Scenic Wonders of New Jersey by Gregg Biermann

The three places in suburban New Jersey that I have chosen to represent in a trio of recent videos do not offer post-card enshrined views, iconic architecture, historical narratives or symbolic importance. They are, however, all part of my immediate environment and everyday life. *Hackensack Motet* (2006) takes for its subject the main street of a small New Jersey city that lies in the shadow of Manhattan. *New Jersey Gradual* (2008) scans the Garden State Plaza mall parking lot and garage in Paramus. *Traffic Patterns* (2009) is shot on parts of Routes 4 and 17. These locations are only 8 miles from Manhattan; however they typify America in general more than they do New Jersey specifically. The fact that these places are so ordinary inspired me to contend with their images, despite my own ambivalence towards them – or maybe because of it.

In each of the three videos, my camera records the world through the front windshield of a moving automobile. The ubiquity of motor vehicles is itself responsible for the creation of the contemporary suburban environment. The parking lots, highways, strip malls, gas stations, driveways of the suburban environment are part of the infrastructure that car transportation demands. Cars also significantly transform how we view the world. The cautionary statement "objects in mirror are closer than they appear" that is inscribed on the side mirrors of American automobiles reinforces this view. That is, our understanding of the spaces around us is altered by our position inside the machine – great distances are collapsed and the times it takes to traverse these distances are also collapsed. What the automobile alters for the driver is not only visual and temporal but also psychological. The equation of driving and freedom has long been part of the advertising of the auto industry, which has successfully inserted the car into the American dream. There is some truth in this advertising because by owning a car I can determine where and when to travel and then operate the vehicle myself – thus the name auto-mobile. In addition, the car also offers the feeling of power through its overwhelming physical prowess over pedestrians and bicyclists. On the other hand, suburban roadways can limit freedom as they often welcome no other form of transportation. In doing so the suburban environment itself binds Americans to loans, insurance policies, repairs and gasoline costs: burdens that can limit individual freedoms. However the perception of freedom through the automobile is powerful enough for Americans to successfully obscure all of the many extremely negative social, environmental, political and medical consequences of a car ownership society.

That the technologies of cinema and the automobile developed simultaneously is not an accident. Looking back to the pre-cinematic work of Eadweard Muybridge and E.J. Marey, we can see that their central concern was locomotion. Looking at the world through the windows of an automobile creates a primal sense of motion – the windshield is analogous to a movie screen. The car obviously allows for enhanced physical mobility as the cinema can allow for a kind of psychic or imagined mobility. Both automobile occupants and movie spectators look at the world while seated – the former literally belted into position. Although the movie viewer is located in the static place in a movie theater or at home, the screen reveals photographic impressions of the places the camera has been. The viewer can travel from one place to another within the rectangle of the screen. Looking through the car windshield, one can feel variously: meditative during a long night drive; exhilarated while accelerating through space on an empty road; and furious at other drivers who are competing for the same space. Of course, motion pictures can also produce similar powerful affective states. These feelings triggered by both cars and motion pictures have in common a strong visual component.

Ethnographic documentary filmmakers would be criticized for filming people from another culture from a vehicle, as the glass and steel of the vehicle would physically and psychologically separate the filmmakers from the living subjects that they were seeking to represent. The documentary filmmaker is

supposed to be immersed and the moving vehicle sustains the anonymity of the filmmaker and at the same time makes them a voyeur. When it comes to representing the suburban landscape or lifestyle, the automobile is an essential component of cinematic apparatus. One need not be a pedestrian to record the pedestrian. In this way, I become analogous to the ethnographer, simultaneously becoming a participant and observer by driving and filmmaking.

These three video works are all shot on location but also in the virtual spaces made possible by 3D computer animation software. In all of these works I've come to be very interested in the possibilities of manipulating live action video sequences as textures in virtual 3D animated spaces. The contrast between “real” recorded spaces and virtual computer generated ones is also important. The on location recordings carry with them whatever sense of place the location offers. The virtual spaces are created by the interior of the virtual 3D cubes, spheres and cylinders. These objects are abstract, generic forms, yet these videos apparently move the viewer inside them. In all of these works, there are two distinct cameras at play. The actual video camera mounted behind my windshield is one, and the virtual camera floating inside the virtual space is the other. There is a tension between these two cameras as they simultaneously produce two vantage points from which to view the imagery. At times they vie for primacy and at other times one or the other perspective seems to dominate in the viewer's consciousness. There are also two kinds of movement in these works. The first kind is the movement generated by my camera as it records the landscape from my car. The second sort of motion is the impossibly smooth computer animated movement of the virtual shapes. When these movements happen simultaneously they create a complex perceptual task for the viewer.

