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The Last Clean Shirt
by Alfred Leslie & Frank O’Hara

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In 1964, American painter and film maker Alfred Leslie completed the movie The Last Clean Shirt with subtitles by poet Frank O’Hara. The film was first shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1964 and later that year at the Lincoln Center in New York, causing an uproar among the audience. The movie shows two characters, a black man and a white woman, driving around Manhattan in a convertible car. The Last Clean Shirt is a true collaboration between the images of a film maker and the words of a poet since Alfred Leslie used lines by Frank O’Hara as subtitles to the dialogue or rather the monologue: the woman is indeed the only character who speaks and she furthermore expresses herself in Finnish gibberish, which demanded that subtitles be added.

Where they’ve come from. We’re not even up to 23rd Street yet.
Sings a little song in middle. “I hate driving.”
(Frank O’Hara, “The Sentimental Units,” Collected Poems, 467)
According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a territory is “the extent of the land belonging to or under the jurisdiction of a ruler or State.” It can also be “an area defended by an animal or group of animals against others of the same species or an area defended by a team or player in a game.” Finally, a territory is “a tract of land, a district of undefined boundaries; a region” and “an area of knowledge, a sphere of thought or action, a province.” The film engages some of these notions such as the idea that a territory has to be fought for, or claimed, that it is an area defined by rules and norms. Such rules and norms can however be redefined as in a game. In *The Last Clean Shirt*, the territory of the city (Manhattan) is superseded by more formal and virtual territories, by the unfolding of images and subtitles: the spaces that matter in the film are more literary and artistic than physical. The idea of bifurcation, of swerving is of the essence in the movie. Although the car itself only makes three turns all in all (including a U-turn), the turning, swerving and skidding takes place elsewhere, in the tense articulation of words and images: such is the uncharted territory that Leslie and O’Hara invite us to explore.

We can see *The Last Clean Shirt* as a parodic road movie and we might wonder if we are not driving on a side street instead of on the main street: if we accept the ride we are offered, we soon veer off and hit unknown roads towards metaphorical and virtual territories.
The Last Clean Shirt was even more avant-garde or visionary than critics were able to see at the time: it is not merely a film but a new form of work of art, a new literary object, in the wake of the simultaneous poem invented by Blaise Cendrars. We might then wonder how the film goes beyond simultaneity in the mapping of a new artistic space created between images and words. Lastly, we might contend that The Last Clean Shirt had a stab at creating a form of "intermedia" space.

"Use alternate route": such could be the road sign posted by Alfred Leslie at the beginning of the movie. Indeed the car does not seem to go anywhere although we see it moving. The road trip begins on Astor Place in Manhattan: the car goes one block south, makes a U turn at the level of 6th Street (it goes around Cooper Union), goes up Third Avenue, stays on Third Avenue until it hits 34th Street, turns left on 34th Street until it reaches Park Avenue, makes a right turn and parks on 34th Street and Park Avenue in front of Macy’s department store. The film repeats this scene three times. In the first part of the triptych, we can hear the woman talk to the driver in Finnish gibberish. Since we do not understand a word, we are forced to focus on the purely eventless trip: nothing ever diverts our attention from the monotony of the road. The second part of the film has us go back to Astor Place and start again, but this time we can read the subtitles which tell us...
what the woman is saying. The third part is yet another return to Astor Place, the subtitles now expressing the silent driver’s thoughts. There is no action in the movie besides the gesticulations and verbal outpouring of the woman sitting in the car.

The Last Clean Shirt is a parodic road movie in the sense that the car is the defining frame of the screen: the camera is on the back seat and the spectators are given a ride three consecutive times. A road movie promises to be rewarding entertainment-wise: the narrative line is usually geared towards a climactic end and all along the road numerous events are supposed to take place. The problem here is that there is no road: we only have to make do with Third Avenue, which is a street in an urban environment. Besides, it seems that the urban environment of Manhattan itself is totally blurred out of vision. We cannot make anything out and sadly have to focus on our two traveling companions. The other problem is that we are not allowed to leave the car since the camera is set in the back seat and does not move. The windshield and the back of the front seats frame the screen both vertically and horizontally: the spectator is trapped, which makes for a strange feeling of claustrophobia. The irony of the situation is that the camera only moves once, towards the end of each section of the film, when the car reaches a traffic light and we are shown a WALK sign. “WALK”: this is precisely what we cannot do as spectators; we are prisoners of this vehicle which moves at a regular, nondescript speed.

