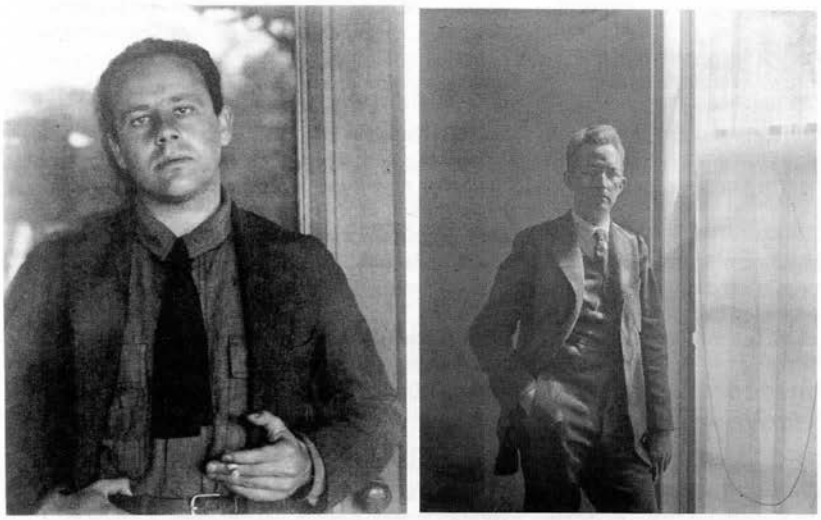

Fig. 1: Composite portraits, Paul Strand (left) and Charles Sheeler (right), c. 1920.

Bruce Posner on *Manhatta*

What I am going to show in this brief, quick review is how the work, when preserving it, will inform you about the films themselves. It is a journey looking backwards. We're looking at it from the outside bringing all of this history to it. The work will tell you things when you look at it and really examine its physicality, and that is the referential post for restoring a film.

[*Manhatta* film clip #1: 23 Wall Street to end of pan down Park Row Building]

This is the best copy of the film that existed vis-à-vis the year 2000. Prior to that most of you probably saw the film as a 16mm print that was even worse than this because of the disproportionate reduction of the actual frame and the poor duping. The British Film Institute National Archives supplied this print from the sole surviving dupe negative. This is how it was presented in the *Unseen Cinema* retrospective in 2000. At that time I was like, 'Wow, this is incredible!' But it was always perverse. Why does the camera pan stop there? It made no sense structurally. Then you have the attendant shaking and dirt, a lot of shaking, a lot of dirt. Too much contrast. Those are nitrate punch holes. That's one sequence I wanted you to take a peek at and think about.

[*Manhatta* film clip #2: Pan up Equitable Buildings and montage of shots across rooftops]

This is the next sequence, going up the Equitable Buildings, shot in lower Manhattan. And you see more jumps, blips, and dirt. The associative montage that is going on is very straightforward in this film. You go to the top of the building, and then you see what can be seen from the top of the building. The question is this: how is it that a film made by two stellar photographic masters, such as Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand, can be so technically inept and full of visual errors? It defies logic that these artists would have released such a mess. So let's search for clues.

Here is a picture of Paul Strand in 1919. Alfred Stieglitz took this picture. Right there's a credential. And this is a picture of his partner Charles Sheeler in 1910. Sheeler was older than Strand by seven years, but here they are pictured at about the same age. Nonetheless, they came together and wanted to make a movie of New York. They each exhibit

these larger than life stances. You have two complex personalities coming together, and they meshed together while making the film.

Basically you saw a film that looked like this. When I finally got my hands on the actual negative from the BFI I examined it and then went through the whole photochemical process. I exhausted all of the possibilities of normal conservation techniques and realized that Hollywood was where to go. That's when the 2K digital restoration business was really picking up steam in 2006. At that time, Hollywood was really the only place to go to have access to that high-end technology.

The original 35mm movie film negative, the nitrate and its duplicates, had all kinds of built-in problems. Here are some 'before and after' examples from the 1947 dupe negative and the finished 2008 2K digital restoration. Splices, lines, out of frame. Mistakes. You know, that was the other great thing about Hollywood. They did everything for you. Do this, do that, bring the cappuccino. Then the bill shows up. Whoa! This cost $150,000 to do. That was only possible through the generous sponsors, the museums that made it possible.

