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Painting a Friend, Un-painting the World: on Some Aspects of Visuality in Jack Kerouac's *Visions of Cody*

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that Jack Kerouac's becoming a writer was somewhat fortuitous. Being preoccupied with improving his literary skills and voracious reading, Kerouac was seriously fascinated with visual arts and "on a number of occasions told friends he would have been a painter if he weren't a writer" (Adler), as it is noted in the collection of Kerouac's paintings, sketches and drawings published under the title *Departed Angels: the Lost Paintings*. The 2008 book comprises over a hundred graphic works created throughout Kerouac's life. Additionally, the Beat Generation representative worked on book covers, such as the one for *On the Road*, which has never been used. Similarly to the bulk of other Beat Generation literary contemporaries, the writer was also active in avant-garde filmmaking, the most renown example being Robert Frank's and Alfred Leslie's *Pull My Daisy* (1959), a short film provided with an off-the-camera improvised narration by Kerouac.[1]

Seemingly complete, the list of writer's direct links with the field of art seems yet to ask for at least one more reevaluation. To break the dominant tendency of dealing with *On the Road* as a literary work, it would be valuable to consider the extent to which its original scroll has become a visual art artifact. Importantly, it has been already displayed side by side with works of Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline (Tes 21, 22). Pushing the matter further, situating the scroll at the intersection of various fields of art poses another

1 Essentially, the visual arts were of great significance to other key figures of the Beat Generation. Lawrence Ferlinghetti took up painting in the late 40s and has been active ever since. Also, Gregory Corso was a talented painter who was highly esteemed and dedicated his poems to the Italians, such as Uccello or Botticelli. Finally, Allen Ginsberg expressed his admiration for the Dutch masters and attempted to transpose Cezanne's juxtapositions of colors (and jolts that came thereby) onto his poetic idiolect. I would like to thank Professor A. Robert Lee for turning my attention to some of these interdisciplinary relations.

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question — the degree of plausibility of treating the artifact as an example of concretism. It is, all in all, self-referential evidence of the process of creation; its autotelism finds a perfect match in the famous ending words of Archibald MacLeish's poem "Ars Poetica" which read: "A poem should not mean / But be."

The spontaneity of Kerouac's prose has invited commentators to compare the writer's flamboyant and impulsive writing to action painting. Juxtaposing the two, Michael Hrebeniak coins *action writing* and argues that Jackson Pollock's "vision of the relationship between the painter and the "all-over" canvass is concomitant with the principle of Spontaneous Prose, where the writer becomes the act of writing, which instantly comprises the page" (150). This results in a model of creation which "is a process, not a goal; a production, not an illustration" (151).

Wide involvement in the field of visual arts could not have remained without any stamp on Kerouac's prose, *Visions of Cody* (VOC) being the best exemplification. Originally titled as *Visions of Neal* (naturally referring to Neal Cassady), the novel was written in the early 1952, partially comprised of rewritten events of *On the Road* and eventually published posthumously as *Visions of Cody* in 1973. As it is noted by many commentators, the book was the immediate consequence of Kerouac's dissatisfaction with the results achieved with *On the Road* and his being introduced to the idea of "sketching" with words. At some point Kerouac ceased to perceive the hastiness of description as the main tenet of an ideal rendering of reality through words. What began to be exerted instead was the idea of non-preconceived "sketching" with words, which was to resemble a painter's work. Kerouac sets up some of his methodology in "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" — activating the new technique should involve setting the object "before the mind, either in reality … (before a landscape or teacup or old face), or … in the memory … " whereas the procedure necessitates an "undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words". Once again, the correspondence between such procedures and action painting appears to be clear:

> If a Pollock canvass is the record of a dance in color, *Visions of Cody* is the record of a dance in language. There is the same intense focus on the medium of the art and the imagination, the same sense that texture and motion or the implication of motion is more important than overall architecture. There is the same presence of the personal, the performer. (Hunt 144)

What is also pervaded with visual thinking are the writer's ideas on timing, centre of interest and structure of work. Kerouac quits a "horizontal," thus

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plot-striving, arrangement of the novel, which is the case with *On the Road,* for the sake of a "vertical" one opting for the insight and dissection of a precise moment (Hunt 2). Additionally, as an avid movie-lover, the author of *On the Road* could not exclude cinematographic influences from his methodological essentials. In an article "Belief & Technique for Modern Prose" (1959) Kerouac coins the term "Bookmovie," "the movie in words" for the sake of true "visual American form" (Sterritt 9). Despite the scarcity of comment left by the American author, the "Bookmovie" seems to be an extended idea of "sketching," a smooth and fluid movement of present-tense sketches in which the past and the future, the myth and the real blend into one compact "now."

As regards *Visions of Cody*, such sketches form much of Part One and Part Three of the novel. The former, devoted to portrayals of New York, among many others illustrates places like men's room at the railway station, St. Patrick's Cathedral, a B-movie cinema, or an employment agency; the new technique of spontaneous and lengthy, gradually dissective sketching is clearly palpable:

> And over at third avenue and 9th street is a beat employment agency; it's over a music store which (Western Music Co.) has a dirty piss splashed and littered sooty sidewalk in front, … *Western Music Co.* written in white against green glass with lights behind but so sooty is the white part it makes a dirty sad effect… . Black with dust planking is hall leading in – sign says (34 is the number) – *chefs, cooks, bakers, waiters, bartenders, etc.* – In the office (brown light) sits a shirtsleeve vest brownsuit boss at desk … as two beat clients wait in blue leather chairs … . Building is ancient – 1880 redbrick – three stories – over its roof I can see cosmic Italian oldfashioned eighteen story office block building with ornaments and blueprint lights inside that reminds me of eternity, … black stairs like fire escapes … the dungeon of Time underneath just a few feet over the Snake … .(VOC 20)

Occasionally, spontaneous verbal illustrations are accompanied by their graphic counterparts, perhaps for the sake of yet a more precise effect. Importantly, sketches often include or are interwoven with writer's impressions of Cody/ Neal Cassady as it was one of Kerouac's main aims to give a full account of his friend's *being*. The novel is partially a bildungsroman bearing witness to the extent of how visually-oriented and indebted to pop culture Kerouac's perception of his friend and the world was. It is through a series of pictorial metaphors that Cody Pomeray's adolescence is organized by Jack Duluoz (Kerouac's alter ego). The main hero of the novel imagines his friend, Watson, to have been sleeping like "the little boys in fleecy nightgowns in mattress advertisements of the *Saturday Evening Post*" (VOC 84); also, he receives his first suit from "Bela Lugosi vampire Count bowing to the young hero at the

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door of the rainy castle …" (VOC 84). Moreover, he spends his time fixing his eyes on issues of *True Confessions* magazine and literally grows up side by side with "a movie that was so completely beat it could only be called a C- or a D-movie" (VOC 73). Visual materials teach him how to desire (15-year old Cody is enticed by a girl called Marie, "the epitome of the cute little sexy fleshpot of honey, gold and shiny hairs that you see in illustrations of Coca-Cola girls …") (VOC 97). It is also through a visual metaphor that we learn about Kerouac's becoming a writer when he states: "I had thought in, and before, college, that to be a writer was like being … the Emile Zola of the film they made about him with Paul Muni shouting angrily in the streets at the dumb and stupid masses, as if he knew everything and they didn't know a damn thing" (VOC 299).

Although divergent in methodology of creation, *Visions of Cody* and *On the Road* agreeably seek to impose a mythical status on Neal Cassady; they both aim at depicting him as an American angel, a demigod-like figure whose capabilities remain beyond one's comprehension. In the later novel what supports Kerouac's endeavors are myths created by the visual media. The legend of Cody Pomeray is anchored in no less legendary equivalents. Namely, the character resembles an American performer, Gene Autry (VOC 392); he also finds to be superior to Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire* as he "has a thinner waist and bigger arms" (VOC 346), and haunts Duluoz after mutual travel experiences — " . . . though still like a fiend I see him rushing, gliding, like Groucho Marx in heaven …" (VOC 403). In a way, Pomeray is elusive and "too shiny" for any representation whatsoever as it is observed by the narrator: "Let's swing a camera down on Cody and catch him hurrying up the ramp … , but Gad he would outrun the camera!" (VOC 372). On one occasion Duluoz feels too confused to distinguish Cody's antics with The Three Stooges-like passers-by from Moe, Larry and Curly (and Cody?) on the cinema screen. Also, thanks to the Hollywood characters, Duluoz draws a lesson about Cody's ordeals and in a retroactive manner justifies his *beatitude* (VOC 353, 354). Finally, Duluoz/Kerouac does not refrain from projecting a mythical status on either himself or other characters. On the occasion of a vibrant evening he feels like Jean Gabin (VOC 218) or imitates an American comedian, Milton Berle, in spontaneous verbal sketches in Part Three (VOC 312). What is more, transcribing tape recordings, he leaves a comment about Evelyn's (Carolyn Cassady) words pointing out that she is "*(laughing like Irene Dunne in an old Cary Grant comedy)*" (VOC 281). Additionally, the way his friend, Joanna (Luanne Henderson) is sitting on a bed is compared to "a sad French painting of 1950, not a Modigliani but that emaciated Breton genius