We are being taken for a ride: after driving around three times we are entitled to wonder if we are not on the wrong street/avenue after all. One should remember that one of Frank O’Hara’s great poems is “Second Avenue” which runs parallel to Third Avenue. Going up Third Avenue instead of going down Second Avenue might be a hint that Alfred Leslie and Frank O’Hara have indeed taken us in. This also hints at the etymology of “parody,” which means parallel discourse. Third Avenue runs parallel to “Second Avenue” and the subtitles of the film echo the long poem that Frank O’Hara wrote in 1953.  

Section 3 of the poem reads:

Blue negroes on the verge of a true foreignness
escape nevertheless the chromaticism of occidental death
by traffic, oh children bereaved of their doped carts
and priests with lips like mutton in their bedrooms at dawn!
and falling into a sea of asphalt abuse which is precisely life
in these provinces printed everywhere with the flag “Nobody”

We may wonder if both characters, the black man and the white woman, are not on the verge of a true foreignness. Yet they do escape “the chromaticism of occidental death” since the movie is in black and white. The Last Clean Shirt as parodic movie may be trying to warn us against the “sea of asphalt abuse which is precisely life.”
A parody provides a critical discourse which allows one to step back and reflect. Not only does the film parody the road movie genre, but it also mimics moral fables, it undermines existential discourse and philosophical grandiloquence. The subtitles undermine the ideas of responsibility, freedom and guilt:

* You don't say that the victim is responsible
* for a concentration camp
  or a Mack truck

If “it’s not in us it’s in the situation” as the subtitles say, the individual seems to have limited leeway, independence or freedom. Such notions as responsibility and guilt are actually blown apart by the irrelevance of comparisons and juxtapositions. The subtitles go against the grain of any straightforward lamenting over the loss of meaning of the world. The woman says:

* I really am upset about things
* I mean it’s a rotten life
* Everything that goes on around you
  is ridiculous

The ambiguous nature of the subtitles is that they both stage the ridiculous aspects of life and the ridiculous nature of ponderous statements about life. Time plays an important part in the movie: at the very beginning the driver tapes a clock onto the dashboard. At the beginning of section 3, the subtitles read:

* I could do this...
* I could do this a lot easier
  with CHEWING gum.

Such is Frank O’Hara and Alfred Leslie’s way of trying to raise awareness about such issues without yielding to self-indulgent whining: parody and humor come to the rescue. The spectator is relieved to see that the movie might become more eventful at the beginning of section 2 when the following subtitle appears on the screen: “and one Sunday I will be shot.” But his hopes are shattered when the following subtitle appears: “brushing my teeth.” Comic relief comes to the rescue of uneventfulness. The shooting we usually find in film noir or in western movies is here applied to everyday life:
listen, I want you
to promise me something,

*If I ever get as fat as Eunice,
shoot me,*

*Don’t ask me about it.
Just shoot.*

We are therefore invited to take an alternate route. We had been warned, though, at the very beginning of the movie by the black screen and the white label saying EDU. The soundtrack to this preliminary image was a voice singing James R. Lowell’s poem “Once to Every Man and Nation” followed by gusts of wind, which set the tone for the rest of the movie:

*Once to every man and nation*
*Comes the moment to decide*
*In the strife of truth with falsehood*
*For the good or evil side*
*Then it is the brave man chooses.*
*While the coward stands aside*
*And the choice goes by forever*

The film is therefore a parody of a foreign educational movie with a hint of a mock-heroic tone, as Alfred Leslie confirms:

*The first moment you see it, you hear a language that you may or may not get. You may or may not realize that it’s a fake language, you may or may not understand the clues that are offered at the very opening of the film […] All of that means to, in a Brechtian sense, to hank you in place and make sure you’re going to stay there and make a choice because a lot of the times when you get it you have to say to yourself: “am I going to stay or am I going to leave?” This is a gun that’s being put to your head like the Dada poets and threatening you and saying: “you gotta pay attention to what’s going on at the beginning of the turmoil in the country culturally and politically” […] “You gotta pay attention,” I mean it means something, you read those newspapers and maybe you need to understand that what’s being printed in those newspapers is not true and that you have to hold back a little bit.”*

The parodic tone of the movie therefore serves a purpose: although the film pokes fun at grandiloquence and moral ponderousness, it still seeks ways to address ethical and political issues.

In that perspective, one of the key subtitles is capitalized: NEVERTHELESS. It echoes Frank O’Hara’s long poem “Biotherm (for Bill Berkson)” where one can read: “NEVERTHELESS (thank you, Aristotle).” (CP 436) NEVERTHELESS is central in The Last Clean Shirt because it links the film as parody to the film as moral fable: in spite of all the fun
Alfred Leslie and Frank O’Hara are having at debunking seriousness and metaphysical reflections, they do not shirk ethical issues which they deal with in an indirect and therefore more elegant way. “The sea of asphalt abuse” of the poem “Second Avenue” is also present on Third Avenue: we are presented with the irony of being in a car, of not being able to leave it, of driving and not going anywhere. This can be understood as an ironical comment on the American society of the fifties and sixties, on the emerging consumer culture and car industry. The car is seen as a potential danger: “I think the license plate / has a bomb in it” is one of the subtitles to the driver’s thoughts. The trajectory of the car is also socially questionable: it goes from the lower class neighborhood of the East Village to posh Midtown Manhattan, parking in front of Macy’s department store.

However, “[t]he sea of asphalt abuse” is there, it is “precisely life” and one has to acknowledge it: refusing it or lamenting over it will do no good, one has to make do with it. The subtitle “I am ashamed of my century / for being so entertaining” is excerpted from the end of the poem “Naphtha” (CP 338) which concludes on this line (not included in the film): “but I have to smile.” Alfred Leslie and Frank O’Hara are smiling at the very same time they are taking stock of the situation. It is interesting that another subtitle “I know so much about things, I / accept so much it’s like vomiting” should come from “Spleen” (CP 187), another poem by Frank O’Hara. By using such lines in the same artistic space, Frank O’Hara stages the ins and outs of his own ethical grounds, he sums up the ambivalence of his outlook on life and on the society he lives in: he hovers between the refusal of excess, “it’s just that things get too much,” and the necessity to accept the consumer world and live in it. The names of Hollywood stars Elke Sommer and Loretta Young shine on the black and white screen of The Last Clean Shirt, a reminder that the film is an alternate route that we have chosen: we are in a parallel black and white world where we can reflect upon our civilization.

The tension between accepting and refusing what one can rapidly sum up as the consumer society is one of the principles of the film. We could even consider that Alfred Leslie and Frank O’Hara’s answer to that tension is the perspective they offer on boredom. The film itself could be considered as a variation on boredom: as Alfred Leslie pointed out in the passage quoted above, the spectator soon has to make up his mind as to whether he is going to refuse the cinematic boredom he is subjected to and leave the cinema. Whereas both characters do not go anywhere, the subtitles are a display of geographic references such as Africa and China and of various references to the glittery entertainment world. The fact that subtitles move from one geographical reference to another is telling: due to space constraints on the screen, subtitles have to be short and fragmentary. This “excerpt format” of the subtitles perfectly fits this (travel) catalogue of a
world where places are reduced to mere clichés, since one lacks the time and interest to stay in one place and explore. The Last Clean Shirt seems to be a critical commentary of the advent of the new leisure and traveling classes of the 1950s and 1960s:

*What I really would like to do
is go to Havana
*
*for a weekend—
*
*like Betty Grable (*).*

Betty Grable is a movie star who acted in such movies as Million Dollar Legs (1939), Down Argentine Way (1940) and Song of the Islands (1942). The latter films are set in exotic settings. The question mark in the above subtitle may be proof that Frank O’Hara was not quite sure of the actress (or the movie) he wanted to quote. There was a movie of the same period called Week-end in Havana (1941) directed by Walter Lang which starred Carmen Miranda and Alice Faye.

Frank O’Hara and Alfred Leslie are staging this fake postcard world and underlining its cheap exoticism. The Last Clean Shirt and its subtitles bank on the economy and rapidity of cliches that they use at the same time as they subvert them: in the subtitles quoted above the emphatic tone “really” contrasts with the duration of the stay “for a weekend” as though going to Havana was tantamount to going to the local grocery store, a mere trifle. What Leslie and O’Hara are targeting here is the blasé conception of life such a consumer world implies. Shortly after the scene just quoted, one can read:

*I would like to think
that you were driving us
*
*all through space
to some peculiar place
*
*where everyone would be happy
and safe and boring,
*
*boring, in a new way
*
*that the century
does not know about yet.
Alfred Leslie and Frank O’Hara are equating the emerging consumer society with a world of planned boredom, planned in such a way that one can only wish for things: “I would like to think / that…” The real thing is at several removes, we are being moved away from the center of things by a generalized packaged boredom: “happy and safe […] in a new way / that the century / does not know about yet.” Such words seem quite prophetic of the 21st century entertainment world. The current craze, reality TV, may very well be an illustration of the above quotations: how life has been made into a safe, planned and packaged commodity that can be shown on television as “real life.” As in The Last Clean Shirt where the spectator can only focus on the two people in the car and therefore assumes a voyeuristic position, the 21st century spectator is also hijacked into watching something that has been carefully planned although it is presented as real life, i.e. unpredictable. It does not seem far fetched to say that Frank O’Hara and Alfred Leslie had foreseen some of these elements in their film. Boredom becomes the focal point of these issues: what is boring? Can boredom wake one up? Are we kept in a state of boredom or in a state of entertained boredom? Are there several forms of boredom?

