

Castro Street

By Scott MacDonald

For Bruce Baillie filmmaking has always been a spiritual quest and he has sometimes imagined himself as cinema's Parsifal, the "pure fool" of Arthurian legend, confronting a troubled world with his camera-Excalibur. And as is evident in "Quixote" (1965), his first longer film, his forays into a fallen world as a cine-knight-errant have often involved challenges doomed to failure. Nowhere is this more evident than in what may be his most impressive film, "Castro Street" (1966), where the "dragon" to be confronted in the interests of a healthier humanity was America's postwar industrialization. The Castro Street of Baillie's title is not Castro Street in San Francisco, which was already a center of gay culture by the time "Castro Street" was made. This Castro Street was a thoroughfare through the industrial zone of Richmond, California, across the bay from San Francisco—an area of oil storage tanks and railroad yards (I say "was" because the area has changed a good deal in the past half-century).

For many of us who came of age in the years immediately following the Great Depression and World War 2, the burgeoning industrial might of modern America was both triumph and problem. It was a triumph because productive factories and the railroads that ministered to them represented a recovery from economic disaster and war—indeed for the postwar generation, factories were beautiful in their power, an industrial sublime. The problem was that this industrial and economic recovery was clearly endangering the natural environments where this burgeoning industry had established itself—it was not unusual to hear that a river had caught fire from the high level of pollutants dumped into it. Industrial spaces were increasingly understood as blemishes on the landscape and, for some, visual emblems of this nation's increasing addiction to over-consumption and wastefulness.

For a knight-errant filmmaker, this two-sided monster represented a personal challenge—especially since celluloid cinema itself was an industrially-produced mechanical/chemical medium that was doing damage to the American Eden. Baillie decided to accept the limitations of his medium, but to use the filmmaking process in an unusual way:



A superimposed image from the film. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

Technically, when I made "Castro Street," I went into the field again with my "weapon," my tools. I collected a couple of prisms and a lot of glasses from my mother's kitchen, various things, and tried them all in the Berkeley backyard one day. I knew I wouldn't have access to a laboratory that would allow me to combine black-and-white and color, and I was determined to do it by myself. I went after the soft color on one side of Castro Street where the Standard Oil towers were; the other side was black-and-white, the railroad switching yards. I was making mattes by using high contrast black-and-white film that was used normally for making titles. I kept my mind available so that as much as one can know, I knew about the scene I had just shot when I made the next color shot. What was white would be black in my negative, and that would allow me to matte the reversal color so that the two layers would not be superimposed but combined. (interview with Baillie in "A Critical Cinema," 1992)

Though Baillie would later claim that the intensity of making "Castro Street" "blew my fuses for life," the result was a short film (10-minutes) of remarkable beauty and complexity, a sound-image work that in its unusual combinations offers a provocative understanding of industrialization itself.

"Castro Street" is a visual and auditory phantasmagoria. Baillie's layering of physical spaces, emphasized by the doubling of black-and-white and color, functions as a kind of yin yang, not only for two kinds of industrial space, but for the interplay between the physical elements of industry and commerce and the natural world within which these elements function. Often during "Castro Street" we become aware of

the flowers and grasses, the movements of clouds, the changing light of the sun—visual elements that, on one level, are contextualized by the kaleidoscope of industrial activity, and at the same time represent the physical and historical context for modern industry itself. Indeed, in some instances Baillie's industrial images are framed so that they evoke elements of the natural surround: a smokestack is seen in a gorgeous scarlet iris—an industrial poppy; colorful pipes, at first seen out of focus (they could be flowers) subsequently come into focus; and a pan up a cluster of green pipes causes them to look like stems.

As a-natural as the industrial sector of Richmond, California might seem, Baillie suggests that it is a product of nature, not only in the obvious senses—industry is built within nature, exploits natural resources—but in a spiritual sense: the same force that grows those flowers (the “spiritual” force so many of us go to nature to access) has inspired human animals to “grow” the material “flowers” of their imagination. If nature is the physical manifestation of the divine spirit, modern culture—and the industrial technologies that sustain it—manifests the human spirit in the process of emulating divinity. And recognizing this, suggests Baillie, provides a hope that within an increasingly materialistic society, we can recognize the original sources of our power and find new, healthier ways to honor them, to reconnect with them.

As filmmaker, Baillie stands in relation to the film industry as the flowers growing between the industrial structures in “Castro Street” stand to the Castro Street industrial zone. Without modern industry an independent film artist like Baillie would not have the

opportunity to make films, and without concentrations of population in cities, there would never have been audiences for motion pictures of any kind. Unlike those who fetishize “Nature,” and unlike commercial filmmakers who tend to worship all things modern, Baillie accepts and explores the liminal zone between nature and culture that makes modern life possible. “Castro Street” simultaneously pays homage to modern industry and reflects Baillie's desire to transcend the techno-industrial origins of cinema. It is no accident that the one phrase of popular music we hear within Baillie's layered soundtrack is “Good Lovin'” from the Young Rascals song of the same name—and that we hear it just before “Castro Street” concludes. We cannot help but love what makes our lives possible, what supports our creativity—but we can also, as Baillie does in this film, work with all the diligence at our disposal to transcend the problematics of our context and move the world toward poetry.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Scott MacDonald has written on independent cinema since the 1970s; his most recent book is American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn. In 1999 he was named a Film Preservation Honoree by Anthology Film Archives and in 2011 the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences named him an Academy Scholar. He teaches film history at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY.