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SEEING WITH A FILMMAKER'S EYES:
GLIMPSES OF MOBILIZED LANDSCAPES IN STAN BRAKHAGE'S
*THE WONDER RING (1955) AND VISIONS IN MEDITATION #2:
MESA VERDE (1989)*

Abstract. In this paper I present various ways in which Stan Brakhage's *The Wonder Ring* (1955) and *Visions in Meditation #2: Mesa Verde* (1989) tend to challenge the concept of American landscape by means of cinematic conventions traditionally associated with phantom rides, city symphonies and contemporary road movies. It seems that Brakhage's works do not only employ non-standard editing, camera movement and extended shot to reproduce a continuous flow of motion, but they also exploit the dynamics between the spectator's "mobilized virtual gaze" (Friedberg, *Window 2*) and passing views by evoking a distorted experience of sensational and meditative voyages, hence questioning panoramic perception and an idealized image of American (film) landscape intrinsically bound with the natural and technological sublime. Particularly, both films draw on rapid handheld camerawork, superimpositions, anamorphic lens, bright or dim exposures, fades, odd angles, softened focus and other techniques to defamiliarize and objectify the protagonist's journey and thus document Brakhage's perception and extra-objective reality.

Key words: American avant-garde and experimental film; Stan Brakhage; American landscape; phantom ride; city symphony; road movie.

Since the 1960s, film criticism has continuously extolled Stan Brakhage's often daunting and confounded non-representational imagery, expressive style as well as formal and conceptual approach to filmmaking embedded in his personal film aesthetics based on the concept of "an eye unrulred by man-made laws of perspective" and the process of defamiliarizing of images (Brakhage,

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Metaphors 1; see e.g. James 4). The artist's constant pursuit of synaesthetic cinema is perhaps best epitomized in his seminal manifesto, *Metaphors on Vision*, where he reflected on his lifelong quest as a filmmaker: "I am after pure film art forms, forms in no way dependent upon imitation of existing arts nor dependent upon the camera used as the eye. I do not want films to show [...] but to transform images so that they exist in relation to the film only as they flash onto the screen...exist in their own right, so to speak" (36).

Brakhage's investigation of some universal and often taboo issues of birth, death and mortality, sexuality and innocence, religion and mythology or poetry and visual arts, often considered a study in observation and immersion or a documentary of subjectivity, are generally referred to as a form of lyrical filmmaking,¹ influenced by European modernism, Anger's, Peterson's or Deren's trance films, the Black Mountain poets, particularly Olson's, Creeley's and Cage's writings, and the abstract expressionist painters (Sitney, *Eyes* 272). O'Pray notes that embracing of abstraction and materiality of the film medium made Brakhage the first genuinely modernist American filmmaker, which also manifested itself in his deeply Romantic, self-reflexive and nature-based concepts of the artist and landscape, explored, for instance, in *The Art of Vision* (1961–1965) or *Songs* (1964–1969), and "dominated by a visionary and mythological quality touched by a traditional notion of the sublime" (59). It might be argued then that many of his mature works draw on an Emersonian or Romantist aesthetics rooted in the modernist subjectivism, which investigates the role of art by means of surrealism, personal expression, imagination and the idea of the "untutored eye" (Sitney, *Eyes* 72). In other words, Brakhage's spontaneous camera becomes "an intuitive instrument of expression of the body and eye" and lies at the heart of some visionary and abstract experiments "untrammelled by ideological, cultural, even conceptual baggage" (O'Pray 60).

Sitney suggests that Brakhage's vast body of approximately three hundred and fifty films² can be generally divided into early psychodramas, ranging from *Interim* (1952) to *Anticipation of the Night* (1958), and later works of his mature period,³ which began with the release of *The Wonder Ring*

¹ The term, coined by Sitney in reference to Brakhage's or Bruce's filmmaking, is defined as "the pervasiveness of the lyric voice in cinema among the works of neophytes in the late 1960s, a decade after Brakhage's formative works in that mode" (*Visionary* 155).

² The majority of Brakhage's works can be described as shorts, that is lasting between ten and forty minutes.

³ Sitney further classifies Brakhage's mature works by dividing them into the following categories: i) works, which dealt with the themes of Eros, childbirth, death, animals and the cinematic crisis lyric (1959–65); ii) 8 mm lyrical films, which often involved painting on a celluloid to lower the production

(1955) and enabled the artist to utilize a rich potential of what has become the hallmark of his style, that is the use of superimpositions and somatic camera movement (*Visionary* 137). The sheer volume and scope of his cinematic “adventures in perception” is indeed unparalleled and encompasses such varied aesthetic trends as dramatic realism, expressionism, expressiveness, surrealism and lyricism, achieved by means of handheld camerawork, collage film, painting and scratching on celluloid, fast cutting or the use of multiple exposures (Elder 394). In contrast to a more typical Brakhage oeuvre, however, *The Wonder Ring* (1955) and *Visions in Meditation #2: Mesa Verde* (1989), while drawing on these and related approaches to filmmaking, retain a largely representational form and take the nature of landscape, travelogue and light as their subject matter, explored by Brakhage since the 1970s in a body of works dealing with the theory of moving visual thinking, the cinematic representation of elusive cognitive acts. In this stage of the artist’s career, the representation of landscapes, though present in some earlier pictures of his mature period, has become a repeatedly resurfacing theme, initiated by the Roman, Arabic, and Egyptian series of photographic abstractions and further developed in such films as *Desert* (1976) or *Visions in Meditation* (1989-1990). Likewise, the analyzed material employs non-standard editing, camera movement and extended shot to reproduce a continuous flow of motion as well as exploits the dynamics between the spectator’s “mobilized virtual gaze”⁴ (Friedberg, *Window 2*) and passing views by evoking a distorted experience of sensational and meditative voyages, hence questioning panoramic perception and an idealized image of American (film) landscape intrinsically bound with the natural and technological sublime (see e.g. Grey 55; Verhoeff, *The West* 200).

In both films, audiences are exposed to American landscapes presented in a travelogue form⁵ where certain shots may be indicative, somewhat ironi-

costs (1964–1968); iii) 16 mm films, which dealt with an exploration of landscapes and involved autobiographical elements (1967–1970); iv) a trio of documentary films known as Pittsburgh trilogy (1971); v) “tone poems” and the autobiographical series (1973–1984); vi) silent “abstract” films, which dealt with modes of seeing (1979–1989); vii) post-1989 works partly inspired by Brakhage’s marriage to Marilyn Jull, which dealt with film sound, psychodrama and painting on film (*Eyes* 70–82).

⁴ The “mobilized virtual gaze,” defined by Friedberg as “a received perception mediated through representation” and based on a paradoxical combination of the mobility of viewing with the immobility of the spectator, allows the viewers to experience a sequence of edited images as one single shot in the form of a fluid camera movement (*Window 2*).

⁵ Gunning (“Before Documentary” 14), Peterson (197) and Ruoff (2) note that since the end of the 19th century, travel films’ most notable formal elements have been the focus on place as their primary subject as well as the use of travelling shots, which tend to foster “the view aesthetic.”

cally, of standard cinematic conventions utilized to conceptualize natural and urban landscapes and influenced by a distinctively Hudson River School tradition of depicting sublime, picturesque and luminist qualities of the featured scenery. For instance, the monumental and mysterious ruins of Mesa Verde in Brakhage's fourth and final Faust film (Hedges 173), *Visions in Meditation 2*, though portraying hardly identifiable imagery with modulated color and light, are stylized in the (North American) sublime and highly exuberant manner to "articulate the horror Brakhage felt at the site" (Sitney, *Eyes* 335). In a correspondence with Sitney, Marilyn Brakhage provides an account of the filmmaker's trip to Mesa Verde, which inspired him to make footage for the picture:

In June we were in NYC for two weeks, most of the summer back in Boulder, but then we went on a third driving trip, which must have been in August, this time around Colorado—the "painted desert" in the south, west to Mesa Verde, north then, and finally east again across the divide. [...] When we arrived at Mesa Verde, Stan had a very strong feeling that something terrifying and evil had happened there. I think we arrived fairly late in the day . . . stayed overnight nearby, and then returned the following day. He went into a kind of deep filmmaking trance . . . (Sitney, *Eyes* 323–24)

This view is confirmed by Brakhage himself who stated in the film's synopsis: "'There is terror here,' were the first words which came to mind on seeing these ruins; and for two days after, during all my photography, I was haunted by some unknown occurrence which reverberated still in these rocks and rock-structures and environs" (*Canyon CinemaFilm/Video Catalog* 7 57–58). Indeed, it seems that the 16mm *Mesa Verde*, while drawing on Brakhage's and Group of Seven's aesthetics, conveys a strong sense of terror built upon the sublime and the picturesque as well as the technological sublime whose presence is easily detected in the picture's frames, filled with light in motion, and multiple layers of superimpositions. It particularly reverberates in the opening sequence, which features a gradual transition (fade-in) from an out of focus, black image to a backlit image of a mountain infused with superimposed, dynamic shots of vividly coloured trees and sky. A similar effect is generated with rapid hand-held camera movements evident in the following aerial shot of the clouds and reveal shot of the Anasazi people's cliff dwellings. Interestingly, the latter shots are subject to slow motion and then intercut and superimposed with either time lapse or fast moving landscape shots. Later, a man's naked and convulsing body lying on

the ground or the grass⁶ is superimposed on the cliff dwellings and juxtaposed with a deer in the meadow, both of which constitute the recurrent motif of the film.

Pruska-Oldenhof notes that the epileptic body, pulsating through optical printer effects and multiple exposures, the deer, the birds, the clouds and water constitute the sole independently moving elements and all the remaining forms have been set in motion through Brakhage's erratic editing (46). The scholar further suggests that the artist's trembling camera, particularly the transformation of a peaceful water imagery into the ferocious one, might symbolically correspond to the spectators' breathing patterns intercut with some nervous and almost rhythmically aggressive shots, hence contrasting life and vitality with death and decay (Pruska-Oldenhof 46). However, as hinted by Brakhage himself, the terror elicited onsite, which is eventually released with water imagery and the final fade-out, derives more from the technological sublime (see e.g. Nye) expressed in the relationship between nature and civilization, here represented by the eventual or fated abandonment of Mesa Verde by its native inhabitants and enhanced by contrasting colours of the featured natural phenomena and structures as well as the collision of swift lateral (tracking) pans of the sky or the clouds and in-and-out sweeping overlapped zooms of the dwellings (*Canyon Cinema Film/Video Catalog* 7 57–58). Testa argues that other measures, which contribute to achieving such an effect, include the use of near-repetition, graphic-cuts, superimposed matches and mismatches, panning zooms ins and outs, swooping hand-held movements, fades to black between the shots, extreme close-ups or long traveling shots ("Late" 15).

Similarly to the remaining installments of Brakhage's *Visions in Meditation*, *Mesa Verde* has been produced in a travelogue mode with the prevailing desert-sky-road footage filmed from a moving automobile and occasionally intercut with long shots of the buildings. A staggered and discontinuous approach to the narrative gives rise to disassociative temporalities and implies the protagonist/filmmaker's state of consciousness, which is projected through the camera and evokes such responses as awe, fear and terror, heat and light, a meditative desert glare and a physical experience of the landscape itself expressed through one's simultaneous eagerness and unwilling-

⁶ The footage of male epileptic seizures was retrieved by Brakhage from Waith G. Chase's nine documentary films (1905), preserved in the Paper Print Collection of the Library of Congress, which earlier served as a source material for such filmmakers as Jacobs or Frampton.

ness to approach the site (Testa, "Late" 15-16). Pruitt notes that *Mesa Verde*, along with the *Visions in Meditation* cycle, conveys

a vivid sense of traveling across the wide expanse of the North American Continent by car ... [...] The camera emphasizes the great emptiness of continental space with only a faint and fleeting sense of human presence within it, which is, ... seen in flashes of cross-cutting. This ultimately unifying visual motif hints that the title of the series plays on the notion of mystical visions in a desert or wilderness ... (Pruitt 127-8)

Sitney discusses the concept further by asserting that the series "is a pure example of a filmic periegeten, a Whitmanian celebration of travel in quest of symbolic ancestors in the sublime geography and prophetic meteorology of North America," as inspired by Emerson's *Nature* or Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* (*Canyon CinemaFilm/Video Catalog* 7 57). While documenting Brakhage's visit to the Mesa Verde National Park, the work continuously plays with the spectators' perception of landscape and distance through its reliance on the absence of human element, perpetual motion and layering of superimposed images, thus creating a somewhat surreal imagery.

