

Allan Sekula: filming the forgotten resistance at sea

The photographer's new film, about global maritime trade, has been hailed by Occupy activists. Its maker has spent a life challenging new forms of capitalism

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Still from *The Forgotten Space*. Photograph: Allan Sekula, Noël Burch

Water has always played a large part in the photographer Allan Sekula's life. As a student in San Diego at the end of the 1960s, he used to wander downtown and gaze up at the flophouse hotels through whose windows he could see money being exchanged between prostitutes and sailors. "It was [Edward Hopper](#) on military steroids," he recalls. "That was the time of Vietnam, and there were even mutinies on some ships – especially among African-American sailors who were protesting against racism in the navy. Young guys my age from the west coast were being dehumanised and turned into a few good men.

Damsels in Distress

Production year: 2011

Country: USA

Cert (UK): 15

Runtime: 97 mins

Directors: Whit Stillman

Cast: Adam Brody, Analeigh Tipton, Greta Gerwig

[More on this film](#)

The Forgotten Space by Allan Sekula and Noël Burch

Tate Modern

Date: 23 April 2012

Time: 6:30pm

Duration: 2 hours

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"They'd come to the fence of the Marine Corps Recruiting Depot and say: 'If I can get over this fence will you meet me at the laundromat down the street in an hour with a car?' We managed to get some of them out. But often the shore patrol and navy police would come and pull them away. They'd be taken to briggs, assigned to a motivation platoon, and beaten up. The depot was next to an international airport on the waterfront, and some of the recruits were so desperate to escape they'd tried to get away by running across the runways, where they'd be hit by planes and be killed. This never appeared on the news."

Sekula, who had grown up in the Los Angeles harbour town of San Pedro, was learning that the maritime world, far from being a realm of pleasure cruises and play, was riven by struggle and class conflict. Since then much of his extraordinary body of experimental work has been devoted to chronicling the social, economic and political dynamics of life on the oceans. His latest exercise in hydro-poetics, a cine-essay entitled *The Forgotten Space* that he co-directed with Noël Burch, uses the statistic that 90% of cargoes today are carried by ship as its

cue to develop a wide-ranging thesis about containerisation, globalisation and invisible labour.

Seas are fascinating, Sekula argues, because of the counter-orthodoxies and refutations they offer to modern political thought. "In Alain Tanner's *Les Hommes Du Port*, a documentary about dockworkers in Genoa, he says: 'The time of the sea runs counter to the lie.' He doesn't say what the lie is. But you know: it's everything about neoliberalism. The sea is all about slow time – things move slowly, there's a lot of waiting – and as such it contradicts all the mythologies of instantaneity perpetuated by electronic media."

Sekula believes that seafaring work, like many other forms of manual labour, is ignored by many journalists whose own class status predisposes them towards fixating on white-collar and mental labour. But, as *The Forgotten Space* shows to haunting effect, this invisibility is also structural: containerisation has depeopled the bustling port cultures of previous eras and left in their wake automated landscapes.

Sekula, who was born in 1951 and whose grandfather migrated to the US from Poland, thinks that America has a particular amnesia regarding its relation to the sea. "We've always focused on the frontier hypothesis of US history. In spite of the takeover of the Panama Canal and the annexing of Hawaii, the sequential opening of western space has mainly been seen as a matter of terrestrial dominion. Today the function of the US navy is to protect the sea lanes of the world – that's free trade. And it's America's technical and legal innovations that have made the globalisation of sea trade possible."

This kind of systematic analysis, allied with deep, almost ethnographic research, is also present in Sekula's influential book *Fish Story* (1995), which he describes as "a sort of experimental essay in words and pictures that sometimes reads like fiction, sometimes like an essay, sometimes journalism, sometimes prose-poetry". Its photo-text form recalls earlier investigations of immiserated labour such as George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) and James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), both of which Sekula admires.

"I'm more sympathetic to traditions of critical realism than a lot of people in the art world," he admits. "They treat journalism as a bad object and always think that when they intervene it's without the naivety of the journalist. That doesn't seem fair to what the best journalism and non-fiction has been."

Sekula's search for what the film historian Edward Dimendberg has called an "honest materiality" is informed by his own upbringing in San Pedro (a working-class town). His first major work, *Aerospace Folktales* (1973), featured interviews with his father, a chemical engineer at Lockheed, who had lost his job. "Being working class gives you a bitter sense that all the promissory notes of the American Dream are rarely cashed in. You see failure and blockages all around you."

At San Diego, he took classes with the Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse and conceptual artist John Baldessari, and studied alongside Martha Rosler, who would later come to prominence for her interest in questions of geopolitical infrastructures and social exclusion. He also read essays on photography by John Berger and Roland Barthes, and as a result began to theorise his future work. "I wanted to explore the discursive split between art and documentary, the myth of Alfred Stieglitz against the myth of Lewis Hine." (Stieglitz was a revered figure in the development of art photography. Hine, by contrast, used his camera as a tool in the service of social reform.)

Sekula was sceptical of the romanticism and love of metaphors he discerned in the work of Stieglitz. "I saw the path of symbolism as one that led to hermeticism or a retreat from the social," he recalls. "I was trying to defend a critical social realism." His success at doing this, both in his often-cited study *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photoworks 1973–83* (1984) and recent films such as *The Lottery of the Sea* (2006), has won him many admirers. Among them is the American maritime historian Marcus Rediker, co-author with Peter Linebaugh of *The Many-Headed*

Hydra (2000): "The old national stories just aren't making much sense to people any more. Once you start thinking transnationally, you're led to the sea: the ship is the first great instrument of globalisation. Allan's idea that you can observe the compression of time and space in the modern world from the decks of a containerised cargo vessel is brilliant."

It's certainly an idea that has considerable potency in the present climate, when growing numbers of people all around the world are questioning the capitalist orthodoxies they've been fed by economists and politicians. In Barcelona last year, a gallery that screened *The Forgotten Space* was visited by many of the *indignados* who were protesting nearby. In Oakland, Occupy activists planned to show a pirated version of the film on a temporary screen they installed after blocking some of the streets in the port area.

This kind of resistance reminds Sekula that his collaborator Noël Burch had "hoped the film could 'be completed by other means – and of necessity it would have to be completed by different means'. He meant by self-organised political means on the part of the people. The sea has often been thought of as recuperative; that more and more dockers and working people are insisting on not being moved on or not being swept away by the forces of efficiency and rationalisation gives me grounds for optimism."

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