Luckily one of the keys to working on this film was having massive amounts of artwork to examine. They were both masters and went on to make even greater things. In the period between 1915-1917, Strand made an incredible series of platinum prints, some of New York and others on a porch in Connecticut. You see the correlation of the imagery here. This is a beautiful image by Strand.

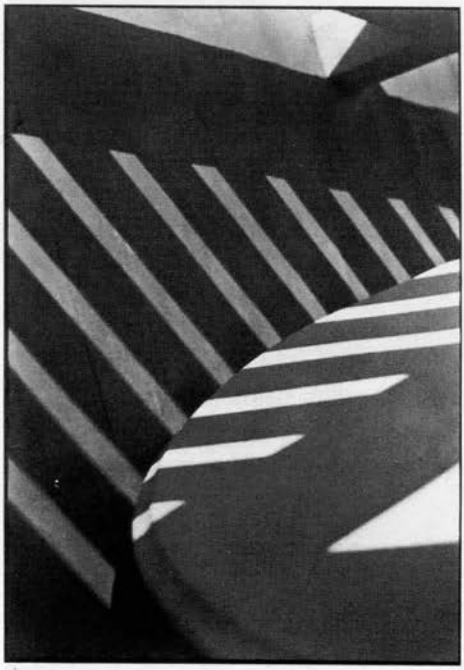

Fig. 2: Porch abstraction, photograph by Paul Strand, 1917.

There were two things that inspired me to do this project. One was actually having Strand's platinum prints to examine. I went to museums to look at the original prints without glass or anything in front of you. You have never seen anything so beautiful on an aesthetic, visual level. Where the blacks are black. Sorry to say but this slide does no justice to it at all. If you look closely, do you see what I see? Happening here and there and all over the print. Thumbprints. Does you see the swirls of the thumbprints? Whoa! Strand's thumbprints. This is the 'after', when the restoration was done. Look! That could have been Strand or Sheeler's thumbprint. And now it's gone!

Fig. 3: Thumbprints, before, 35mm film frames, Sc 35 from *Manhatta*.

Fig. 3a: Thumbprints, after, 35mm film frames, Sc 35 from *Manhatta*.

In examining the actual original negative materials he used at that time which are stored at the Aperture Archives in Connecticut, Strand shot a little negative about this size [gesturing with hands a size approximately 2¼" x 2¼"] in 1916, made it into a glass plate of the exact same size, a magic lantern slide, and then from that slide made a blow-up to another plate that was contact printed on 9" x 13" paper. The glass negative and the big negative have thousands of marks on them. Pencil and charcoal marks. He stippled everything. He integrated this motion of movement and fingerprints into the pictures, a raw artisan approach. His compositional sense was that incredible that he could work this stuff into the structure of these pictures. These patterns are visible in all of his pictures during this period.

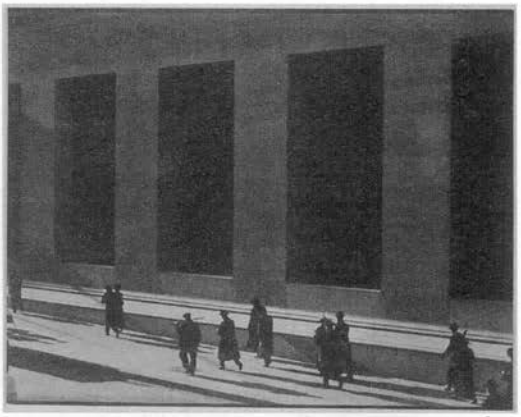

Fig. 4: *Wall Street*, photograph by Paul Strand, 1916.

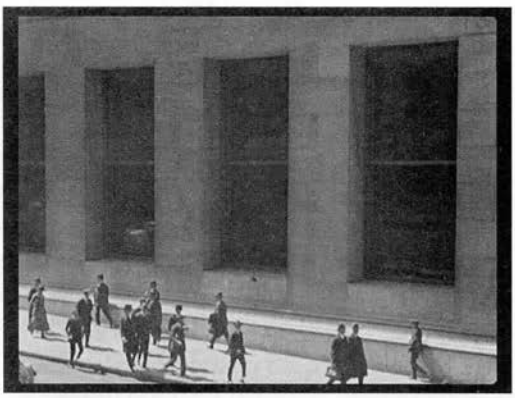

Fig. 4a: 35mm film frame, Sc 14 from *Manhatta*.

