

Notes on the Port of St. Francis

By Scott MacDonald

Frank Stauffacher's "Notes on the Port of St. Francis" (1951) is a distinguished contribution to the tradition of the City Symphony: a film that depicts a composite day in the life of a city, often from before dawn to after dark. The City Symphony was named by Walther Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Big City* (1927) and has produced a considerable series of remarkable films, most of them documentaries—Alberto Cavalcanti's "Rien que les heures" ("Nothing but Time," 1926), Dziga Vertov's "The Man with a Movie Camera" (1929), "Weegee" (Arthur Fellig) and Amos Vogel's "Weegee's New York" (c. 1952), and Robert Gardner's "Forest of Bliss" (1986)—though there have also been fictional City Symphonies: Spike Lee's "Do the Right Thing" (1989), for example. Notes was Stauffacher's first celebration of urbanity, though both it and his whimsical "Sausalito" (1948), a film about what was then a small town across the bay from San Francisco, can be understood of part of his attempt to build a sophisticated film scene in the Bay Area.

From 1946 until 1954, Stauffacher was the creator and director of what he named "Art in Cinema," a successful and influential film society that presented a wide range of films not otherwise available in the Bay Area to audiences in San Francisco and Berkeley. As a creative programmer, Stauffacher was well-aware of the City Symphony tradition: Art in Cinema's first series included a program called "Fantasy into Documentary" that presented the Ruttmann and Cavalcanti films, along with and Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke's "The City" (1939). Stauffacher's master plan in programming Art in Cinema was first to educate Bay Area cineastes about the remarkable cinematic experiments that had been coming out of Europe since the 1920s, then to focus on Bay Area filmmakers as important contributors to this experimental tradition.

"Notes on the Port of St. Francis" focuses on both the geography and the history of San Francisco. The film is shaped by Stauffacher's careful organization of his visuals (a combination of motion pictures, plus some photographs and illustrations) and by his juxtaposition of imagery and sound. After an opening quotation from Walter de la Mare's "An Epitaph"—"Here lies a most beautiful lady;/Light of Step and heart was she;/ I think she was



Scenes like this accompany narrated excerpts from Robert Louis Stevenson's 1882 essay on San Francisco. Courtesy Barbara Solomon and San Francisco Bay Area TV Archive

the most beautiful lady/ That ever was in the West Country"— "Notes" is divided into eight sections, each separated from the next by a moment of darkness. The opening five-minute prelude provides a brief overview of the nature of the California coast, the Golden Gate, and San Francisco Bay; of the origins of San Francisco and the bustling modern city it has become. The remaining sections explore, respectively, the city's hills being negotiated by cable car, by makeshift go-carts piloted by young boys, and by automobile (one driver fails to reach the top of a hill and must back his car down); the speed of the city's development on a sandy spit of land visited regularly by earthquakes; the mixture of ethnic groups, languages, and types of people that characterize the city; Italian Americans and Fisherman's Wharf when it was a fisherman's wharf (a man tossing dough for a pizza reminds us that, until a generation ago, pizza was an exotic food in this country); Chinese Americans and Chinatown; the often surreal movement of fog and mist; and finally, the architectural diversity of the city's neighborhoods.

Stauffacher's use of sound provides a second kind of organization. Throughout "Notes," the visuals are contextualized with environmental sound (toots from ships, the rattle of cable cars, wind) and music (classical music often, and typical ethnic musics when relevant). And during sections 1, 3, 5, 6, and 8, a spoken narration, composed of excerpts from an 1882 essay about San Francisco by Robert Louis Stevenson, is delivered by Vincent Price. Stevenson emphasizes the speed with which San Francisco had developed by 1882: it had become a major city during the course of a single lifetime. He also refers to an Indian tale, "perhaps older than the name of Cali-

fornia,” in which San Francisco “rose out of the sea in a moment, and sometime or other shall, in a moment, sink again.” As Price speaks this passage, Stauffacher provides a downward tilt shot of the city filmed from the Bay that replicates the idea of the city rising suddenly out of the water. Given the Walter de la Mare description of “a most beautiful lady,” it is easy to imagine that Stauffacher was thinking of Botticelli’s “The Birth of Venus.” And in an era of global warming, it is difficult not to re-think the Indian tale!

Stauffacher’s title, “Notes on the Port of St. Francis,” reflects the filmmaker’s characteristic humility and wit. On one level, “Notes” refers to the brevity of “Notes on the Port of St. Francis” (21 minutes), compared with the feature-length *City Symphonies* Stauffacher had programmed at Art in Cinema, and suggests his awareness that this documentation of his city is at most partial and preliminary. Of course, “Notes” can also refer to musical notes—a nod to the idea of the *City Symphony*. Like Ruttmann, Vertov, and other filmmakers who have contributed to the form, Stauffacher understood his poetic vision of San Francisco as a form of visual music, in this case accompanied by the complex “music” of the soundtrack.

Stauffacher’s work as film artist and curator, the combination of cine-historical awareness and personal humility evident in “Notes on the Port of St. Francis,” continued to resonate after his death at 38 years (of a brain tumor) in 1955. His support of Bay Area filmmaking and independent filmmaking in general must be considered among the primary instigations of the vital role the region has continued to play in the modern history of cinema, through institutions such as Canyon Cinema, the Pacific Film Archive, and the San Francisco Cinematheque, and within the work of longtime Bay Area film artists like Bruce Baillie, Robert Nelson, Larry Jordan, Gunvor Nelson, Ernie Gehr, Nathaniel Dorsky, George Kuchar, Jerome Hiler, Greta Snider, and Scott Stark.

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.*