intrigues is interwoven with the melodrama of the shadows that race across the walls and of the rushing storm clouds visible through the broken windows. The unified space, the sustained combination of these two techniques—the color tracking shots through the architecture and the black-and-white figures discovered in it—and these implications of narrative allow O'Neill to create a more unified and popularly accessible long film poem than he had before made.

Though it appears to be a drastic revision of the conventions of the narrative feature, the film has a strong lineage in both the industry and the avant-garde in the genre of hotel films that runs from *Blood of a Poet* (Jean Cocteau, 1930) and *Grand Hotel* (Edmund Goulding, 1932) to *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961), *The Chelsea Girls* (Andy Warhol, 1966), and *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980)—there are, of course, many more. As is common in these, the hotel's linked private and public spaces form a material architecture that supplies a narrative architecture; people and stories, otherwise only

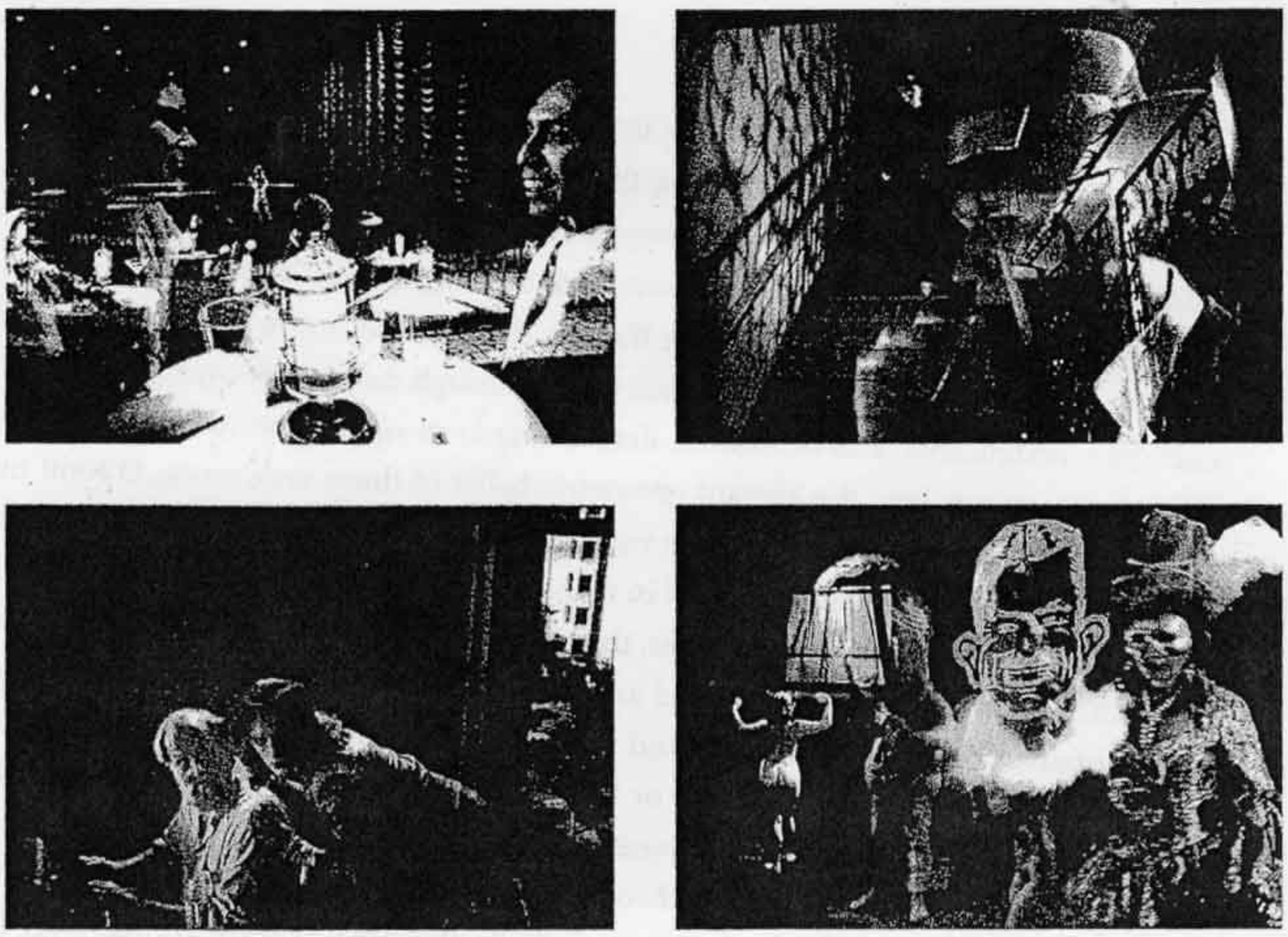

FIGURE 82.
Pat O'Neill, *Decay of Fiction.*

minimally related, are allowed to encounter each other, and the intermittent interaction between their stories can take the place of substantial dramatic narrative development in any of them. Dr. Otternschlag's remark—"Grand Hotel! People coming, going, nothing ever happens"—suggests both the circulating narrative indirection and its architectural framing that provide a more integral unity than the dossier structure of O'Neill's previous films had allowed. But though *Blood of a Poet* and *The Chelsea Girls* are the most obvious models for the sublation of the abrupt segmented form of O'Neill's earlier shorts into the more extended format, *Last Year at Marienbad* is phenomenologically the more similar. The mix of forgetting, recognition, and misrecognition and the nostalgia of memory and desire that inform Renais's film are paralleled in O'Neill's voyage into the Ambassador's unconsciousness. "Once again, down these corridors, through these halls, these galleries, in this structure—from another century, this enormous, luxurious, baroque lugubrious hotel," the voice-over of *Marienbad*'s celebrated opening shot intones (a text that only recently, though in another century, O'Neill's friend, Chick Strand, had borrowed for the sound track to her compilation film, *Loose Ends*), "where endless corridors succeed silent deserted corridors, sculptured door-frames, series of doorways, galleries, transverse corridors that open in turn on empty salons." Here are precisely described the

traveling shots through the social and imaginative environments of the previous century with which O'Neill animates his stories.