Hackensack Motet takes a virtual cube and inscribes video images onto each of the six sides. It also incorporates a reflective sphere that uses ray tracing to fragment and restructure (on a cosmic axis) otherwise ordinary video footage of Hackensack’s Main Street. The interaction of the movement of the recorded urban landscape and the smooth pre-programmed movement of a virtual cube results in a kaleidoscopic visual transformation of the landscape.

Hackensack Motet is shot on Hackensack's Main Street which is a scrappy version of a traditional American main street. The street is an ungentrified commercial strip populated by struggling mom and pop businesses, ethnic food restaurants and markets, and both private and municipal offices. It is now a vestigial reminder of the American ideal of the commercial downtown district that has been somewhat forgotten in suburbia in favor of different sorts of shopping centers, like strip-malls with their chain stores and massive parking lots. My original inspiration for this work was the early film *A Trip Down Market Street* (1905) in which a vehicle-mounted camera records a single dolly shot down a busy turn of the century San Francisco thoroughfare. My work also consists of a single continuous dolly shot. What makes my video different from *A Trip Down Market Street* is that the interaction between the recorded material and the animated material drastically increases the spatial complexities of the pictorial space as the following story suggests. At the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey in Summit where this piece was installed some years ago, a woman approached the piece and exclaimed: “I lived in Hackensack for 35 years and that is not Hackensack!”

The other inspiration for the work was the daily television reports during the Iraq war about the holy city of Karbala. I reflected on the notion of a holy place and I wondered if it would be possible to make a work that might consecrate the otherwise prosaic city of Hackensack in some way. I felt that I could substantially transform the space of main street through the power of CGI. Additionally, the audio composition is made from samples of early Christian choral music and the motet (of the title) is a form of liturgical music. All three pieces make use of choral music samples in order to reinforce the feeling of sacredness. Each of these videos attempts to posit a banal location as a spiritual place. Part of my

intention in this work was to approach the numinous through the digital transformation of the commonplace. The idea of downtowns, malls, and highways as sacred spaces might be linked to the Protestant work ethic, as these are the places that allow the good work of trade to be accomplished.

Thinking about these three pieces in retrospect -- along with my earlier *Material Excess* (2003), which posits the afterlife as a consumerist blizzard of animated junk mail and junk food -- I can say that my interest in the collision of the sacred and the profane was influenced by the zeitgeist. During the period when these pieces were created, America was in the midst of an unprecedented intrusion of religious rhetoric into secular life. Christian fundamentalists were granted unprecedented influence under George W. Bush. They sought to inject religion into public discourse, public policy and public institutions. They revised history to paint the skeptic founding fathers as being motivated by explicitly Christian principles. They attempted to reconcile science with scripture by supporting the teaching of “intelligent design” in public schools. They justified the war in Iraq in medieval religious terms: as a “crusade”. They funneled billions of federal tax dollars into “faith based initiatives”. Republican members of the Congress and President Bush even created a new religiously motivated law that specifically interfered with the individual private lives of a brain-dead woman and her family in the Terry Schiavo case. The President imposed new injunctions against Federal funding for abortion and stem cell research that were religiously motivated. Religious-minded politicians even tried to create a new anti-gay amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The mainstream news media did not seem too keen on investigating the religious nature of these actions by public officials.

Of course, my own work doesn't take this on as explicit subject matter and it does not make an explicit political statement. I did find it ironic that the theocratic goals of the Bush administration had some striking similarities to those of the Islamic terrorists that were supposed to be the bitter enemies of the American way of life. Both groups want to bring about a world where religious morality and the laws of the state are identical. I wondered if such an America, taken to its logical conclusion, would look the same. Would it look corporate? By subtly coloring banal places in a sacred light, I sought to place my fingers on America's pressure points and fault lines. In *New Jersey Gradual,* which was shot in the Garden State Plaza Mall parking lot, the clash between the sacred and the profane is most exaggerated. The word “gradual” refers both to the slow and continuous pace of the piece as well as an important choral segment of a Catholic Mass. It is difficult to think of a more profane space than the Garden State Plaza parking lot. Because of Bergen county's “blue laws”, this mall and local commercial strips like it are closed on Sundays in recognition of the tension between consumerism and holiness. Near one of the entrances to the mall parking lot stands the Arcola Korean Methodist Church that has a sign that reads “open on Sundays”. Despite the apparent dissonance between commercialism and spirituality, during the post 9/11 spike in patriotic fervor the born-again President Bush told the country that shopping is patriotic.