In the interview, Alfred Leslie said that he wanted people to pay attention whereas the entertainment world encourages them to be passive. One cannot really say that the film is boring, the film stages boredom as a means to raise people’s awareness. The subtitle “boring in a new way” can be understood in two opposite ways: boring in a way that defeats boredom and excites intelligence. Such is the kind of philosophical, almost maieutic boredom staged by The Last Clean Shirt. The other kind of boredom would be the corporate, manufactured and disguised boredom that we are served everyday by the entertainment industry. Frank O’Hara was perfectly aware of the dangers of boredom and his analysis of David Smith’s sculptures resonates with his subtitles for The Last Clean Shirt:

[David Smith’s sculptures] have no boring views: circle them as you may, they are never napping. They present a total attention and they are telling you that that is the way to be. On guard. In a sense they are benign, because they offer themselves for your pleasure. But beneath that kindness is a warning: don’t be bored, don’t be lazy, don’t be trivial and don’t be proud. The slightest loss of attention leads to death. The primary passion in these sculptures is to avert catastrophe, or to sink beneath it in a major way. So, as with the Greeks, it is a tragic art.

(What’s With Modern Art? 27; emphasis mine)

We might be fooled by the uneventfulness of the film The Last Clean Shirt. It is true that nothing goes on on the surface, although the surface here begs to be defined. Like David Smith’s sculptures, The Last Clean Shirt has no boring views if you watch the film as you would look at a painting.
you listen to the film or if you read the film, you won’t be bored and you won’t be lazy. We could even say that the primary passion of this film is to avert catastrophe too: better than any theorizing of the so-called “post-modern” world, the film stages it and takes it apart. The question is, is it possible to avert catastrophe? Are we or the characters already dead, as the title to the film *The Last Clean Shirt*, the funerary hymn and other references to death might suggest? And how can we avoid catastrophe? Alfred Leslie said “I wanted to make this construct in which the audience would be forewarned and then if they didn’t, they would just enter into the musicality of language” (Interview). The choice is ours to consider this film as a new kind of work of art or not.

*The Last Clean Shirt* is a collaboration between someone who is “primarily” a painter, Alfred Leslie, and someone who was “primarily” a poet, Frank O’Hara. We should however underline the fact that both men did not work side by side: Alfred Leslie shot the film first, then showed it to Frank O’Hara and commissioned lines from him. It may therefore be more precise to say that images and words work together side by side in the movie.

The film is informed by a painter’s vision: the camera is set in such a way that the car and the road end up making an almost abstract composition. Alfred Leslie manages to get a two-dimensional effect out of a three-dimensional medium, cinema: *The Last Clean Shirt* is the staging of the taking apart and flattening of the moving image. The film betrays the concerns of the painter: lines, planes and dimensions are carefully organized on the screen and enter a field of tension. The spectator can see vertical lines: the characters, the street, the buildings, the windshield frame and the hands of the clock. Horizontal lines also come into play: the subtitles, the upper part of the seats and of the windshield and a series of small horizontal lines can be seen on different parts of the screen. Circularity also finds its place with the clock, the wheel and various buttons on the dashboard of the car. There seems to be no depth, no relief whatsoever on the screen. It is as though Alfred Leslie went back to the early years of cinema to show us that what we take for granted i.e. verisimilitude, lifelikeness and 3-D relief are but constructs, mere illusions. Alfred Leslie seems to hint at old movies where we see characters in a plane with the sky or the scenery projected behind them on a screen for reality’s sake.

The situation is reversed in *The Last Clean Shirt*: the characters are turning their backs to us. What is traditionally the backdrop in early movies here becomes the front (of the car, the road) with an equal lack of perspective. The car is therefore going forward within the movie, but
backwards if one considers the backdrop/front situation. Front and back are inverted. It is as though the avenue itself was a mere illusion projected on the screen—or on the windshield which becomes a second screen—to give us the illusion that we are going somewhere. Everything has been thought out to prevent the birth of perspective: the rearview mirror does not reflect anything and the clock fastened to the dashboard becomes a visual stumbling block, a constant reminder that the main axis is the linear unfolding of time. The white line of the subtitles at the bottom of the screen adds to the flatness of the film: “This apparent aid to comprehension […] has the effect not merely of distraction but of emphasizing the plane of the film and of the screen, insisting upon the two dimensionalities” (French 55). Both characters and spectators therefore remain stuck inside this immediate foreground, which is demanding on vision and perception. We may wonder if perspective itself, if the escape hatch may not be found within the subtitles themselves.

