“Toll a bell for the El/For the last clientele/With a stubborn and sporting esprit/Not a cinder around, yet my vision is blurred/Sentimental? Yes, that I may be./Nothing ever again can be quite what the Third Avenue El was to me.”—This metropolitan dirge, composed by Michael Brown, is the current hit of Julius Monk’s suave revue in the new nightclub cellar, The Downstairs. Mr. Brown’s wail poignantly expresses the general lamentation for the passing of Third Avenue as we knew it.

Shedding a tear for Third Avenue, or any city antique, is a popular sport. Nobody in town is kept as busy as the nostalgia-minded. Their eyes are never dry from weeping for another lost cause. New York, chameleon-like, changes with extravagant regularity; the city’s old familiar song is the ra-ta-ta of the riveter. But Third Avenue is a special field day for the nostalgic.¹

May 12, 1955, was truly a “special field day for the nostalgic”; it was the last day to ride on the Third Avenue elevated train. The El had ceased to be an important form of public transportation in New York City by the mid-twentieth century, carrying a mere 70,000 fares per day compared to the subway’s 4.5 million.² Although there were still elevated trains throughout the city’s boroughs, the trains that ran down Ninth, Sixth, and Second Avenues in Manhattan had been torn down by 1942.³ The Third Avenue El was the last of its kind, and riders were eager to memorialize this dying technology. An account of the last ride on the Third Avenue El describes the train being overrun by “souvenir collectors” who stripped the car of “everything that wasn’t nailed down”: “The black metal destination markers proved the most popular items and were quickly removed from their window slots. Several persons carried six or eight signs tucked under their arms and for a while there was a brisk trading of ‘duplicates.’”⁴ This hunger continued for less concrete souvenirs that could communicate the experience of the train ride. The New-York Historical Society opened “Exhibit of the City’s Elevateds” the day the Third Avenue El closed, replacing the literal ride with a figurative
A decade later, the New York Public Library tracked “The Rise and Fall of the Elevated Railroad”; along with the usual photographs, sketches, and contracts, this retrospective included a “1 1/2 hour program of old [E]l movies (and some new ones too).” Elevated trains (and their tracks, stations, and passengers) were common in cultural representation of the New York cityscape throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, the Third Avenue El’s imminent destruction made it a particularly resonant subject for postwar artists and writers. Popular and avant-garde filmmakers shot on its cars and beneath its tracks in the shadowy world of the Bowery. Photographers preserved the flowery ironwork on the girders and the potbellied stoves and stained glass in the stations. In the 1950s, the El traveled nearly empty while subways were packed and cars jammed the streets, but this anachronistic transportation technology gained a new hold on the city’s cultural imagination. The Third Avenue El’s end was the beginning of its afterlife as an object of aesthetic contemplation.

New Yorkers mourned the El because it was a link to the city’s past that was about to disappear—one of many in a period of rapid urban development. New York has always understood itself as a city that changes “with extravagant regularity,” as Emory Lewis suggests above. The 1950s were no exception, a decade “highlighted by a construction boom that once again transformed the cityscape. High-rise apartments and slum clearance projects were going up virtually overnight.” However, I suggest that the El was not just a metonymic stand-in for “the wonderful old world that’s passing.” Instead, it structured New Yorkers’ knowledge of urban space in a way that was no longer possible on other modes of transportation. Personal and collective views on American life often arise from machine-mediated views of American space, even once the technologies that made those views possible are deemed outdated or razed altogether. We tend to think about technological innovations as they suggest new social arrangements and philosophical understandings. However, in the 1950s, the El was an obsolete technology in a modernizing city, and it emphasized movement through the city as mediated movement through the urban past.

Recent critical attention to the elevated train has emphasized its panoramic quality in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century literature and the distanced relationship to the city sights (particularly the lives of the poor) that resulted. For these critics, technology is a shield and a frame: it protects New Yorkers who can afford the fare and aestheticizes encounters that would otherwise be experienced more authentically at street level. However, my argument considers how the El’s visuality changes over time and in relation to other, later transpor-
Farewell to the El

tation technologies. In the last days of the El, it was no longer a novelty or a mover of the masses. Instead, it had a more symbolic purpose as an alternative to the decontextualizing force of the subway or the isolation of the car. The El showed postwar artists a city dissociated from progress, haunted by machines of the past and visions of modernity from seventy-five years ago.

The progress associated with newer transportation technologies could not erase the satisfactions of riding the El: it offered the urban subject embodied connection and a sense of lived history. Nostalgic representations of the Third Avenue El in the 1950s argued that these pleasures should continue to be a part of New York's visual landscape. Janelle Wilson describes nostalgia as “the opportunity to observe and juxtapose past and present identity”; the nostalgia for the city as seen from the El posited continuity and discontinuity between past and present forms of urban space and experience. A later verse of the “metropolitan dirge” described above compares the danger and excitement of driving on an icy street under the El tracks with the boring experience of driving on Third Avenue after the tracks have been taken down: “Now it’s dull and it’s drab to go by in a cab/with a feeling approaching ennui”—the anachronistic thrill is gone. This new ease of movement led to an historically specific ennui. The temporal and spatial order of postwar New York idealized an efficient flow that reduced the dangerous (and interesting) proximity of relics of the city’s past. The connection to city space made possible by the El stood in sharp relief to the frictionless movement through the city embraced by urban developers, architects, and the like: Robert Bennett describes their form of development as a “postindustrial dematerialization of urban space.”

We can understand the “nostalgia-mindedness” of artists of the 1950s as an attempt to rematerialize urban space, creating a concrete, embodied relationship to the city. Like nostalgic cyborgs, artists of the 1950s inhabited anachronistic machines in order to see what modes of perception they offered and how they could be maintained in a world without the material technology itself.

The El’s anachronistic visuality collapsed binaries between distance and intimacy, public and private space, past and present. Visuality, what Hal Foster calls “how we see, how we are able, allowed or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein,” is central to understanding technology’s importance in American culture. Transportation technologies situate viewers in literal and symbolic relation to the passing landscape: here we can think of the car’s importance as an individualistic technology, for example, arising from its literal separation of the driver both from the surroundings and from the crowd. The defining aspect of the El, particularly in comparison with later forms of public transportation, was its openness to city space.
“shad belly” design included a low-slung center so the cars didn’t tip over, and gave extra height to ceilings (they were 9’6’’); its double row of windows in the center provided extra light and extended the view.\(^\text{25}\) Windows could be opened, and on summer days the back door of the last car was opened to take in the breeze. This connection to the urban environment was impossible on the subway, a space of physical and psychological dissociation.\(^\text{26}\) El passengers experienced a clear relationship to the city, while subway passengers could not see where they were going.\(^\text{27}\) A 1938 editorial from the New York Herald Tribune doubted that the El would ever be torn down precisely because of the aesthetic pleasure and spatial mastery riders felt in their navigation of the city: “Powerful nationalistic smells of cooking, as well as odors from the leather, spice, chemical, coffee and other industries reach the traveler who is seeing New York for a nickel, and if he is a regular, he can tell with his eyes shut about where he is on his journey.”\(^\text{28}\) Here, regular riding of the El is not associated with the daily grind of commuting but with the sensual experience of smelling fresh ground coffee. The city may be a site of shifting neighborhoods and alliances, but it is legible (even smellable) to those habituated to movement through it. The embodied connection to city space should not suggest that El riders experienced a more real version of the city than subway riders did—it was a wholly different one. Subway car views alternated between dark tunnels and stations distinguishable only by name; lone riders retreated into internal fantasy through reading, daydreaming, or dozing.\(^\text{29}\) El passengers, on the other hand, experienced fantasies that were directed outward into external city space. Technologies of transportation reinforce urban subjectivity by literalizing views of the city: moving underground, New York became a space of invisibility and isolation; moving aboveground and in close proximity to city life opened up otherwise invisible spaces to fantasies of communion. While the cross-country train offered the possibility of connecting different parts of America, the elevated train suggested this imaginary connection could take place on an individual level as well.\(^\text{30}\)

Artists of the 1950s latched on to this externally directed gaze as a way of preserving not only the sights of the El but also the way of seeing from it. American surrealist Joseph Cornell examined this way of seeing more extensively than any of the other artists I discuss here, using assemblage, film, and writing to examine the technology’s possibilities for projecting a reverie of connectedness onto urban space. Cornell’s prominence in the art world rests on the reputation of his boxes, which were filled with found and purchased objects arranged as they would be in a cabinet of curiosities.\(^\text{31}\) His diaries from the 1920s through the 1950s are filled with notes of the people and scenes he
Farewell to the El, as well as the magical sense of identification that they evoked. One diary entry describes a “woman adjusting [her] window” seen from a Queens elevated train. The “‘flash’ view of [the] moving car leav[es] this image imbued with the magic that used to come so strongly in commuting days and following.” Cornell often attempted to visually evoke the viewer’s past in his artwork just as he experienced his own past while watching the woman described in his diary. One series of shadowboxes, known as the Window Façade boxes, is made up of vertically oriented grids of windows: the box suggests the façade of an apartment building seen from a passing elevated train, and viewers expect that similar isolated scenes will be glimpsed inside (fig. 1).

Throughout this article I return to the works of Joseph Cornell because their organization of the El’s visual space illustrates an understanding of public transportation not only as a historically specific technology to be mourned and fetishized but as a way of seeing that can be examined and problematized. Throughout Cornell’s corpus, old-fashioned technologies make the persistence of the past a concrete and embodied—but not easily perceived—presence. This is especially true of his film Gnir Rednow, produced in collaboration with avant-garde film pioneer Stan Brakhage. Brakhage shot the initial footage on the Third Avenue El and edited it for his own film, The Wonder Ring (1955); however, Brakhage’s final product did not evoke the sense of encounter between different spaces and times that Cornell had envisioned. Reversing Brakhage’s intentions as well as his title, Cornell edited The Wonder Ring into Gnir Rednow (precise date unknown), a film that re-created the El’s visuality as Cornell understood it. While this seems to be an example of what Susan Hegeman calls “salvage ethnography,” I argue that Cornell is not merely a nostalgic preservationist. For Cornell, the Third Avenue El is not just a structure; it is a structure of feeling. To know New York through this anachronistic technology is to realize the historical locatedness of urban visuality, and yet to want it to persist outside of its specific history.

Passing Acquaintances

The El oriented passengers like Cornell to the cityscape in two ways: it presented broad vistas that connected neighborhoods as well as intimate close-ups that segmented vision into brief glimpses. The first section of William Dean Howells’ novel A Hazard of New Fortunes (1890) shows readers how the close-up views affected nineteenth-century passengers’ visual relationship to the city. Basil March and his wife, Isabel, ride the elevated trains back and forth across Manhattan looking for an apartment. They glimpse theatrical scenes of the urban poor through windows of the apartment buildings near the tracks:
It was better than the theatre, of which it reminded him, to see those people through their windows: a family party of work-folk at a late tea, some of the men in their shirt-sleeves; a woman sewing by a lamp; a mother laying her child in its cradle; a man with his head fallen on his hands upon a table; a girl and her lover leaning over the window-sill together. What suggestion! What drama! What infinite interest!

Here the El both connects and separates. The respectable bourgeois protagonists share the train with other classes and ethnicities, but the immigrants and poor people glimpsed in passing are intriguingly distant. The scenes are fascinating because of the technological frame provided by the El: the images flow seamlessly one into another, and the passengers experience a panoptic sense that the apartment dwellers are unaware of being observed. By contrast, when the Marches are confronted with a scene of poverty at street level, the experience is far less aesthetically pleasing. The El presents a theatrical display of interiority to an invisible audience that can instantaneously perceive and possess the meaning in the sight. Unlike the scenes described in Carrie Tirado Bramen’s “The Urban Picturesque,” the El does not display the particularity and variety of working-class life. Each of the tableaux is separated from the others by semicolons, creating a sense of self-enclosure and evoking an entire story. The unbroken stream of images from the El window displayed the passing city as a spectacle, connecting it to earlier forms of visuality instantiated by the passenger train.

The El’s usefulness as a technology that defended passengers from the immediacy of their encounters was not an absolute one. Over time, the habitual exposure to detailed interior spaces moved even the nineteenth-century bourgeois spectator beyond distanced appreciation into what Michael Taussig calls a “tactile appropriation” of city life, a lived connection that transcends typicality. When a sight is repeatedly encountered, its picturesqueness spills over into the intimate, the embodied, and even the confrontational. To return to Howells, “What suggestion!” and “What drama!” both seem praises well within the realm of the picturesque aesthetic, but “What infinite interest!” suggests meaning that cannot be contained by the surveillant gaze of the El rider. When seen once, a scene glimpsed from the El seems to stand in for all immigrants, all working women, or all urban poor; when seen regularly, the glimpse’s ability to stand in for a larger whole breaks down. This repeated and immediate view made the El a particularly urban form of transportation, one that offered the fascination of intimacy along with the comfort of anonymity.

More contemporary transportation technologies cannot offer both at once:
the subway is intimate, but you are just as visible to the other passengers as they are to you; the car allows for personal anonymity, but the gaze from a car cannot penetrate interior spaces.

As public transportation moved past the windows of private homes, a peculiar kind of sociability was created between these border-crossing spaces—a form of “passing acquaintance” that was intimate without creating social obligations. On the same page as the theatrical scenes in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Isabel describes “the fleeting intimacy you formed with people in second and third floor interiors, while all the usual street life went on underneath[, which] had a domestic intensity mixed with the perfect repose that was the last effect of good society with all its security and exclusiveness.” Here, separated from the street below, both the El car and the apartment seem to interact. The very depth of the interior space refuses the flattening of a sketch; it is the inability to reduce the vision seen to a picture that creates a sense of the city as intimately social. Of course, this intimacy is fleeting, still feels unidirectional, and takes place in neighborhoods and with people who are not actually part of “good society.” But it has an important purpose, particularly for Isabel as an upper-class wife isolated from the Boston milieu to which she is accustomed. The furtively glimpsed wholeness of another city dweller restores the individual passenger’s lost sense of social wholeness. In addition, the “security” and “exclusiveness” bring the viewer into contact with lower-class life as a comforting social ritual without the social obligations of a more upper-class “good society.” Instead of a separation through technology, the spatial proximity made possible by the El effects an asymptotic easing together of American classes, perhaps suggesting a gradualist model of assimilation. The visual structure of the El welcomes the spectator into an intimate crowd, one defined not by nicety but merely by visual proximity. This proximity was especially striking on avenues where the distance from the tracks to the adjacent buildings was less than thirty feet. (See fig. 2, from *Third Ave El* (1955), for a sense of just how close the trains were to apartment windows.) The El’s technological possibilities, rather than creating containment, begin to include letting otherness in. The imaginative connection between physical and psychic interiors creates a kind of dream space of urban intersubjectivity.

In the 1950s, the Third Avenue El’s intimate proximity to city life was the theme most often examined in literature, art, and film. A later verse of “Third Avenue El” describes how the structure “looked in the windows of avenue wives/Until it became a part of their lives” and insists that, in spite of its destruction, “a family of six hundred thousand survives.” The visual relationship between the El train and the apartment window begins voyeuristically, but it
becomes a familiar, even a familial sharing of city space. This intersubjective connection reinforced urban community in a period when the car became a more popular form of transportation, one that reinforced the separation of passengers and drivers from city space and from each other. Although critics tend to discuss technology’s effects in terms of connection to or alienation from the community, the El was a technology that bridged the two: it created a deep sense of imaginary connection without making people feel responsible for each other.

Cornell’s film, *Gnir Rednow*, uses surrealist techniques of appropriation and reversal to defamiliarize these intimate encounters with people seen from the El—he uses most of Brakhage’s footage, but shows it upside-down and backward. This reversal articulates the difference between Brakhage’s and Cornell’s ways of seeing the city from the El, and also makes clear the two possible ways of relating to the city implicit in the technology. *The Wonder Ring* narrows the panorama of the city to a subjective view of a person seeing, while *Gnir Rednow* shows the difficulty of seeing something, of visually making sense of city space. Brakhage focuses on the field of vision rather than any particular object in it: his film begins with squares of light falling through the

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Figure 2.
A still from *Third Avenue El* shows the proximity of the elevated train tracks to the surrounding buildings. Courtesy of Creative Commons.
El platform to the pavement below and an ascent to the platform up stairs that repeat the same abstract rectangular patterns. Within most shots the camera pans from left to right, mimicking the movement of the train as well as the scanning gaze of the flaneur, always in search of the best sight. *Gnir Rednow*, by contrast, forces viewers to interact with city sights by including new shots of people gazing directly into the camera, framed by windows or the train doors. Perhaps most striking is Cornell’s addition of an extended shot of a man in a fedora seen through the door of one train car and into the next. The man stares straight into the camera and moves toward it; seen upside down and backward, his movements are both engrossing and disorienting. Brakhage’s film does not show any other faces directly: any portraits are partial, oblique reflections in the window, again emphasizing the safely impenetrable eye of the camera—we can see them, but they can’t see us. Cornell presents faces that are more centered. However, they are upside down and have to be consciously humanized through a mental flipping of the image.

The reversed faces, like the dramas Howells describes or the faces Ezra Pound saw in a station of the metro, move the commuter to pause, to make a lateral glance, to be momentarily transfixed by something that interrupts the eye’s commuting journey. Despite its avant-garde technique, *Gnir Rednow* joins other representations of the El in affirming technology’s power to connect the viewer with the urban community. This connection enmeshes passengers in city space by reflecting back a mixture of their desires and the unknowable difference of other lives. The glass of the train and apartment windows separates the El passenger from the scenes glimpsed. However, glass does not separate absolutely, as Bernard Herman points out; it both reflects and refracts, showing the desires of the collector and gently distorting the objects it encloses. Technologically-mediated urban visuality leads to a kind of opacity: the urban subject seen from the El is always visible and socially knowable, but never totally legible, totally interpretable.

Reinserting intersubjective encounter into Brakhage’s El ride, Cornell also emphasizes another aspect of the El’s visuality that was seen in many nostalgic representations. From Howells on, artists and writers pointed to the interaction between public and private space as the most notable experience of riding the El. The description of an El ride from the 1930s shows passengers and picturesque denizens of city space reaching out even further toward one another than Howells would have dreamt:

From the car windows one can almost touch the buildings—buildings lined with fire escapes and strung with the family washing. Frowzy women lean from the window sills exchanging
gossip and bawling at their offspring playing in the gutter three floors below. During the heat of summer, thousands of the residents pull mattresses out onto the fire escapes and sleep the nights through, oblivious of the traffic flowing past just a few feet from their heads.50

The scenes of lower-class life glimpsed from the El train are often picturesque to the point of cliché—the same “frowzy women” lean out of their windows in Ashcan school paintings and popular dramas such as Elmer Rice’s Street Scene (1929). But when passengers “can almost touch the buildings” and the train passes “just a few feet” from sleeping residents’ heads, there is an undeniable immediacy to the experience for both groups. The ensemble of El train and apartment building shaped American vision through the power of proximity. In the late nineteenth century, the heyday of the El, apartments had only recently become acceptable alternatives for the members of New York’s middle class who could not afford the financial burdens of a private home. Middle-class residents observed a clear distinction between public and private domestic spaces, but apartment buildings still had semipublic areas that were used by the less genteel tenants as extensions of their homes.51 The woman leaning out of her window and yelling at her child “playing in the gutter” is not observing the niceties of apartment life, since she is engaging in a (quite literal) dialogue between inside and outside. The structure and proximity of the elevated train enacted a similar kind of dialogue, a dialogue that undid the separation between the public, semiprivate domestic, and private spheres.52

The adjacency of train tracks and apartment buildings broke down the defined uses of city space. However, by the 1950s, the development projects of urban czar Robert Moses (including parks, bridges, and highways) had moved New York City toward a model of spatial separation and unimpeded movement—the frictionless, dematerialized city previously mentioned. Interaction between residential spaces and spaces of transportation was strictly taboo: Jones Beach, a recreational park on Long Island that Moses helped establish, is separate from the city, and buses had to obtain special permits to enter its grounds.53 Jane Jacobs described planning of the postwar era as it separated cities into zones with different purposes, creating “business districts,” “culture districts,” and the like.54 When nostalgic artists mixed public and private spaces, they were going against the grain of urban planning and popular notions of progress.

**Looking and Moving Backward**

In addition to creating a visual dialogue between self and other, public and private, the Third Avenue El created dialogue between past and present. The
El’s circular movement and old-fashioned appearance made a journey on it seem counterproductive. It was literally an older space: entering through an old-fashioned station with a pot-bellied stove and stained-glass windows, riding around the city in “antiquated wooden coaches,” riders spatially inhabited the past.55 This historicized place was a space of inefficiency made possible by anachronistic technology. In spite of the guidebooks’ insistence that “the speed of the El is substantially the same as that of the subway,” the El provided a slowed-down relation to city space for artists of the 1950s.56 The perceived slowness connected passengers to the city’s past and gave them time to examine their surroundings. The El’s temporal and spatial relationship to the city contrasts dramatically with that of streamlined trains.57 Streamlined transportation’s appearance underscored its ease of movement; its visual beauty, modernity, and emphasis on forward motion “stimulated public faith in a future fueled by technological innovation.”58 In comparison, the El’s old-fashioned and inefficient space emphasized the lateral pull of memory and urban history on the forward motion of progress.59 The proponents of razing the Third Avenue El spoke about the city in terms of unceasing forward movement. The circulation of the El through the city, rather than a parallel forward movement, became an impediment. According to a New York Times editorial,

elimination of the Manhattan El . . . would mean restoration to full use of one of this island’s main north-south thoroughfares, which for seventy-six years has been encumbered and blighted by its forest of pillars and its roof of ties and tracks and stations and trains. City Construction Coordinator Robert Moses has urged in the interests of traffic flow that the El be torn down.60

The El is an odd, liminal element of the urban landscape—its pillars are naturalized as trees, but the “roof” domesticates it. The diction in this editorial even enacts a thwarted forward motion: the “ties and tracks and stations and trains” throw up one barrier after another, and the roof does not actually encumber movement on the north-south street, but it adds to the claustrophobia of the space. The “interests of traffic flow” are humanized and given authority by the name of Robert Moses—a man who embodied efficiency. Even when people were nostalgic about the El, they often couched their arguments in terms of efficiency. The week after the Third Avenue El’s last run, the New Yorker described the need for destruction of the structure in more poetic terms:

But cupolas and stained glass adorning green villas have nothing to do with the nineteen-fifties; they are so old and out of place that to us they must be either hideous or quaint. Until the villas have been torn down and half forgotten and then slowly rebuilt in memory, we
can't be sure how much they may have meant to us . . . Twenty more years and a brand-new “L,” the “L” of recollection, will go darting among the rooftops, at a speed the old “L” never reached, through a city fairer than any of us has ever seen.\footnote{61}

The imagined effects of this ghostly technology are curiously similar to the progress-based discourse of unimpeded forward movement that led to the El’s destruction. Romanticizing the El as it will be remembered, this description removes any trace of the anachronism that artists of the 1950s embraced: its old-fashioned cars become “brand-new”; its inefficiency is transformed to speed; even its contact with the city is imagined as contact with a utopian city of the future. While the iron grip of Robert Moses would not begin to relax until the late 1950s, nostalgic artists used the El to articulate negative or mixed feelings about what had until then been New York’s steamroller style of modernization.\footnote{62} Compared to these visions, nostalgia for the El as it actually existed was literally and figuratively movement in the wrong direction.

Perhaps it is no coincidence then that Cornell’s film about the Third Avenue El is projected upside down and backward.\footnote{63} Cornell’s reuse of Brakhage’s footage in \textit{Gnir Rednow} foregrounds one of the most old-fashioned and inefficient aspects of movement on the Third Avenue El—its standardization. Unlike foot and car traffic, movement on elevated and passenger trains is predetermined and can follow only a limited set of paths. From the 1920s on, both Els and railroads suffered in relation to more flexible and decentralized forms of movement.\footnote{64} Cornell did not feel that movement on old-fashioned transportation technologies was inherently limiting.\footnote{65} He often made boxes that included Baedeker guidebook pages, and an entire box of his library is filled with guidebooks for movement by train, car, bike, bus, and cruise ship.\footnote{66} By using shots that came from someone else’s journey, Cornell emphasized restriction and repetition, key aspects of elevated train commuting that other artists of the period ignored. His interest in preestablished paths and sights also suggests a self-consciously modernist take on urban visuality as something borrowed, cited, but not owned. Instead of a director’s credit, \textit{Gnir Rednow} ends with the much-discussed title card, “The end is the beginning.”\footnote{67} Most critics read this card, obviously and rightly, as a nod to T. S. Eliot; it also underscores the counterproductive or backward-looking movement associated with the El in the 1950s.\footnote{68} His citation echoes the model of urban nostalgia espoused by the \textit{New Yorker}, but instead of destroying something in order to idealize it, Cornell argues that one has to \textit{reuse} it, to reimagine past structures in new contexts.

Several critics have noted Cornell’s increased interest in urban preservation during the postwar period without pointing to the wider context of artistic
nostalgia in which it occurred. Deborah Solomon says “buildings, vistas, and entire blocks that Cornell had explored since the 1920s were disappearing under a wave of glass-and-steel construction. Streetscapes seemed to be changing beyond recognition every time he looked.” Lynda Roscoe Hartigan sees a “nostalgic drive to preserve” in Cornell’s films, such as Gnir Rednow and Centuries of June (1955). But it is the desire to make the past present that distinguishes Gnir Rednow from the other short films made about the Third Avenue elevated train between 1953 and 1958. Hal Freeman’s film Echo of an Era (1957) explicitly places this transportation technology in the past when the film’s narrator calls it “indifferent to the rhythm of a changing city.” This contrast was particularly evident through the choice of music: nearly all of these films were silent (perhaps suggesting the relative peacefulness of an El ride compared to one on the subway or in a car). Sometimes an old-fashioned score emphasized the El’s pastness: Carson Davidson's film, Third Avenue El (1955) shows modern images of the El set to harpsichord music. D. A. Pennebaker’s film Daybreak Express (1953) was set to the Duke Ellington song of the same name, suggesting the El’s connection to the passenger train in more explicit terms than most. David Amram, the composer for Echo of an Era said, “During some of the film that showed elegant old horses and carriages, I wrote some of the wildest jazz, and somehow it worked in relationship to the picture.” It “worked,” I argue, because the intention of these filmmakers was to emphasize the El’s connection to other old-fashioned forms of transportation and its disconnect from contemporary life. Truly “salvage ethnographers,” these filmmakers portrayed the El as purely anachronistic, a holdover from the past before “modern” art and architecture had taken over the city. Instead of using technology to articulate forms of perception that should be maintained, this contrast made the images being salvaged seem even stranger and more distant.

Cornell, by contrast, articulated both the discontinuities and the continuities between the past he used and the present he reimagined. Under his defamiliarizing gaze, even the present becomes a sign to be read rather than something that can be taken for granted. In Gnir Rednow, the process of looking becomes one of searching out the few signs that can be recognized at all. Because they are upside down (and because the El had been torn down by the time Cornell was recutting the film), the advertisements that scroll past the windows can no longer be read as part of the commuter’s daily life. When a poster spotted on the El platform is lingered on long enough to be read as The Blackboard Jungle, the viewer experiences a certain amount of relief in seeing a sign that establishes the film in a particular place and time. Cornell’s anti-lyrical film shows
the difficulty of visually possessing an ever-changing city: without that poster, the viewer’s connection to the outside world would be lost. He renders urban sight more difficult in order to foreground it as a historical process. Reversing the film takes even the encounters with people out of the realm of personal vision: the face is abstracted, flattened, and emptied. The reversal makes the spectator work at recognizing what can be seen, acknowledging the cutting off of possibilities for poetic sight in the stripped landscape of Robert Moses’s New York and encouraging the kinds of views of the city that were being shut down by urban development. Here, the film explicitly articulates the anxiety of midcentury artists’ nostalgia: if we keep destroying these structures from the past, how will we even be able to see the present in the dematerialized and dehistoricized space of constant urban renewal? Working in a time and place that championed the ostensibly unmediated subjective views of abstract expressionism, Cornell uses the technology of the El as a way of reconnecting the viewer to the external world and suggesting the difficulty of seeing and recovering history in the American cityscape. Art, he suggests, is one way of retaining traces of the technological past relieved from the burden of efficiency.

Echo of an Era

New Yorkers still navigate the material environments of outdated transportation technologies, as well as the arguments about urban spaces that surround them. Since the mid-1980s, property owners, residents, and rail enthusiasts have debated the fate of the High Line, an elevated freight railway that ran between factories on Manhattan’s Far West Side. The history of the High Line is a history of urban American transportation technology in miniature. Freight was initially delivered on a street-level railroad on Tenth Avenue. This made crossing so dangerous that the street was popularly known as “Death Avenue” and men on horses, called the “West Side Cowboys,” rode in front of the trains on horseback waving flags and warning passers-by. The High Line replaced this train line in the 1930s through funding from the state and city of New York. Interstate shipping by truck rose in popularity in the 1950s, and the High Line became a victim of the standardized and centralized movement of rail technology, just as the passenger and elevated trains were.

The High Line’s shifting meanings, like those of the elevated train, suggest that technologies of transportation are ideal conveyances for the changing material and emotional needs of the city. These parallels are all the more striking since designers consciously tried to avoid them: the “Friends of the High Line” Web site explains that the “structure was designed to go through the center of
blocks, rather than over the avenue, to avoid creating the negative conditions associated with elevated subways.” Nevertheless, as it fell into disrepair and weeds overran the tracks, the High Line’s role as a space for imagining the city echoed that of the Third Avenue El in the 1950s. It mediated opposing visual states through a combination of proximity to and distance from its urban surroundings (see fig. 3). A wilderness penetrating a heavily industrial area, an island of solitude near the busy West Side Highway, the High Line transmuted a space of urban transportation into a space for transportive meditation—albeit for the few who chose to brave the abandoned structure, rather than for the masses who rode (or could ride) the El.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the fate of the structure seemed destined to be the same as that of the Third Avenue El: this time, it impeded economic progress rather than literal movement. However, a group called “Friends of the High Line” formed in 1999. With the help of some celebrities and positive media coverage, the group persuaded the city to preserve the structure and set aside funding for development of a mixed-use open space on the former freight tracks. A design team led by Field Operations and Diller, Scofidio + Renfro was chosen from more than 720 applicants to design the new park space. A new debate has arisen in the wake of these designs, between those who embrace the public space that will be developed and those who fear the new development will eliminate the way of experiencing the city that is possible on the structure in its current state. In some respects, this is a debate about class: the value of businesses and apartments near the High Line will increase exponentially after the development is completed. One critic suggests that “many of the plants and artifacts now flourishing there won’t likely find a home on a polished walkway, made for yipping terriers and baby strollers.” Many of the outsiders who roam the High Line in its wild state feel they will also lose a home.

“In the end, this treetop world, as we know it, will disappear,” says the same critic wary of dogs and strollers, using the language of the “metropolitan dirges” sung fifty years before. City dwellers continue to feel nostalgia for modes of perception that will be lost to urban development. The fear of longtime New York residents—that the city has utterly transformed from a bastion of grimy authenticity to a slick simulacrum—has led them to embrace another anachronistic perch for orienting artistic vision to urban space. The Third Avenue El and the High Line both suggest that anachronistic technologies offer visual alternatives to the top-down organization of American urban space since World War II. Here, the concern is not the imaginary connection between city dwellers, which, after all, would be enhanced by an additional promenade. Instead, it is a connection to wilderness, nature in a state not planned by the likes of Fred-
erick Law Olmsted. The utopian desire surrounding the High Line is an opposition to planning itself, observed even in the development’s planned preservation of “wild spaces” of weeds and tall grasses. The fact that the High Line spontaneously evolved into a nature walk and graffiti- and garbage-strewn outdoor sculpture garden suggests that other things can still spontaneously develop in the city: subcultures, neighborhoods, ideas. The High Line is one of New York City’s few popularly embraced wastelands, places that Stephen Carr and Kevin Lynch call “freer than parks . . . places on the margins.”77 Its very marginality—like that of the El—makes it a site of possible perceptual freedom. “The Plain of Heaven,” a 2005 exhibit by the Creative Time arts organization, used the redevelopment of the High Line as a starting point for art that considered “how we imagine, and long for, inaccessible spaces [and] the way in which we re-mystify the world we already know.”78 Nostalgic urban visuality articulates this longing for inaccessible urban space and unknowable urban life—both as a mystification and as a form of protest and inquiry.

I do not want to suggest that old technologies produce inherently resistant, liberal, or positive ways of seeing the American city. Instead, they point out an
important, and often forgotten, aspect of theorizing visuality—discontinuities in technology’s use and meaning. Critics have understood visuality as it arises through public habituation to technological innovation, but Paula McDowell’s argument about oral and print culture reminds us that “binary models of media shift have never done justice to the complexity of actual lived experience.”

New technologies and new visions of city space always compete with old; we can consider more local and less deterministic versions of urban visuality when we think about how technologies hang around urban space, insisting on the persistence of past relationships to the city. The product of multiple technological obsolescences, the High Line forces us to consider America’s relationship to technology as one that moves beyond innovation and obsolescence. The aesthetic needs fulfilled by technology proceed at a different pace than its planners, producers, or even consumers intend. The temporality of the Third Avenue El as a symbol, imaginative view, and way of knowing city space persisted long after the last passenger disembarked. Urban development can never bring about a total erasure of the past, even in a city that changes with the “extravagant regularity” of New York. Considering technology’s aesthetic residue gives us a more complex map for navigating urban space, tracing the trains of thought that shaped the American city as they cross, trail off, and eventually stop.

Notes
3. “The Rise and Fall of the Elevated Railroad, 1867–1967,” New York Public Library pamphlet, Exhibit June–September 1967. There were still elevated trains in the boroughs of Brooklyn and the Bronx and, most important, an elevated train from Queens that Joseph Cornell took into Manhattan almost every day.
6. Unfortunately, the library no longer has records of what movies were shown in this program. However, both the small number of films about the elevated trains and the familiarity of the current staff with the Brakhage and Cornell films and suggest that one or more of the films I discuss in this article were included on the program.
8. Popular films featuring the El were usually fairly bleak visions of the city, including King Vidor’s The Crowd (MGM, 1928) and Billy Wilder’s The Lost Weekend (Paramount, 1945). Avant-garde films, which I discuss later in this article, are more optimistic.

10. I thank my second anonymous reader for the formulation that my essay’s subject was “the aesthetic afterlife of the El.”


17. The car did not have as pronounced an effect on perception in New York City in this period as it did in the suburbs. See Mark Foster, *Nation on Wheels: The Automobile Culture since 1945* (Belmont, Calif.; Wadsworth, 2003).


20. Svetlana Boym considers nostalgia to be inherently opposed to progress: “At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythm of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress.” *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xv.


22. This is not merely a fanciful comparison: many of the films shot from the El in the 1950s had extended sequences from the “point of view” of the train, shot from the front car’s window with the tracks stretching out through the cityscape.


26. “As we spend more of our lives in interior environments, we are deprived of many natural clues to the passage of day and season. Office and factory buildings, long corridors, and subways are timeless environments, like caves or the deep sea. Light, climate, and visible form are invariant.” Kevin Lynch, *What Time Is This Place?* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1972), 69.