This is a famous recreation of the same scene as his famous 1916 Wall Street photograph, from the same camera set-up on the steps of the Sub Treasury Building in lower Manhattan. What I am telling you is that Strand reworked his material like crazy. This is the actual print from 1916, one of two prints made. Later in the 1960s and 1970s he reprinted those negatives again, like this [shows examples]. Strand would have loved digital technology, to be able

to manipulate and to change his images at whim, as the artist believed he should do. Here's prime evidence. Check this image out. 'City Hall, New York, 1916'. Again, Strand's compositional sense is playing out. What's going on above that man? There's a whole person removed. See his hat, his shape? And if you still don't believe it, the man's shadow is still there on the ground. It's the man that's gone. This is somebody [Strand] that's really in touch with his business as an artist. Strand's history of re-addressing his images, either on his own or in partnership with others, provided me the poetic license to do the film's digital restoration.

And Sheeler did a similar thing. Now, perversely, this next scene was found among 14 photographic stills, 4" x 5"s, under Sheeler's bed after he died. They were never exhibited. But they are direct frame enlargements from the film trims of *Manhatta* from when he edited the film. Here's a film frame, right at the beginning of this sequence, and here's one of the pictures found under the bed. As you can see, they are 2-3 frames apart from one another. This is what gave me another foundation from which to proceed. Now you don't use a photograph to make a film, but in this case this was as close as we were going to get to the original film negative because the stills were made right off the film by Sheeler, several frames located on either side of the splice. Here's a building from the still, another still from under the bed used for the restoration. So we weren't that far off with the materials we had to use for reference.

Fig. 5: Trinity graveyard, Sheeler photograph, trim from Sc 13 from *Manhatta*.

Fig. 5a: Trinity graveyard, 35mm film frame, Sc 13 from *Manhatta*.

Fig. 6: Bankers Trust Building, Sheeler photograph, trim from Sc 30 from *Manhatta*.

Fig. 6a: Bankers Trust Building, 35mm film frame Sc 30 from *Manhatta*.

Now, is this an avant-garde film or what? Anyone could watch this film and read it as a normal film. The Whitmanesque titles add a little poetic flair, also the camerawork. It was first shown at the Rialto Theater, New York City, during the week of 21 July 1921. This is a picture of the inside of the movie theater. This would be the screen, the orchestra pit. Just to give you an idea of the situation in which it was shown. That's not so avant-garde. It was on a normal billing of films and listed as a 'scenic' to be played before the feature attraction. They had regular music playing, all this conventional stuff. It wasn't even mentioned in the newspaper ad, but it did receive six newspaper reviews, and several months later a substantial critical review appeared in *Arts and Decorations*.

Fig. 7: Interior, Rialto Theater, New York, n.d.

Fig. 7a: Sonia Delauney stage setting and costumes for *Le Coeur à gaz*, play by Tristan Tzara, presented at 'Soirée du Coeur à barbe', Théâtre Michel, Paris, 6 July 1923.

But here's how we know it's an avant-garde film. A couple of years later on 6 July 1923 at the 'Death of Dada' event [*Le Cœur à barbe*] at the Théâtre Michel in Paris, when they had a riot and all of that jazz. Here it is on the bill with a line-up of superstars. It's listed as Sheeler's *Fumée de New York* [*The Smokes of New York*]. There was a title change. It was originally *New York the Magnificent* at the Rialto. Here, two years later, with films by avant-gardists Hans Richter and Man Ray. It influenced everybody in attendance from Marcel Duchamp, who most probably was responsible for putting it on the bill, to René Clair, who was working on a Paris city film *Paris qui dort* (1923) and then went on to collaborate with Francis Picabia and Erik Satie on *Entr'acte* (1924) and with Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy and their *Le Ballet mécanique* (1924). Here's an actual picture from the Tristan Tzara play that was performed at the event. Notice the movie screen behind the players where *Manhatta* had played to applause earlier in the evening.