In the interaction between images and subtitles, The Last Clean Shirt becomes a new kind of work of art, a new literary object in the wake of Blaise Cendrars’s “poème simultané,” La Prose du Transsibérien. This almost becomes an ironical reference here since in the film the characters can hardly be said to embark on an epic. However, the epic takes place in language itself, what with the references to China, Africa, the frenzy and diversity of the quotes and the mock-moral dimension which filters through. Seeing The Last Clean Shirt as a simultaneous poem underlines the “generic transgression” between language and images. According to Jacques Debrot “generic transgression” lies at the heart of the collaboration between Frank O’Hara and the painters he worked with (Debrot 67-81). The Last Clean Shirt is yet another instance of this, and it even takes the interaction between language and image to an unprecedented level.

There are several definitions of simultaneity in connection with literature and poetry. To Robert Delaunay, “simultanéité” as a concept was first applied to colors on a canvas:

[Robert Delaunay’s] doctrine of “simultanéism” [was] the dynamic counterpoint of otherwise dissonant colors when observed in complementarity. La Prose du Transsibérien is a simultaneous book in that the reader takes in, or is meant to take in, text and image simultaneously; the eye travels back and forth between [Sonia] Delaunay’s colored forms and Cendrars’s words.

(Clay & Rothenberg 163)

In her article “William Carlos Williams / Frank O’Hara: de l’objectivisme au personnisme,” Hélène Aji shows that William Carlos Williams, one of Frank O’Hara’s “great predecessors,” had already been influenced by simultanéist paintings:
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On trouve en fait chez Williams la tentative de faire la synthèse entre deux grandes tendances de l’art contemporain. D’une part, le simultanéisme est envisagé sous deux angles particuliers : le travail des cubistes comme Braque ou Picasso visant à donner simultanément la représentation des différentes figures d’une forme vues sous des angles différents ; et le travail des futuristes visant à donner simultanément la représentation de plusieurs formes d’une même figure.

(Aji 27)

The Last Clean Shirt is a sum of simultaneous poems if we take one still and one subtitle to be one poetic unit. If you place the subtitles one above the other and add them up, you end up forming a long vertical poem that could be compared to Cendrars’s poem. Frank O’Hara knew Blaise Cendrars’s work and was inspired by it. He also refers to Sonia Delaunay in his poem “Naphtha”.16 Alfred Leslie and Frank O’Hara’s The Last Clean Shirt carries the principle of the simultaneous poem into the age of cinema, underlining and undermining the quality of the moving image in its relationship to language, beyond simultaneity. But how does it all move? How are subtitles and images articulated in the unfolding of the film?

During the first part of the film, the spectator watches the film without being told what it all means. In section 2, he or she watches it again with the subtitles to the woman’s speech and, in section 3, with the subtitles to the man’s thoughts, in a mock-pedagogical manner. We may consider that subtitles are the main obstacle to movement in the film: they form an immediate foreground. The movement of the car along vertical lines and the movement of the eyes reading the subtitles along horizontal lines conflict: both dimensions push and pull. Reading the subtitles takes vision away from the image and allows us to leave the confines of the car. However, such a conflict between image and language seems to be “for the fun of it” since we do not miss any of the “action” on the screen by focusing on the subtitles: the images are one monotonous flow. The film becomes a lesson in reading, a lesson on the specificity of images and words. Whereas subtitles seem to be intransitive in their physicality (they do not lead vision anywhere when you look at them), they become transitive as soon as you start reading them. Similarly, whereas images seem to be transitive in their physicality as they seem to lead to the improbable end of Third Avenue, they seem intransitive if you question perspective in the film. Alfred Leslie was totally aware of the conflicting natures of language and images. He commented: “I used his lines against the image and what I would do there is the image would be in front of me, I had all these lines piled up, I’d written them all out so that the longest line would fit on the paper that I had.”17

The aim of simultaneity in a work of art was at first, according to Boccioni in his 1912 manifesto, to bring about “the possibility of representing successive stages of motion in linear sequence” (Clay & Rothenberg 163). This obviously was to be applied to painting and not to
cinema. The genius of Alfred Leslie is to have applied that principle to film. Film is all about representing successive stages of motion so that they all blur into motion itself: you cannot make out stage A from stage B from stage C, they are all part of movement. In *The Last Clean Shirt* however, Alfred Leslie paradoxically manages to freeze and dissect movement by repeating three times the tedious drive on Third Avenue. Furthermore, it is hard to isolate sequences in the film, you can sum it up by one or two stills at most, since the camera does not change and the characters barely move. Alfred Leslie and Frank O’Hara reinsert linear sequence and therefore discontinuity within the subtitles made up of discreet units of language. Leslie uses the subtitles as elements of rhythm and punctuation in the film: they allow time variations. *The Last Clean Shirt* as a simultaneous poem pits the continuity of images against the discontinuity of language and maintains this tension until the very end: motion is not where we expect it. Successive stages of motion are to be found and made out in language only.