According to Sitney, it is particularly the epileptic's appearance in the middle of the film that reinforces its rhythm as well as determines its form and meaning (*Eyes* 339). Interestingly, the motif constitutes a biographical element inspired by Brakhage's longtime suffering from asthma, then associated with epilepsy, and his painful divorce, visualized through the epileptic's largely enigmatic behaviour and the mystery of the site itself. Sitney claims that "the epileptic's seizure allegorizes the spiritual convulsion of that event, now elevated to a work of fate, an eventuality" (*Eyes* 341). Therefore, the artist seems to render this rather compounded road trip a contemplative, self-discovery journey, which offers both personal and religious catharsis with the stone dwellings functioning as a sacred spot. Camper hypothesizes that "the black entrances to the famous Colorado cliff dwellings suggest voids in human understanding" and can be interpreted in the broader context as a "vision of our repetitive and reductive mass culture" ("Celebrating Stan Brakhage"). More importantly, however, Brakhage's journey to Mesa Verde, depicted in a highly melancholic tone that often pervades his *Faust* series (1987-1989), places the protagonist's encounter with the landscape at the core of the film and transforms it into the "vision of the shamanistic haunting of the abandoned site" with both vibrant and acute editing (Sitney, *Visionary* 413). According to Brakhage, while serving as a

nostalgic road trip to the places of his origins and artistic growth, indicated in the appearance of a partly dilapidated house and the epileptic, *Mesa Verde* constitutes a landscape-oriented travelogue with autobiographical elements:

Part 4 is the obliteration by single frame of the memories of the past in the swell of the earth and in the desert. Also, by this time, I had met and fallen in love with Marilyn [...], and the film resulted from a road trip we took during which I photographed the landscapes of the west and the midwest. So in Part 4 there is no story really—but a going to the desert to rid myself of these “pictures” and encompass the whole spectrum of sky and earth and what lies between the two. (Ganguly 28)

A related form of travelogue is evoked in the 16mm *Wonder Ring*, Brakhage's first non-narrative and second colour film shot in Kodachrome commissioned by a fellow avant-garde filmmaker Joseph Cornell in 1955 to record New York City's Third Avenue elevated railway before it was demolished. Similarly to *Mesa Verde*, it follows the artist's acclaimed practice of rhythmic and kinetic montage, including the use of original perspectives and musical lyricism, which effectively conveys the bodily movements, light patterns and reflections, momentary glimpses into the passing buildings and apartments or the train ride itself. Later re-edited by Cornell, who added more images of people and ran it backward and upside down as a neo-Dadaist pun (Faller 294), the film originally served a crucially educative purpose and constituted a silent testimony to New York's urban life where “the girders of the train platforms become stained glass windows with bright light streaming through the geometric spaces between the steel beams” (Howard, “The Wonder Ring”). It was also Cornell's idea to capture the very spirit of inhabiting the stations and riding the trains by means of a structural rhythm rather than merely to create a poetic and stylized account of the Third Avenue El. While both Brakhage's and Cornell's editing was clearly preoccupied with the play of light and shadow, the latter's accentuated rectangular panels and rich patches of colour in the station's stained glass windows as well as the train's window frames filled with reflections (Pigott 86).

The use of superimpositions creates a dazzling effect where the reflections and refractions of human figures and buildings in the windows seem to merge with the actual structures outside, hence forming bizarre hybrid compositions and challenging the spectator's perspective. The opening sequence features a series of panning and tilting establishing shots of the pavement, the train station, an ascent to the El platform and finally the train itself

rushing in front of the camera as it approaches the platform. The shots on the train are filmed from the viewer-as-passenger's point of view and the camera is fixed on the window to conjure the increasing velocity and kinetic energy of the vehicle. Henderson notes that the filmmaker "equally plays with the reflective surfaces of those windows, allowing images of people to appear like ghosts in the frame, naturally superimposed over the outside world rushing past," hence celebrating the study of movement captured by the static camera as opposed to stasis documented by the moving camera in the picture's opening ("The Films of Stan Brakhage"). Meanwhile, Howard interprets the work as replete with nostalgia and sadness as it attempts to capture a sense of loss of the soon-to-be-ghost subway and platforms through references to a ghostly ride format and, on a metaphorical level, "the aesthetic beauty that goes beyond mere utility" ("The Wonder Ring"). Similarly, Tyler stresses the film's simplicity or lack of pretentiousness and artiness in its depiction of some casual El passengers' experiences (25).