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with the sad longbodied Bohemians in the room, that I saw in that there *New York Times*" (VOC 393). Imposing lengthy and stretched lines of Modigliani or Ernst (as it was probably his "At the Rendezvous with Friends" the writer must have seen), allows for the suggestion that Kerouac lived among and through images quite literally.

It is also Kerouac's account of reality that bears the hallmarks of the sensitivity of a painter or director, be it an acclaimed or imaginary one. Certain depictions, unlike "sketches," are directly marked with meta-language. Describing clouds "that always called Cody's attention to his immortal destiny," the writer recalls "the clouds that in the cartoon sky had all the nostalgia of sweet and haunted distance that pictures give them" (VOC 73). Further, Kerouac's vision of background can be "dark dirt which is like the concoction of an artist palette after a short rain …" (VOC 98). We also find that South Main Street in L.A. looks like "a realistic American painting … , the great square stage and racing tip sheets tacked up on right – a family, mother with long tumbly hair in overalls and black jacket fiddles pennies into weighing machine with the kids, the old man in yachting cap with anchor and wino pants …" (VOC 145). Perhaps the most daring attempt of illustrating Kerouac's vision of both a landscape and Cody with the mediacy of visual nomenclature is to be found in Part Three — Duluoz describes the charms of San Joaquin Valley in California through the eye of a camera as if he was a director:

> … on the soft dust of the starwhite dirtroad in the moonlight softly roll the big pneumatic tires of the camera truck, about forty miles an hour, scooping up a low cloud for the stars; … and on the road itself Hopalong Cassidy, in his white hat and on his famed pony … followed by a band of rustlers, they catch up by the moment; the camera truck is leading and rolling them down the slope of a long hill; soon we will see views of a roadside cut, … then the great moony grove suddenly appearing and disappearing; … then a sudden splash of dark that completely and miraculously amazingly obscures Hoppy in a momentary invisibility … . (VOC 330)

Regardless of the type of depiction, verbal and "vertical" dissection of an image prevails as a priority. As a rule, Kerouac attempts to bite to the bone into what he is confronted with; he *unpaints* the image by scratching off subsequent layers of (un)reality with precise words. He, again in a retroactive manner, ascribes a similar endeavor to Cody who was often

> … fixing his eyes on the mosaic of the tiles on the barbershop floor where he'd long imagined each little square could be peeled back endlessly, tiny leaf by tiny leaf, revealing in little microcosmic encyclopedia the complete story of every person that ever lived as far back as the beginning … . (VOC 73)

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Boring through the texture of reality in *Visions of Cody* echoes and seconds the mad search for "IT" in *On the Road* and is very much aligned with the Beats' general agenda of reaching the very core and meaning of existence.