The question then raised by the movie is: can one read and see at the same time? Can one see a word or can one read an image? Are shapes articulate? Or in other words, can intransitivity or immediacy become transitive and mediated? Are both dimensions exclusive of each other?

Alfred Leslie gives us a hint towards the end of the movie, when the car reaches a traffic light. The camera moves for the first and last time to focus on the sign “WALK”. It is as though language had trickled into the image. However, the sign “WALK” cannot be decomposed; it is no longer made of letters, “WALK” becomes an image that we do not read but see and instantly recognize. Language is in that case no longer discreet. This absorption of language within the image marks the end of movement in the movie and a funerary hymn can be heard at the same time. What Alfred Leslie is showing us here is an instance of language that no longer needs to be spelled out in order to be understood. He is showing us a new kind of immediate language, which is a reflection on the presence of language in the landscape and its efficiency since one does not so much need to read as to see. This is also linked to the idea of the passivity of the viewer: whereas the spectators of *The Last Clean Shirt* have strained their eyes to read the subtitles for twenty minutes in order to understand what is going on, they are suddenly and immediately given an order. This could be Alfred Leslie releasing the spectators. We have been taken for a ride and we have undergone an educative process, we have been taught not to take things at face value: we are now free to walk by ourselves, we have completed our training in skepticism.

What is insidious here is that Alfred Leslie is using illusion, i.e. language mediated by two screens, to give us an order: language is camouflaging itself as an image to urge us to take action. Once again the question here is one of choice: should we obey this kind of immediate
language, which is that of public notices, of law and order, of publicity, of commercial language? The tension between subtitles and images is gone, language has been consumed and absorbed by images, and Alfred Leslie and Frank O’Hara are urging us to think about it. Language is no longer here to oppose its discrete units to the imperialistic nature and violent immediacy of images. All of *The Last Clean Shirt* as a work of art and literary object is geared towards this final shift of the camera.²⁰

* The movie maps a new artistic and textual space almost thirty years before the advent of the internet and the theorizing of hypertextuality. What is interesting in *The Last Clean Shirt*, if we consider it as a simultaneous poem is that the page disappears to the benefit of the screen: the subtitles are not actually printed on the screen but superimposed on the moving image. The subtitles themselves do not move, they appear and disappear according to a frequency that varies in the movie. The text does not take shape in relation to a motionless page but in relation to a moving image.

Recent criticism on Frank O’Hara and film or art has focused on the polymorphous aspect of his work, on the fact that he never shied away from testing his language against other media. In *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O’Hara*, Hazel Smith develops the notion of “hyperscape” which is “a vein-like network in which differences coalesce, only immediately to fall asunder again” (Smith 12). *The Last Clean Shirt* would have been a perfect case in point for this idea of a vein-line network of differences. Just as the images are not a direct rendering of reality but a sequence of images (therefore extracts of images of reality), the subtitles constitute a network that refers to Frank O’Hara’s work as a whole. During the interview I conducted with him, Alfred Leslie told me that he had commissioned the subtitles from Frank O’Hara for the film. As one reads them, a strange impression sets in. There is the overall feeling of discontinuity as no subtitle or group of subtitles logically connects with other subtitles. Yet there is a strange feeling that a connection of another kind exists: there is something else to which we do not have access, a backdrop against which the disrupted narrative line of *The Last Clean Shirt* takes a denser meaning. Indeed, besides recurrent words that one finds both in the subtitles and in *The Collected Poems*,²¹ many subtitles are direct quotations of poems such as “Death,”²² “Spleen,”²³ “Ode to Michael Goldberg (‘s Birth and Other Births),”²⁴ “Ode on Causality,”²⁵ “Naphtha,”²⁶ “Biotherm (for Bill Berkson),”²⁷ “The Sentimental Units,”²⁸ and other poems, so that it is possible to establish a concordance of the movie *The Last Clean Shirt* with *The Collected Poems*. It is all the more interesting as *The Collected Poems* did not exist as such before Frank O’Hara’s death (they were first published...
in 1971). *The Last Clean Shirt* provides us with a personal anthology edited by the poet himself. Only it is a secret anthology, a mask of Frank O’Hara since one has to either remember the poems or go back to the book and read them. Hazel Smith writes “there is also a simultaneity about O’Hara’s production which works against the idea of an evolution of style, because he often moved from one type of writing to another [...] and many of the poems draw together a number of different modes of writing” (Smith 48-49). Frank O’Hara takes this simultaneity to another level in *The Last Clean Shirt* by only giving us lines from some of his poems, a Frank O’Hara sampler, a list of links to a would-be self-edited Frank O’Hara reader.29