In the middle of the film, we find him, sitting in one of these empty salons, typing, until his attention is drawn away by a ghostly woman. Whether or not he is writing the script for this film, the self-portrait is an astonishing figure for a filmmaker whose work until this point had been most resolutely visual, antiverbal, and antinarrative. But the metaphor hardly holds. The power of fiction has decayed, and no unified dramatic trajectory can contain these shards of drama. From the peeling paint, the wrecked vestibules, and the ruins of narrative, the third primary compositional device progressively asserts itself; a cast of characters and special effects, categorically more bizarre than those of the main diegesis and resembling the subconscious visions of the earlier films that O'Neill had otherwise repressed in this one, make their return.

Erupting unharnessed from the hotel's, the medium's, and the filmmaker's id, these demons first appear in a film within the film—perhaps an implied screening at the hotel—when the hooker goes to the john's room. Speaking for him, *The Big Combo*'s sound track intones, "I've been waiting for you a long time"; but he gets more than he paid for, and his room turns into an early O'Neill short. Beneath a couple of bare electric lightbulbs on an interpolated screen, bizarre semihuman creatures come to dance; further inset screens introduce comic-strip characters, fragments of found footage, and more uncanny apparitions, which spark into life, then disappear like exploded fuses. What passes for normal life in the hotel goes on for a while, but then, as Jack Palance's voice from *Sudden Fear* exclaims, "I'm so crazy about you . . . I could break your bones," the screens and their manic phantoms recur, this time dominated by a huge hermaphroditic nude. Sporadic at first, these psychic breakdowns become more frequent, especially after the Kennedy assassination. Clips from the gunfight in another noir hotel film, *His Kind of Woman,* take us down to the Ambassador's nether regions, the working-class downstairs to the luxury above. Rising from here, the visitations finally take over and in the once-elegant rooms stage their Walpurgisnacht. A naked woman cartwheels unseen through the crowds in the Embassy Ballroom, and then her fellow phantoms join her: two huge naked men with the heads of unknown animals, the shadow of a naked woman with wings, a spaceman with a single-eyed ball for a head, faces cut from magazines, a skeleton pushing himself along in an armchair. Like another circle of Hell and more dazzlingly outré even than the gods and goddesses of Kenneth Anger's *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome,* multiple superimpositions of them crowd the hotel, displacing the regular guests, with the densely looped fragments of their conversation punctuated by screams and shards of unknown sound. Finally disillusioned with her lover, the young woman checks out, and as storm clouds roar across the sky, the sun sets and *The Decay of Fiction* ends.