Alongside films and paintings, Kerouac's artistic endeavor of grasping the entity of visions of Cody employs ekphrasis in relation to some of Neal Cassady's family photos. Interestingly, the almost-chronological arrangement of ekphrastic comments allows the writer to present Cody as an angel-like figure who as if is torn between the heavenly character of his soul and poor conditions of the earthly and mortal life. Kerouac begins such a narrative with an old photo of baby Cody and his father:

> There is nothing inexpressibly sadder than that old photo of his father's 1928 house-built-on-a-truck he rattled from West Virginia to West Dakota in, for no reason whatever; baby Cody is in the picture, pudgy, swaddled in a wicker swing, beaming on the world, a sun shining in the pale of the daguerreotype brown, … the roof of the housetruck protruding into the tragic trees … , lost, sad, endless — Eternity standing with her hands behind her back … . (VOC 418)

What we find confronted is the power of life with its sanctity epitomized by Cody and the limits of human existence accompanied with the lack of the ultimate purpose. "Beaming" and "swaddled in a wicker swing," Cody is yet again retroactively associated with baby Christ-figure; he is a future savior brought to breathe new life into the American spirit. Another ekphrastic commentary touches upon a family photo, which in Kerouac's opinion, must be a picture taken at the Sunday picnic. What pervades the writer's description is the sense of change and loss when happy moments and family's paraphernalia are confronted with their successive decay. It is also the city of Denver that transforms to its own detriment and begins "to imitate LA and spread for miles" (VOC 444). Two final, subsequent photos are in Kerouac's eyes imbued with the sense of lost chance and inevitable maturity that brings embitterment. Eleven-year old Cody is "grown big and rocky and gaunt and manly in his doom. Hope expresses itself in the composition of flowers, light, and leaf in the background … ," in his eyes there is "all this human belief, at eleven there's belief (1937) which is gone and should have ripened. Has it not ripened?" (VOC 445). Finally, commenting on the energy and joy that emanate from the photo of recently-married Cody and Evelyn, the writer concludes:

> How can the tragic children tell what it is their fathers killed, enjoyed, and what joyed in and killed them to make them crop open like vegetable windfalls in a bin…poor manure, man… . [S]o there he smiles in his youth, my father, my Cody – and now

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> what fodder, what box thing — … no hope whatever in gleaning the secret from our ancestral he-doers and she-makers. (VOC 454)

Yet, as a rule for Kerouac, what seems to work as the last resort is God — he finishes the series of ekphrases quoting the excerpt from Dante's *Paradiso*: "'Tutta tua vision fa manifesta, e lascia pur grattar.'[2] These lines are the foundations of a great design" (VOC 454). Cacciaguida's words in the canto XVII edify Kerouac (alike Dante) and restore his trust in the truth, importance and salvation that comes with his visions and his faith.

Finally, one may find certain passages of *Visions of Cody* as nothing short of a methodological or theoretical treaty devoted to the matter of visuality. In Part Three we may encounter a short discussion over T.S. Eliot's concept of an image. Duluoz/ Kerouac quotes the poet's words: "'Obviously, an image which is immediately and unintentionally ridiculous is merely a fancy'"(VOC 355), to refute them calling upon the clarity of young Cody's mind. The writer argues: "there were no images springing up in the brain of Cody Pomeray that were repugnant to him at the outset. They were all beautiful" and as he further adds, "it was just a matter of believing in his [Cody's] own soul, … loving the story of your own life, loving the dreams in your sleep as parts of your life, as little children do and Cody did" (VOC 355, 356). Kerouac's endorsement of the power of intuition and a non-discursive approach towards reality bears much resemblance to Baudelaire's advocacy of the descriptor's child-sensitive perception in "The Painter of Modern Life," and is yet another reason for the employment of his spontaneous, non-selective, Whitmanesque poetics. Also, Kerouac's idea of the Take — "the actual juice suction of the camera catching a vastly planned action, the moment when we all know the camera is germinating, a thing is being born whether we planned it right or not" (VOC 325) appears to be concurrent with the artistic agenda of many avant-garde American filmmakers who emerged after the war.

Summing up, *Visions of Cody* bear witness to the extent of how visually-oriented Kerouac's perception of his life, his friends and the world was and how great a number of perspectives such understanding of the novel entails. One may say that Kerouac's account of Cody is in many ways an anamorphic illustration — by means of "sketching," mythologizing, or interacting, the writer seeks to establish the most suitable perspective(s) to reveal the mystery — his friend's essence previously hidden behind the distorted and deficient

2 "Make manifest thy vision utterly/ And let them scratch wherever is the itch" See: Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso.* Trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Ed. Dennis McCarthy. Web. 14 July 2012.

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images. It is finally the novel itself which achieves the status of an anamorphic work of art — it allows for multi-perspective, readerly approaches.

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