*The Last Clean Shirt* leaves no dimension, no space, no territory unturned in an effort to show us that the most interesting line between two points is not necessarily a straight one. The film ceaselessly explores the infinite number of lines that exist between two points, whether it be between start and finish, between Astor Place and Midtown or between images and words, between words and more words. There is no precise turning point in the film, no climax, no dénouement. Instead, turning becomes a method or even a way to approach things. Swerving is a step that one takes to chart new territories on their own grounds. In the end, it may be the most efficient way to reach new points and connect them together.

In 1966, writer, artist and publisher Dick Higgins published a small pamphlet, “Intermedia,” in which he stressed the political nature of the separation of the arts. The beginning of his essay could be a comment on *The Last Clean Shirt* which he may have seen:

> Much of the best work being produced today seems to fall between media. This is no accident. The concept of the separation between media rose in the Renaissance. The idea that a painting is made of paint on a canvas or that a sculpture should not be painted seems characteristic of the kind of social thought—categorizing and dividing society into nobility with its various subdivisions, untitled gentry, artisans, serfs and landless workers—which we call the feudal conception of the Great Chain of Being. [...] However, the social problems that characterize our time, as opposed to the political ones, no longer allow a compartmentalized approach. We are approaching the dawn of a classless society, to which separation into rigid categories is absolutely irrelevant.30

*The Last Clean Shirt* as a film could be considered as a manifesto against separateness, against separations of any kind. In the first section of the movie, the subtitles read:

> *I was thinking about India just now...*
> *I think they should build a Great Wall like China.*
And then the Chinese could build another one—
maybe even bigger if they’re feeling so ambitious
It would keep everybody busy.
And the Africans can go on building dams.

Walling off, fencing off is here seen as an activity in itself, devoid of any other finality than that of separating as we are not told what is separated. This does not mean that Alfred Leslie or Frank O’Hara would have accepted the Benetton-like borderless world that is being marketed today. This world—our world—where commercial discourse celebrates difference by reducing the world to a fashion catalogue of clichés and of types, therefore turning the so-called diversity into an easily recognizable and classifiable product, is to some extent the world that Alfred Leslie and Frank O’Hara foresee and undermine in the film.

Alfred Leslie and Frank O’Hara take the problem to an abstract and philosophical level by using the subtitle “It is the nature of us all to want to be unconnected” as a refrain that runs through The Last Clean Shirt. Fighting against fragmentation is high on the priority list as the reference to Humpty Dumpty reminds us:

It’s the nature of us all
to want to be unconnected…
to want to be unconnected…
And you should pull us all together
Like Humpty Dumpty
or something.

Establishing connections, bridging the gaps, putting things back together again is therefore seen in the light of parody, what with the reference to “Humpty Dumpty or something” or the ridiculous juxtaposition of one’s mother and World War II. The repetition of the refrain “It’s the nature of us all to want to be unconnected” may also be parodic of post-World War II
works of art or films aiming at showing the loss of unity of man after the traumatic experience of the war. This “unconnectedness” constantly referred to is paradoxically a state which is desired and not attained: “to want to be unconnected.” If this movie is against separateness, it does not advocate any form of unity whatsoever, it begs us to reflect on the nature of the link or connection we want to establish, or not establish. As spectators, we are given the choice.

_The Last Clean Shirt_ is a film about choice, a do-it-yourself movie: it is a lesson on the meaning of alternative. “I have the other idea about guilt,” one of the lines often repeated, becomes “You have the other idea about guilt” in the very last section. As spectators we come to have the other idea about guilt without having been told what the main one is, or what guilt in itself is. In the end, what may be important in the film _The Last Clean Shirt_ is to always try and have the other idea (about all and everything) to always be different (and not indifferent) to oneself and the world.

**WORKS CITED**


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The term “intermedia” is here borrowed from Dick Higgins’s essay “Synesthesia & Intersenses: Intermedia” originally published in *Something Else Newsletter* 1, 1 (Something Else Press, 1966). It has been reprinted as a chapter in Dick Higgins, *Horizons, the Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia*. In the essay, Dick Higgins writes that he borrowed the word “intermedia” from Coleridge.

2. The poem and the subtitles have many words in common such as “zoo,” “albatross,” “butter,” “ice,” etc.

3. Frank O’Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara* (141). Subsequent references to *The Collected Poems* will be indicated by the abbreviation CP.

