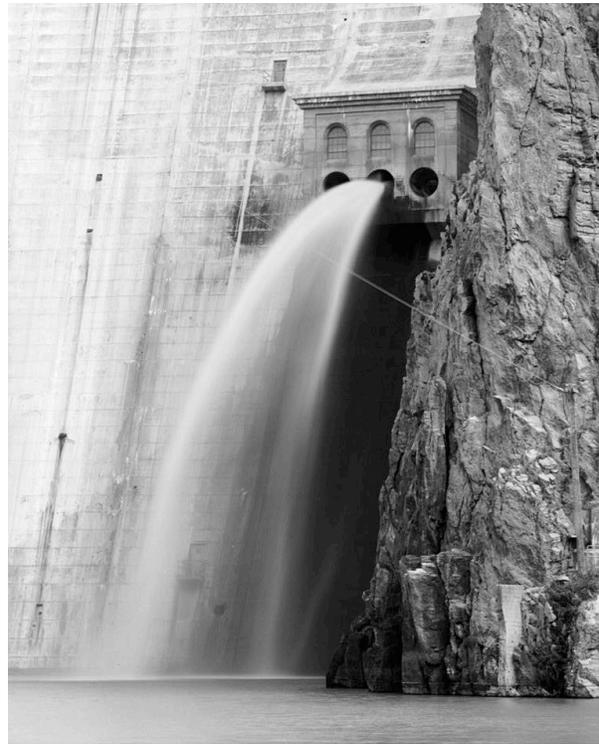


Monument

by Alex MacKenzie



From black, a wheat combine appears. Its engine roars across the soundtrack. We are just south of Nyssa in the state of Oregon.

Agricultural production and farm scenes unspool, punctuated by black leader, sometimes silent, sometimes accompanied by the voices of locals and their stories. But that first engine din continues to impose itself, overtaking these silences and spoken words, a whining machine-age sound that reminds us of the still-mechanical core of industry, agriculture and capital.

Built like a time capsule, Empty Quarter is a portrait of a place and a time: the early years of the 21st century, in the southeast quarter of the state of Oregon. Sparsely inhabited, seemingly vast.

Observational camera shots accumulate as fields are flattened and the harvest

packaged, forklifted, stacked and transported away. This is a landscape that feels fully exploited, where agribusiness belches along with occasional asides to the rodeo, a football game, a laundry day. Towns, post offices, schools all look like structures built as an afterthought to industry, a metaphorical trailer dropped next to the factory. Not the rugged green mountains, sea-sprayed pacific coast, nor urban hipster hubbub of Oregon tourist tracts, this corner needs a five mile to the inch magnification even to be made real on Google Maps. Off in the distance, the volcanoes serve no function here.

The farms portrayed evoke some not too distant past, riding the edge of family and factory with methods not quite as mechanized or dehumanized as we have imagined an agribusiness that feeds the millions. It may well be the very human aspect of these scenes that makes them harder to process. Slaves to a broken

system, far from the bucolic visions of red-painted barns, these farm workers and their lives are in the service of an endless demand from a largely urban population, with production methods that look outmoded and old fashioned to our tech-savvy eyes.

How do we get our food? This is how.

The time spent on these well framed and fixed camera scenes is a gift. We rarely allow this much time for the event (or non-event) in front of us to unwind.

These are scenes typically observed out of a car window from a distance, never halting to feel both the silences of vast fields and the drone of farm machinery tearing through it. Move past too quickly and it is most certainly rendered banal, where wonder is transformed into the remedial.

To sense the details and particularities of this landscape is to stop and inhabit it. Empty Quarter offers us this rumination. It may even demand it. There is something both fantastic and utterly hopeless about observing the movement of massive farm machinery across vast fields while giant hangars of hay bales sit idle. Lives are being lived, stories are told. There is a palpable struggle at work.

And so we are here, standing on the roadside and observing the vast, timeless, wide open country of southeastern Oregon. But where is nature in all of this? Has it all been harnessed, razed, transformed?

Two thirds of the way along we are presented with a wide view of a river gorge. Stunned by the picture-perfect beauty, our perspective is thrown off for a moment, as it is unclear just how big or

how far away these rocky cliff walls and roiling waters are. It seems almost like a miniature, a toy train backdrop. A scenic view of unbridled capital N nature in a film that has chosen a much less aestheticized view of the region. As we observe the churning waters far below, our eye is drawn to the bottom left corner. We catch a glimpse of a cement protrusion, an angular, manmade element in an otherwise radiantly natural scene. And then, nearby, a peculiar turbulence in the water far below.

Of course. How else could we enjoy such a grand perspective than from a man-made viewing deck. Though not stated in the film, we are in fact on an employee-only balcony of the Owyhee Dam. If we turned around and looked beyond the dam, we would see the Owyhee Reservoir, holding back well over a million acre-feet of water. That is somewhere in the vicinity of 390 trillion gallons. Once the tallest dam in the world and a prototype for the Hoover, it is not surprising that our perspective was thrown. We are high above the river.

This is a dam that was completed at the height of the Great Depression. A time, it is worth noting, when a greater than thirty percent drop in real estate prices has today been matched, and beaten. The river was altered in the service of irrigation, a project of the Bureau of Reclamation. Deserts become farms, and farmers plant their crops to feed the cities. No accommodation was made for the salmon run that rose as far as Nevada before this dam was built. There is no fish ladder.

The transformation of this landscape is an act of desperation. Untenable, monumental.

And so when beauty does appear, one can't help but feel the presence of the barrier upon which we must stand to see this opportune view. A position taken, over 400 feet high, and a structure, 537,500 cubic yards of concrete, undeniably removed from the natural world.

It is precisely this contradictory and impossible view that the film inhabits. Quietly observing, but always with our feet flat on the concrete of industry.

We are, finally, a part of this view, an essential element in this equation. We look from afar, but all of this is much closer to us than we realize.

Our butchered landscapes are not long for the world. This is the time that came just moments before the fall. A passing millisecond in the decline of the American empire.

(this essay will appear in the forthcoming DVD book accompanying the film "Empty Quarter" by Alain LeTourneau and Pam Minty)