Now, why is restoration informing you of all this stuff? Here's going up the building; the scene where the camera pans up the building in multiple jumps? What's going on? Because the film literally had splices in it. Oh, it broke, it's the camera, broken projection,

this or that. But no, when we cleaned it up and put it together, it makes this beautiful pan in three distinct sections. One, two, three! Three intentional jump cuts to get to the rooftop. Then we get to the rooftop montage sequence, which I can't really explicate clearly since I have yet to figure out the appropriate language to describe what you are seeing. It's doing all this stuff, and it's all organized in some fashion.

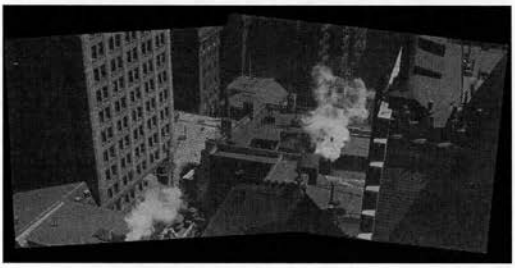

Fig. 8: Composite panorama of Wall Street from Empire Building, 35mm film frames, Sc 30 & 33 from *Manhatta*.

What's going on in this scene geographically? In reality, so to speak? We believe this is a realistic view of New York. What are we looking at besides these beautiful shapes and forms? Here's two film frames taken from this montage and put together as a composite image, to show you how complex but simple their camera set-ups are. One is over here and the next is slightly to the right. They were both made from the same camera position with the camera turned a bit off-axis to encompass a full panorama spread out in front of the filmmakers, a sort of wide-angle shot into the 'Grand Canyon' of New York.

This is the work of true masters understanding their tools and craft, even if this was their first movie. And the montage shows what the camera lens can do. Look at that. That's incredible. Where are we literally located? This is the Financial District with Wall Street running diagonally across the frame and crossed by Nassau Street running north from the intersection and Broad Street running south; this is the New York Stock Exchange, the Sub-Treasury Building [now Federal Hall National Memorial] with the statue of George Washington in front of it, and across the street is 23 Wall Street and the J.P. Morgan & Co. Bank Building, but you can't clearly see it for the smoke. The camera is on the roof of the Empire Building looking eastward across Broadway. It has taken me forever to figure this out. Here's the Trinity Church, right next to where the camera is sitting on Broadway. The camera was up on the Empire Building shooting downward, so we can see the top of these buildings.

Fig. 9: Post card, Trinity Church, Arthur Building, Empire Building, New York, n.d.

Fig. 9a: Composite, shots from east upper floors and roof of Empire Building, 35mm film frames, Sc 27-33 from *Manhatta*.

A good deal of the movie was shot from up here, and everything that is shown was shot from practically the same camera positions. Here's that intersection again in four different but very much the same shots of one view of rooftops. Through slight movements of the camera to the left, to the right, and photographed with short and long lenses, the space is transformed and seemingly depicts totally different views. The space is further abstracted by a mixing of the shots with some other yet to be identified views. The mix is further abstracted by the continually amorphous, moving forms of smoke rising through the frame, and grounded somewhat by the distant view of the ant-like humans walking along the streets. You can see all of this in these four shots, even though they are still images showing no movement in time. All the more stunning since the shots themselves do not move as much as the things depicted in them do move frame-by-frame, i.e. like the rising smoke.

Fig. 10: Composite of 3 shots from north upper floors and roof of the Empire Building, 35mm film frames, Sc 62-63-61 from *Manhatta*.

Later in the film we see another montage taken from the rooftop of the Empire Building in which the editing of shots fractures geographical space. They shot from here, here, and here along the north roof of the Empire Building. Looking down at the Trinity Church graveyard; looking down Broadway over and across the Trinity Church steeple; and down at the Church Street El Station on Rector Street – forming an east-to-west pan. The three shots are shuffled out of order in the final film, making arrangements that further fracture, split, and compress space. This is a cubist abstraction coming off as normal documentary reality. A wolf in sheep's clothing.

Now, to reinforce. I already outlined Strand's credentials for messing around with the image, but what about Sheeler. There were two feature articles with photographs published in *Vanity Fair* in 1921 before the film came out. This one from April 1921 talks about Charles Sheeler being an abstract artist. It shows a picture by Sheeler. That's a frame from the film, and it's where the train comes into the frame. That's actually from a Sheeler painting that was made in 1920 before the film was publicly released. But notice where the train is in the painting? It shows that special slip of a couple of frames in the film at the point of the splice in the film. Sheeler kept these frames and enlarged them to make this painting. He actually transcribed the frame to a canvas.