4. The “*” symbol indicates that subtitles are not shown on the same screen/image.

5. In an interview with Edward Lucie Smith, Frank O’Hara comments on Robert Lowell’s poetry: “I think Lowell has […] a confessional manner which [lets him] get away with things that are really just plain bad but you’re supposed to be interested because he’s supposed to be so upset.” (*Standing Still And Walking in New York*, 13).

6. It is interesting to note that the subtitle “and one Sunday I will be shot / brushing my teeth” comes from the poem “Pearl Harbor” (CP 233) originally titled “On Seeing From Here to Eternity” (“Notes on the Poems,” CP 536). *The Last Clean Shirt* thus indirectly hints at the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in the 1953 film directed by Fred Zinnemann. For a thorough analysis of the poem “Pearl Harbor” in connection with the film, see Mark Goble, “Our Country’s Black and White Past: Film and the Figures of History in Frank O’Hara.


8. It should be added, however, that once Frank O’Hara gave his lines to Alfred Leslie for the movie, Alfred Leslie is the one who arranged them according to the different image sequences: “I was a subsequent director of his speech which I would formalize and fix it in time.” (Interview February 6th, 2003).

9. Quoting the names of actresses came to be seen as a trademark of Frank O’Hara’s later work.

10. The name of Jonas Mekas “Jonas Mekas where are you / I’m worried” is also a reference to cinema. Jonas Mekas was a film critic and a film maker converted to avant-garde cinema by Alfred Leslie’s film *Pull My Daisy*. Jonas Mekas went on to create the Anthology Film Archive.

11. It has been brought to my attention that the reference to the Havana in the film is politically charged. Frank O’Hara has unjustly been criticized for being apolitical in his writing although his work constantly hints at the political and international context of his time. Here we have a clear example of the political aspect of his poetry: the reference to the Havana may refer to the failed invasion of Cuba in April 1961, thus lacing the film with implicit criticism of the foreign policy of the United States during the Cold War. Subsequent references to China and Africa can also be understood in this light. Finally, the quick weekend in Havana may also be an ironical reference to Cuba as “America’s brothel” before the Fidel Castro era.

12. The last clean shirt is the shirt that a deceased person is dressed in when buried.

13. By “primarily” I mean here that the bulk of the artistic production of Alfred Leslie is paintings and the bulk of O’Hara’s production is poetry.

14. Philip French in his 1964 article on *The Last Clean Shirt* had already noted that “The subtitles become part of the film, turning it into a more aesthetic object” (56) without bringing any precision as to the nature of this object.

15. “[…] only Whitman and Crane and Williams, of the American poets, are better than the movies,” “Personism: A Manifesto” (CP 498).

16. “Ah Jean Dubuffet / when you think of him / doing his military service in the Eiffel Tower / as a meteorologist / in 1922 / you know how wonderful the 20th Century / can be / and the gaited Iroquois on the girders / fierce and unfumbling-footed / nude as they should be / slightly empty / like a Sonia Delaunay”. (CP 337)
18. It is interesting that the sign should be at the center of the picture and not at the bottom like the subtitles, and what’s more, within yet another screen.
19. The image where the WALK sign is shown is a crossroads: we do not have to walk and to obey, we have other alternatives.
20. The scene with the “WALK” sign may be the revenge of the image on language. The subtitles have indeed violated the images of the film by the arbitrariness of the words and their absurd meanings, whereas they are usually supposed to help one understand a scene.
21. The “zoo” mentioned in the subtitles can be found several times in the poem “Second Avenue,” CP 139. The “kangaroo” of the end of the film harks back to the early poem “Today,” CP 15. The repetition of India can be a hint at the poem “Vincent and I Inaugurate a Movie Theatre”: “Allen and Peter, why are you going away / our country’s black and white past spread out / before us is no time to spread over India” (CP 399). “Yak” can be found in several poems of O’Hara’s including “Yesterday Down at the Canal” (CP 429). More correspondences can be found between the subtitles and the poems.
22. “is that me who accepts betrayal / in the abstract as if it were insight?” (CP 187)
23. “I know so much / about things, I accept / so much, it’s like / vomiting […]” (CP 187)
24. “I am assuming that everything is all right and difficult.” (CP 297)
25. “the rock is least living of the forms man has fucked.” (CP 302)
26. “I am ashamed of my century / for being so entertaining / but I have to smile.” (CP 338)
27. “NEVERTHELESS (thank you, Aristotle).” (CP 437)
28. “Units” 1, 3, 7 and 9 are used as subtitles in the movie. (CP 467)
29. There are numerous metaphors of attaching, of linking in the subtitles to The Last Clean Shirt.