Meanwhile, Sitney views *The Wonder Ring* as the "recognition of the rhythmic and structural potential of vehicular motion" and one of Brakhage's first attempts to "expand upon Menken's visual rhetoric," which involved experimenting on the syntactical use of superimposition, somatic camera movement and rapid editing indicative of peripheral vision (*Eyes* 71). In his landmark work, *Visionary Film*, the scholar describes Brakhage's El trip as a round dance based on collision montage, a continuous flow of slow panning camera movements and a sensuous handheld camera (159). In this sense, the film can be seen primarily as "a direct ancestor of the elegant train sequence," retaining some core elements of the visionary rhetoric of Gehr's *Still* (1969) or Menken's whimsical *Go!Go!Go!* (1962) (Sitney, *Eyes* 71). Similarly, Michelson lists an inventory of editing techniques like slow motion, anamorphic lens, superimpositions, change of focus, out-of-focus shots and extreme close-ups, whose appliance celebrates first-person vision of the train's movement as well as its reflective and often uneven surfaces (53).

The concept is discussed further by Frye who suggests that the film constitutes "a perfect expression of the world defined by the train, and a peculiarly apposite metaphor for the bare logic of narrative itself" ("Stan Brakhage"). Interestingly, except for fulfilling Brakhage's new ideological stance, which was to expose the audience to the mere vision of the world unmediated by language or other social conventions, the shooting of *The Wonder Ring* turned out to be a pivotal experience for the filmmaker as it allowed him to "move away from his early psychodramas and [...] [advance]

toward conveying subjective impressions through the engagement of camera and environment, without the crutch of mediating characters, and the graphic arrangement shots" (Rowin, "The Cinema of Joseph Cornell"). Aitken argues that the picture's chief focus is on a blurry vision through the train window, which restricts the spectator's view to the flowing cityscape, occasional picturesque sights and glimpses of fellow passengers' reflections, often framed off-center (138). Similarly, Renov postulates that the film's subject matter is "the visible world [...] enlivened by the eye and mind of the filmmaker, a dialectical play of subject and object", calling it "a luminous work, silent, filled with shimmering images that play at the edges of abstraction" (13).

As suggested before, Brakhage's works, though somewhat reviving encounters with the American wilderness through the lens of technology, evoke a far more uncanny effect since they distort the viewer-as-passenger schema by creating highly immersive and almost psychophysical sensations of motion. Drawing on the phantom ride aesthetics, both travelogues provide a novel experience of spectatorship and redefine the role of the unseen locomotive, here represented by the El and automobile, which "literally embodies an unseen energy that compels the camera, the film and the viewer down the track" and road (Gunning, "Landscape" 58-59). Hence, it appears that they invoke an almost trance-like state and restrict the viewers' perspective exclusively to the subject matter, thus fundamentally questioning the distance between them and an ever-unfolding landscape. Meanwhile, the views themselves can be referred to what Gunning calls an anti-landscape, which stands in opposition to its contemplative equivalent grounded in the Hudson River School tradition ("Landscape" 60). In other words, the train ride and road trip become a pure allegory and celebration of the movement and velocity, which is contrasted with a sense of separation created by a more lateral and traditional view of the passenger and inherent in panoramic perception as well as coincides with some core principles of Brakhage's cinema of direct seeing.

On the other hand, both *The Wonder Ring* and *Mesa Verde* tend to evoke a sense of detachment from the panorama where the windshield serves both meditative and disorientating functions by constantly providing conditions for instability prompted by illusionary physical sensations. However, contrary to the hypothesis that "the panoramic viewpoint corresponds to the magisterial gaze of manifest destiny," the films transform the standard cinematic representation of natural and urban landscapes through fostering the

technological sublime along with a sense of immersion and dissolution as well as presence and absence (Gunning 59). For instance, the cityscape in *The Wonder Ring* contains largely distinguishable elements indicative of a hectic urban life and provides the audience with brief, visceral and almost ethereal glimpses of fellow passengers, doors, windows, ticket offices, platforms, billboards, buildings or the carriage itself. Interestingly, the featured trip literally corresponds with some spectral qualities of the phantom itself, which, according to Blümlinger, derive predominantly from “the relationship between movement and stasis and [...] the clouding-over of the visible” (256). Indeed, Brakhage is more preoccupied with exploring an ontological relationship between still and moving images, also reflective of the modernist interest in the materiality of film, and thus focuses on the ways in which the image ripples as the train moves. The haunting effect is achieved primarily by means of intense and vivid color, complex superimpositions, unusual lenses, exposures and focusing, rapid and swooping hand-held camera movements, rhythmic and disjunctive editing and other techniques that expose “a mimesis of holistic-corporeal acts of seeing” (Testa, “Seeing” 293).