The massive Garden State Plaza parking lot is a simplistic landscape, an undefined territory with a single purpose: to temporarily store great numbers of cars while consumers shop. It is a large flat expanse of asphalt, punctuated only by painted lines, sign posts and street lights. It has little apparent aesthetic value. Because of its singular purpose, there is no reason for people to linger in this space and it becomes devoid of street life. When compared with traditional downtown urban areas that have a specific sense of place, spaces like this parking lot seem to obliterate specificity. As my car-mounted camera passes by the facades of various big-box stores, it records corporate signage. Ironically the signage does not really locate the viewer in a specific geographic location because these stores and restaurants are chains that have many locations across the country. This could be anywhere. Yet, judging by their ubiquity, these homogeneous places are ones that Americans seem to prefer over the traditional urban downtown.

The virtual shape that is employed in *New Jersey Gradual* is a sphere. Like the parking lot itself the sphere is simple. The computer graphics term for it is a “primitive”. Unlike *Hackensack Motet* and *Traffic Patterns* there are no other 3D objects to be encountered. Because of its relative simplicity *New Jersey Gradual* comes the closest of the three pieces to depicting the reality of its chosen location (although it too, at times, can verge into the cosmic). In this piece the sphere undergoes a series of pre-programmed rotations across several axes and this interacts with the single dolly shot of the lot. The texture mapping of the video onto the sphere leaves two blank areas that appear as “black holes” in the image. Parts of the image near these black circular shapes become increasingly distorted. Perhaps these black holes can be seen as consuming the landscape or perhaps they are simply geometric abstractions jamming the pictorial space. The cinematic recording of driving through the parking lot is heavily mediated by the changing virtual position of the viewer, which is like moving one's head along the surface of a curved screen. The original vantage point of the video camera within the car is altered by the spherical projection of the texture mapping such that part of the image that was originally in front of the real camera is now behind the virtual camera. This leads to the examination of formerly marginal parts of the original frame.

Traffic Patterns (2009) again utilizes a moving automobile to record the landscape as the vehicle traverses the veins and arteries that connect some of these locations. Like the parking lot, the highway has a single function: to provide a path for moving motor vehicles between destinations. Otherwise, it is another null space. This drive does not seem to be an epic, romantic or mythical one from a commercial “road movie”. Nor does it immediately suggest either individual freedom or adventure but rather, it presents ordinary traffic in an ordinary landscape. The imagery of tail lights on a congested highway must be one of the most common visual experiences in American culture and it is often associated with frustration. The other motorists on the road are almost always anonymous (except what we can discern through the model and year of their vehicle) and this of course transforms the suburban landscape into one teeming with steel clad interlopers.

In *Traffic Patterns*, video sequences shot on New Jersey's Routes 4 and 17 are wrapped around a virtual 3D cylinder and the virtual camera moves around inside it, distorting the raw footage and encountering various reflective objects. Unlike the previous two videos, *Traffic Patterns* is not constructed from a single continuous shot but rather from a rapid inter-cutting of sequences that create powerful shifts in space and time. This metrical editing procedure results in a rhythmic montage. The choral music based audio composition is cut to provide precise sync to the image. The insistent audio/visual rhythm creates a contemplative, almost hypnotic feeling – perhaps similar to the effects of chanting or meditation. The ending sequence of the piece includes synthesized electronic sounds. In Ray Kurzweil's book *The Age of Spiritual Machines* he argues that the calculating capability of computers will continue to increase and eventually will surpass the abilities of the human mind. He speculates that this would include the human capacity for spirituality. I like his idea of worshiping, praying, transcendental machines and this informed the combination of vocal and electronic samples.

Even though all of these ideas swirl around the work as inspirations, contexts or associations, these works are most centrally visual experiences. There are no words spoken on the soundtrack and none written on the screen. I am negotiating the cars, roads and buildings of my own environment through their images. These images are mediated and abstracted by the computer graphics processes that I have described. In some ways my work connects to earlier avant-garde transformations of the cityscape. For example, Francis Thompson's film *N.Y., N.Y.* (1957) employed a variety of custom-made kaleidoscopic lenses, mirrors and prisms that distort and fragment the shots and scenes that create a portrait of New York City. It makes use of the mechanical and optical technologies of its day to actively manipulate the

visual forms of buildings, vehicles, and people found in the modern urban landscape. In *N.Y., N.Y.* there is a tension between the representational and the abstract. Like Thompson did, I look to contemporary technologies to advance innovative compositional strategies that transform the visual field. The results are novel and unique to the digital age. They could not have been produced in film. In this way this work is still in the spirit of the historical avant-garde cinema, despite being made in the post-modern age.