27. For descriptions of the subway’s effect on urban subjectivity in London, see Andrew Thacker, “Imagist Travels in Modernist Space,” *Textual Practice* 7 (Summer 1993): 224–46; for its effect in New York City, see Brooks, *Subway City*, 122–205.
29. Like the passenger train before it, the subway’s regular view and social proscriptions against interpersonal contact led passengers to read for the duration of the journey. For a description of reading on the train as it developed in nineteenth-century Europe, see Wolfgang Schivelbusch, The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 64–69; for an amusing account of American reading practices in the subway (albeit thirty years before the period dealt with in this article), see “Those Who Read in the Subway,” New York Times, June 30, 1929, SM9.
30. The initial discourse in favor of American railroad construction emphasized its connective possibility as an ability to unite the nation. Ward, Railroads and the Character of America, 17.
31. Cornell is even periodized in the past: although he worked from the 1930s to the late 1960s, he has been called Romantic, Symbolist, and Victorian. See Dore Ashton, A Joseph Cornell Album (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), 10; Mary Ann Caws, Joseph Cornell’s Theater of the Mind: Selected Diaries, Letters, and Files (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993), 29; Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, “Joseph Cornell’s Dance with Duality,” in Shadowsplay/Eterniday (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 15. While he worked and exhibited with surrealists who regularly borrowed images and forms from the past (Picasso’s primitivism, say, or Max Ernst’s Victorian etchings in Femme 100 Têtes), Cornell’s appropriations have until quite recently been seen as pure, innocent, magical. Michael Moon’s article “Cornell’s Oralia” does a good job of refuting what he calls the “enchanting innocence line of criticism,” arguing that it is a mode of suppressing the complicated ways in which the boxes work out different forms of (often queer) contemporary desire surrounding fandom in particular. See Michael Moon, “Cornell’s Oralia,” in A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 153. In a similar vein, more recent discussions of Cornell’s work have examined his relationship to contemporary art and popular culture. See Jodi Hauptmann, Joseph Cornell: Stargazing in the Cinema (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999).
32. Cornell, Diaries, Smithsonian Institute, AAA, Reel 1059, Frame 657, January 15, 1953. The “commuting days” Cornell refers to were days when he worked as a fabric salesman in the 1920s and 1930s, riding the Third Avenue El up and down the Bowery with his samples.
34. P. Adams Sitney, “The Cinematic Gaze of Joseph Cornell,” in Joseph Cornell, ed. Kynaston McShine (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 80. Notably, Sitney is one of the few critics to explicitly refute perceptions of Cornell as nostalgic (69): “Cornell was not a nostalgist, a recluse, or a naif, even though he knew how to play those roles expertly. He was a dialectician of experience.”
35. Hegeman describes salvage ethnography as “recording ways of life that are seen to be dying out in the face of encroaching assimilation and modernization.” Susan Hegeman, “The Dry Salvages,” in Patterns for America: Modernism and the Concept of Culture (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 34.
37. Ibid., 65–67.
39. For the most influential discussion of the passenger train’s panoramic visuality, see Schivelbusch, The Railway Journey, 52–69; for a description of American panoramic train travel, see Ward, Railroads and the Character of America, 131, where he says, “Americans were becoming a blur as they sped past one another.” For discussions of panoramic visuality as it affected modern subjectivity, see Friedberg, Window Shopping, 20–29; Mary Anne Doane, “When the Direction of the Force Acting on the Body Is Changed: The Moving Image,” Wide Angle 7.1–2 (1985): 42–44; Lynne Kirby, Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 7.
43. This attention to the horizontal gaze may be particularly pronounced in the later period because the Third Avenue El chiefly ran through residential areas and was quite close to the apartment windows in those areas.
44. “Third Avenue El.”
45. There is an important caveat to this feeling of connection—in all of the films, songs, and novels that I’ve encountered, it is felt only by people riding the trains. In the few instances when the El is represented from the perspective of a Bowery apartment, it is generally an oppressive urban force (see Kirby, *Parallel Tracks*, 165). The relationship of apartment dwellers to the technology of the El is a subject for another study—one that pays as much attention to economic realities as it does to aesthetic-political construction of fantasy spaces. However, this dramatic difference reminds us that technologies do not have a singular meaning, even within a fairly circumscribed population like Manhattan residents.
47. Fischer, *America Calling*, 266, suggests that the telephone “solidified and deepened [preexisting] social relations.”
48. This interest is epitomized by the last shot’s rack focus, which begins on the sight seen through a train window and becomes more and more blurry until the focus is on the dusty and scratched glass of the window itself.
56. Ibid.
62. See Caro, *The Power Broker*, particularly chapters 41 and 42, for details of Robert Moses losing ground after struggles in the 1950s over public housing and the Tavern on the Green.
63. It also suggests a close reading of the title’s temporality: *Gnir* could be read as “near” and *Rednow* reveals “now.”
64. The railroad industry suffered particularly in relation to road-based freight because of the latter’s flexibility and decentralization. See Albro Martin, *Railroads Triumphant: The Growth, Rejection, and...
Rebirth of a Vital American Force (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 358–59. Foster says that planners were consciously rejecting the subway and the El as solutions to problems of urban congestion because of their lack of flexibility compared to the car (64). Curiously, the subway’s centralization and standardization did not impede its popularity.

65. Cornell’s Hotel boxes are the first works in which he explores the imaginary escape from self at the heart of the nineteenth century’s regulated forms of travel. Called “Hotel” boxes because each includes a scrap of paper with a hotel name collaged on one of the walls, these boxes connect Cornell’s interest in travel with his exploration of interiority.

66. Box 77, Smithsonian American Art Museum.

67. The Wonder Ring, in comparison, begins with its title and Brakhage’s name scratched into the leader. This gesture can be read both as a mark of possession as well as an introduction to the tactile and perceptually personal quality of the film.

68. Joseph Cornell loved T. S. Eliot. His library at the Smithsonian includes a handmade book with all of the Four Quartets written in painstaking calligraphy.


72. Pennebaker’s film fits somewhere between these two categories: while his use of swing music suggests an interest in the El as anachronism, he also uses the train as a visual analogue for cinema itself, focusing on the flickering images seen through a moving El train and the kaleidoscopic views of the city made possible by its elevation.