According to Testa, the projected images evoke a phantasmagorical sense of mystery and confusion not only through their reliance on subjectivism, but also through their associations with lyrical documentary (Baillie, Child, Deren, Frampton, Friedrich, Gehr, Gottheim, Jacobs, Kubelka, Mekas, etc.), which attempts to “capture the peculiar light, movement, and vibration of an elevated part of a quintessential public and urban subject, the New York subway” (“Seeing” 293). In this sense, *The Wonder Ring* may be also considered a partial revitalization of the city symphony as it tends to incorporate certain elements of the genre’s complex spatial arrangement of urban environments, particularly rhythmic editing, hyperkinetic camera choreography and layering of superimposed images (see e.g. Beattie 1, Verrone 127). Brakhage’s shots from the El, whereas creating a strong sense of dialectical tension, capture dazzling and almost poetic glimpses of the 1950s New York through their reliance on the genre’s “dual sense of anonymity and intimacy” as well as repetition, fragmentation and displacement (McCabe 61). Also, the artist observes and contemplates the filmed subject while reinforcing the effect of a (symbolic) landscape whose cinematic effectiveness is largely “dependent upon the lighting” (Arnheim 69).

Meanwhile, *Mesa Verde* provides the spectator with an even more unconventional viewing experience as the sole perspective of the viewer-as-passenger, namely a desert-sky-road footage, is diversified by nearly matching

superimpositions of zooms ins and outs of the structures, the supine epileptic, the deer and other objects, which offer glimpses into Brakhage's mind. Below Testa characterizes the artist's pursue of first-person travel narrative, mostly equivalent of his state of consciousness:

the subject, the "I" that approaches the ruins, registers with each shudder, zoom, and pan of the camera, with graphic-cuts and superimposed matches and mismatches, the impacted times of car and foot co-occupying the film's progressions. [...] The film's montage [...] [is] redolent of the "I" feeling and, then projecting its feeling through the camera [...]. (Testa, "Late" 15)

Furthermore, Brakhage's peculiar camerawork greatly enhances a sense of claustrophobia rather than that of wide open spaces traditionally associated with the frontier experience and thus corresponds with European road movie conventions used to depict the 1960s automobile travel (MacDonald 127–8). Hence, it appears that except for the choice of some quintessentially American settings constructed with apparently sublime western countryside and the embodiment of automotive visuality, *Mesa Verde* challenges a linear, open-ended plot and character structure as well as eliminates such framing devices as aerial, side-by-side or inside the vehicle traveling and tracking shots, often exploited in the road movie, and replaces them with side windshield views to convey "a visceral sense of traveling at a hyperhuman, modernized speed" (Laderman 15). This measure also allows Brakhage to exaggerate the filmmaker's presence, which, on the one hand, creates a strong sense of isolation, enclosure and confusion, and, on the other, enables the viewers to identify with the protagonist. Moreover, it further distorts a car-imposed and two-dimensional horizontal quality on the landscape when seen from behind the front or side windshield and allows to experience distance not only as an abstraction, but also as an extension of the stream of consciousness (Wilson 34).

As can be seen, both *The Wonder Ring* and *Mesa Verde* tend to rely on highly perceptive riding and driving sequences where the windshield acts as a framing device unfolding passing landscapes as "a narrativized screen space" and converting them into objects of visual pleasure (Friedberg, "Urban" 184). As Borden remarks, "landscapes become fragmented into a series of discrete objects, vistas and markings, but are then recombined by the particular driver, car and journey" and it is driving that defines landscape in cinematic terms, "notably those of framing, sequencing, editing, unusual juxtapositions, montage, changing pace, unexplained events and sights and