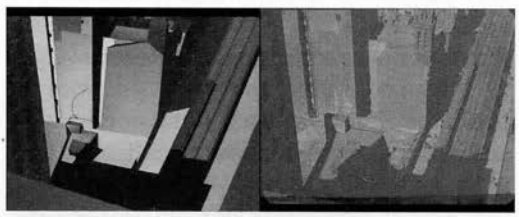

Fig. 11: Composite of *Church Street El*, painting by Charles Sheeler, 1920, and 35mm film frame, Sc 62 from *Manhatta*.

I'll end on this. When we get to this scene where the camera pans down the building, suddenly it stops, and then resumes panning down to the ground. What's going on? Enter digital restoration technology. In the finished piece it's a nice, smooth pan down, except for the stop. You can't mess around with that stop, because it's there. It's not like it was a mistake. So the camera goes down and stops for some mysterious reason.

Here's another *Vanity Fair* reproduction of a building, the Park Row Building, a photograph by Sheeler published in January 1921. I am not sure if this photo was made before the shooting of the film, during the shooting of the film, or after the shooting of the film, though there is some internal evidence in the photo that it was made during the shooting. Sheeler made two beautiful still exposures. This is only a small part of a larger 5" x 7" negative that he cropped in various ways. But he also took this same image and made a drawing in 1921, and made a painting in 1922. This spot is the same spot at which the film pan stops and meditates on the scene before resuming its descent to street level. From these two pics he made several different crops using sections of the entire image and in effect made an incredibly avant-garde montage comprised of seven different still photographs: close-up, far view, to the right, a bit more over, a close-up in, a little bit to the right, etc. When the different pictures are lined up next to one another they form a horizontal line. The image sequence moves across the actual space from left to right, 'panning' from the Park Row Building to lesser-sized structures on the east. A filmstrip runs this way, vertical. The pan runs this way, a vertical direction down the filmstrip. The stills run this way in a horizontal direction. A completely integrated approach to documenting this one spot near the Park Row Buildings and environs.[1]

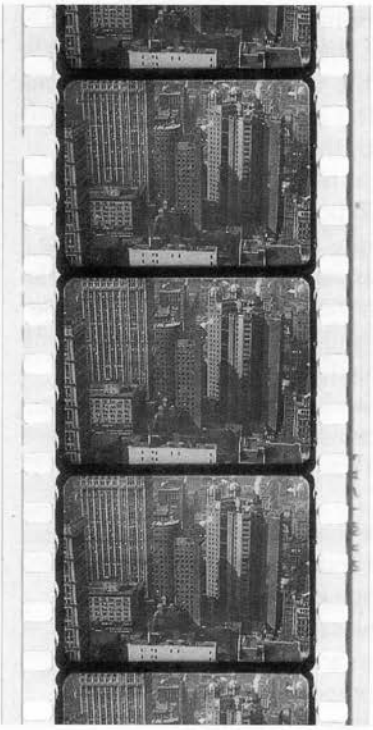

Fig. 12: Pan down Park Row Building, 35mm film frames, Sc 16 from *Manhatta*.

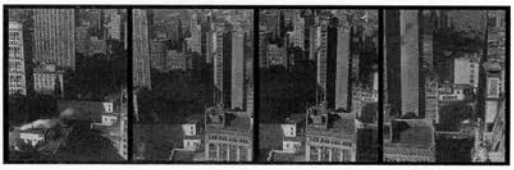

Fig. 12a: 4 views, *Park Row Building*, photographs by Charles Sheeler, 1920.

Aesthetically we can run further down the road with this. The connection at the time was to Duchamp's modernism, which Sheeler was tied into being a part of Walter Arensberg's New York circle. Duchamp's infamous *The Nude Descending the Staircase* (1913) is an obvious example, and mind you a painting that Sheeler had ample time to study firsthand while he was photographing it for the Arensbergs. And this is a painting by Pablo Picasso from 1908. These are still photographs taken by Sheeler, because he documented this same work for the

Arensbergs. He had direct contact with the paintings. These are other paintings by Picasso from the 1908 period that further the connection. This is a very interesting thing I was shown by the art curator/historian Bernice Rose as reproduced in her Cubism and Film exhibition catalog.[2] Picasso used still photographs in his studio to record the progress of his works, to analyze them while in progress. In this one, Picasso used double exposures, slightly skewed superimpositions of the same painting, so he could think through how to fragment and move further along these cubist studies of a woman. The lineage is just mind-blowing.