O'Neill's three long films are an incomparably innovative and sophisticated address to the possibilities of approaching geography and history within geography via a critical con-

frontation with cinema. Envisioning simultaneously the medium of film, the history of the movies, and the geography in which the former became incarnate as the latter, they form a magisterial meditation on the American Southwest and on cinema, on the region and the medium with which it has been historically identified. Though it is utterly distinctive and original, O'Neill's oeuvre is fully informed by the histories of both the studio cinema and the avant-garde traditions created outside it and on its edges, especially in Los Angeles. It completes and illuminates the achievement of his local contemporaries and indeed of much of the previous avant-garde. It subsumes Gary Beydler's use of natural elements to force the film into self-consciousness of its own material nature, Louis Hock's similarly self-conscious engagement with mass-media images of the region, Fabrice Ziolkowski's concern with the historical determination of Los Angeles spatiality, and James Benning's ostensibly more referential but still crucially film-specific California geo-documentaries. But O'Neill's roots lie in the visual languages of European modernism: in the Expressionism that inspired the experimental films of the late 1920s and sustained Vorkapich's and Florey's careers into the 1940s to engender the film noir that *Decay of Fiction* so dramatically re-creates; in the traditions of abstract animation, inaugurated by Oskar Fischinger and the Whitney brothers and revived as psychedelic underground in the 1960s; but also and especially in Surrealism, brought to the United States slightly later to engender one-off independent films such as *Even as You and I* but which bloomed dramatically in the 1940s in the work of Deren and her followers and then reasserted itself in Chick Strand's and Nina Menkes's films. Though the overt subjectivity and first-person expressiveness of the main post-Deren tradition of the postwar American avant-garde emerged indirectly and latterly in O'Neill's work rather than being its point of departure, the structural tropes of underground film are nevertheless recurrent; and though the critical severity characteristic of New York structural film was modified in Los Angeles, still aspects of its systematicity, medium self-consciousness, and formal rigor (and the example of the computer-controlled camera O'Neill found in Michael Snow) are also essential to his work. And so, re-creating the visual intensity of Brakhage and the avant-garde's avatars in an entirely different vocabulary, O'Neill made a genuinely expressive amateur cinema in the interstices of the industry.[10] The most typical of all Hollywood's Extras, he marshaled the resources of the avant-garde to salvage a realm of authenticity from the alienation of commodity cinema.

For all his stylistic innovations are engaged within the more fundamental attempt to transform the medium, its resources, and its productive methods for human uses. In his attempts to reclaim Los Angeles for film and to reclaim the medium in which Los Angeles lived, O'Neill is one of the last machine's last master craftsmen, the maker of the last Hollywood *films* (even though he is also one whose technological innovation also looks forward to culture after cinema).[11] In his life's work of radically re-creating the aesthetics of film, he initially followed the post-Deren tradition of the amateur, 16 mm personal film of the heroic era of the underground, when other cultural currents made the possibility of an alternative to the commodity film industry a real possibility. But in

his mature work, he turned to the tradition of independently produced features of the kind that have recurred in the Los Angeles avant-garde: the attempts by minorities in the 1970s and after to make commercially viable art films in the mode inherited from Harrington, von Sternberg, Nazimova, and the Socialists of the early teens. If the attempt to create an autonomous Socialist cinema with *From Dusk to Dawn* marked the beginning of the century's master story of the avant-garde's resistance to capitalist culture, its history continued in the many other attempts to create a popular participatory culture opposed to the commodification of all social, cultural, and imaginative life of which the integrated twenty-first-century corporate entertainment cartels we still know as Hollywood are the most dystopian summary form. The place where this history began, Los Angeles, may also perhaps be the place, not where it will end, but where it will find new forms of life.