so on, all of which are induced by the speeding, kinematic nature of driving” (78). Indeed, Brakhage’s use of rhythmic editing gives rise to a strong sense of kinaesthetics, that is sensory experiences generated by motion and hence inculcates a genuinely sensory encounter with the *mise-en-scène*, which contains “items of non-contextual contemplation” (Borden 71). As the featured train and automobile rides use conditions of speed, they provide a mesmerizing intensification of urban and rural perceptions (Simmel) as well as “exacerbate a sense of strangeness, disconnection and velocity” (Borden 80), creating an almost hypnotic sensation of movement. However, the kinaesthetics of the analyzed material, which “involves a substantial re-orientation of the experience of time and space, in which sight, senses, intellect, landscape, meaning, creativity and the human body are all potentially reconfigured” (Borden 84), offers a far more disorientating experience and challenges the concept of American landscape by means of creative montage as well as selected phantom ride, city symphony and contemporary road movie stylistic traits. Namely, both films, while to some extent seeking inspiration from the sublime and picturesque qualities of natural and urban scenery, draw on Gunning’s anti-landscape and distort the traditional viewer-as-passenger’s perspective through their peculiar take on first-person narrative, which celebrates a pure velocity and ways of direct seeing.

In his 1990 lecture, “Gertrude Stein: Meditative Literature and Film,” given at the University of Colorado and later published in *Millennium Film Journal*, Brakhage commented on the nature of motion pictures, which inspired many of his projects: “Film must eschew any easily recognizable reference. [...] It must give up all that which is static, so that even its stillnesses-of-image are ordered on an edge of potential movement” (195). In line with this statement, the artist’s productions continuously test the limits of imagination and revive the freshness of a childlike visual perception before it becomes suppressed by adulthood and societal norms. Likewise, his travelogues attempt to recover and transform one’s lost capacity for vision while drawing on his phenomenological aesthetics of hypnagogic vision, also known as closed-eye vision, peripheral vision, moving visual thinking, dream vision or memory feedback (see e.g. Ganguly 67). However, what distinguishes Brakhage’s travel imagery from his other art forms is that it is not only interrogated as a mental representation of the artist’s experiences, often self-referential and independent of external stimuli, but it is also grounded in some firmly established narrative and visual conventions revolving around the theme of travelling. Simultaneously, the use of interruptive techniques like

rapid handheld camerawork, superimpositions, flash frames, anamorphic lens, bright or dim exposures, fades, odd angles, out-of-focus shots, pulsation and others, defamiliarizes and objectifies the protagonist's journey and hence documents the director's perception and extra-objective reality.

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MIGNIĘCIA RUCHOMYCH KRAJOBRAZÓW
W *THE WONDER RING* (1955) I *VISIONS IN MEDITATION #2: MESA VERDE* (1989)
STANA BRAKHAGE'A

Streszczenie

Przedmiotem artykułu jest próba analizy reprezentacji amerykańskiego krajobrazu w filmach eksperymentalnych Stana Brakhage'a *The Wonder Ring* (1955) i *Visions in Meditation #2: Mesa Verde* (1989), przedstawionego za pomocą wybranych konwencji gatunków filmowych obejmujących *phantom ride*, symfonię miejską i film drogi. Analiza materiału filmowego autorstwa Brakhage'a pod względem wspomnianych cech gatunkowych może prowadzić do wniosku, że stosowany przez reżysera niekonwencjonalny montaż, ruchy kamerą i długie ujęcia mają na celu przywołanie zniekształconego doświadczenia czuciowej i kontemplacyjnej podróży poprzez wyeksponowanie dynamiki między mobilnym spojrzeniem wirtualnym ("mobilized virtual gaze"; Friedberg 1993) ze strony widza a mijanymi obiektami obserwowanymi z perspektywy pojazdu. W szczególności, dzięki wykorzystaniu takich technik jak kamerowanie "z ręki", supernałożenie, dynamiczny "fast cutting", obiektyw anamorficzny czy też wielokrotna ekspozycja, oba filmy zdają się kwestionować panoramiczną percepcję i wyidealizowany obraz amerykańskiego krajobrazu, nierozłącznie związanego z koncepcją naturalnej i technologicznej wzniosłości (*natural/technological sublime*).

Streściła Kornelia Boczkowska

Słowa kluczowe: amerykański film awangardowy i eksperymentalny; Stan Brakhage; amerykański krajobraz; phantom ride; symfonia miejska; film drogi.