The other one that I think important is where Strand and Sheeler act like the painter Cezanne with his fruit on a table, where he moves things around, painting different colors and whatnot. Seeking the perfect composition. They did that to lower Manhattan. This is not their picture, but illustrates how they approached and appropriated lower Manhattan. They took views of Manhattan and moved things around in the editing to suit their artistic ambitions. That's a bird's-eye view from the Woolworth Building down Broadway with the Singer Tower, East River and the Harbor, Governor's Island and the Statue of Liberty in the far background. All of these are seen in the movie. Anyway you get Cezanne's 'fruit on a table' thing, but in the film it's 'the city on a table' arranged by Sheeler and Strand. Here's another view of lower Manhattan, looking from the top of the Equitable Building, up 22 stories over everything. In the film it makes for an incredible panorama view across the pyramid-ledged Banker's Trust Building that shows New York Harbor, Governor's Island, and Brooklyn. But the point is that in the film you start with a couple of still shots, two scenes separated by a couple of other shots placed in between, and an entire world opens up. Don't tell me they didn't know what they were doing in an aesthetic sort of way. It wasn't a random event.

Fig. 13: View of lower Manhattan from the Woolworth Building c. 1913.

Fig. 13a: Composite panorama of lower Manhattan, 35mm film frames, Sc 35 & 38 from *Manhatta*.

There's one more thing that I can show you to provide another example of a unique discovery made while examining the film. Again the actual film reveals to us its own history. This was apparent throughout and is quite normal in old films. But something else was happening too and shows itself very clearly twice in the film: once at a cut from long shot to close-up shot in the railroad yard and a second time at a cut from close-up shot to long shot of the men working on steel girders. Remember when we were first watching the film, and it was teetering like this [moves hands around erratically]. That motion usually is associated with the duplication printer, not adjusted right and the film too shrunken to go through the printer properly. But this sort of jiggle, the slight jiggling throughout that varies in degrees of

intensity and changes in different parts of the film, took me months to figure out.

I discovered that in some shots the jiggling is like this [shows film clip with slight jiggle]. And then in close-ups, it jiggles like that [shows another film clip with much more aggravated jiggle]. This means the original shooting camera was not mounted properly on the tripod. Three times a second they were turning the camera crank to produce a silent film speed of 16 frames per second. The tripod legs probably weren't spread out wide enough, and the camera was noticeably teetering. The telephoto lens exaggerated the movement. So in the close-ups – the magnified shots – the jiggling is extreme, and in the wider shots – the less magnified shots – it is lesser.

Is this something the filmmakers had intended to be seen? Or is it a 'mis-take', pun intended, that should be left as found? Should a film restorer-preservationist intervene and fix it? And if corrected so as to reduce, if not eliminate the jiggle, does this then make the film as the filmmakers had intended? Or does it produce a phony version of the film? Heady stuff to contemplate in the context of fragmentation and avant-garde film art.

There is much more to show you, but for today we have run out of time.

Transcribed by Greg de Cuir, Jr and Bruce Posner from the audio recording of Posner's talk on 12 December 2013, Belgrade.

Annotations and edit by Bruce Posner, August 2014, Miami Beach.

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(Endnotes)

1 The quality of these Sheeler photographs indicated to me that it was okay to go back to what we had for movie film, at least for this restoration, and make it as sharp as we could but still have it appear like what we worked from. Also, it should be noted that much earlier, in 1910, the photographer Alvin Langon Coburn made a photograph of the Park Row Building from almost the exact same vantage point. It appeared as the last image reproduced in his book publication *New York*. The emphasis on these same spots, the area photographed and the position of the camera from which it was photographed, seems to indicate a dialogue between the filmmakers and their predecessors in photographing New York.

2 Glimcher, Arnold and Rose, Bernice. *Picasso, Braque and early film in Cubism*. New York: Pace Wildenstein Gallery, 2007.

On Fragmentation

Alternative Film/Video Research Forum, 2012-2013

edited by Greg de Cuir, Jr

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