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“Bringing the Unseen out of the Shadows”: In Pursuit of Ciné-Trance and Film-Performance in Ben Russell’s *the quarry* (2002) and *TRYPPS #7 (BADLANDS)* (2010)

Abstract: This paper aims to present the ways in which Ben Russell’s films, *the quarry* and *TRYPPS #7 (BADLANDS)*, tend to draw on conventions traditionally associated with ciné-trance (*TRYPPS #7*), as developed by Jean Rouch, and film-performance (*TRYPPS #7* and *the quarry*). While both pictures invoke the presence of the sublime, *the quarry* transforms the featured landscape into an image-object and hence fails to represent the lived experience and instead provides the audience with a spectacle or a sensation simultaneously engaging them in the performance on their own terms. Meanwhile, *TRYPPS #7*’s reliance on ciné-trance becomes more evident in its attempt to expose the hypnotic and deceptive capabilities of moving-image media, which do not only distort the spectator’s rational sense of space and perspective, but also connote the phenomenon of possession itself through featuring the protagonist’s narcotic trance. To achieve the desired effect, Russell creates an atmosphere of sublimity and transcendence by means of structural and avant-garde film’s devices that transcend the realist–narrative paradigm of anthropological filmmaking, including static and kinetic montage, multiple perspectives, hand-held and rotating camera movements, intimate long takes or fixed shots of extended duration.

Keywords: American experimental and avant-garde film; ciné-trance; film-performance; Ben Russell; *the quarry*; *TRYPPS #7 (BADLANDS)*

In this paper I present various ways in which Ben Russell’s films, *the quarry* and *TRYPPS #7 (BADLANDS)*, tend to draw on conventions traditionally associated with ciné-trance (*TRYPPS #7*) and film-performance (*TRYPPS #7* and *the quarry*) through their reliance on fictive space and time or recomposing the participants’ personalities, which aims to reinterpret the idea of travel, movement, trance and hallucination by

way of a romantic vision.¹ While both pictures dwell on "the presence of the sublime," they seem to differ in the extent to which they borrow from experimental ethnography (Maya Deren, Jean Rouch, etc.) and the avant-garde ideas of altered perception (Stan Brakhage, Paul Sharits, etc.).² Particularly, whereas *the quarry* "serves as a testament both to cinema's failure to reproduce the lived moment and to its success in replacing that moment with one that is equally wondrous", *TRYPPS #7* seeks inspiration from phenomenological experience and secular spiritualism by juxtaposing an individual psychedelic experience with the formal abstraction of the desert landscape of Badlands National Park.³ To achieve the desired effect, the filmmaker creates an atmosphere of sublimity and transcendence by means of both static and kinetic montage, multiple perspectives, hand-held and rotating camera movements, intimate long takes or fixed shots of extended duration.

Originally developed by Jean Rouch and based on the process of participatory filming, the theory of ciné-trance combined a cinematic ontology with the phenomenon of trance by means of an active, embodied and hand-held camera to induce a creative possession-like state involving the filmmaker as well as their subjects and audiences.⁴ The very notion, however, is often seen as problematic. It was first coined by Rouch in "The Camera and the Men", which, while dealing with the history and theory of anthropology film, defined the term as a dynamic and improvised relationship between a filmmaker and their hand-held camera that synthesizes Vertov's "cine-eye", "eye in movement" or "mechanical cine-eye ear" with Flaherty's "participating camera":

For me then, the only way to film is to walk with the camera, taking it where it is most effective and improvising another type of ballet with it in which the camera becomes as alive as the men it is filming. [...] [I]nstead of using the zoom, the cameraman-director can really get into the subject. Leading or following a dancer, priest, or craftsman, he is no longer himself, but a mechanical eye accompanied by an electronic ear. It is this strange state of transformation that takes place in the filmmaker that I have called, analogously to possession phenomena, 'ciné-trance'.⁵

¹ Arnd Schneider and Caterina Pasqualino, "Experimental Film and Anthropology," in *Experimental Film and Anthropology*, ed. Arnd Schneider and Caterina Pasqualino (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 6.

² Genevieve Yue, "Magnetic Disorientation: Navigating Ben Russell's TRYPPS" (presentation, Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference, Chicago, IL, March 6–10, 2013).

³ Ben Russell, "the quarry (preview only)," *Ben Russell on Vimeo*, <https://vimeo.com/6790577>, acc. September 20, 2017.

⁴ Jean Rouch, "On the Vicissitudes of the Self: The Possessed Dancer, the Magician, the Sorcerer, the Filmmaker, and the Ethnographer," *Journal in Visual Communication* 5, 1 (1978): 7–8; Dan Yakir, "Ciné-trance: The Vision of Jean Rouch," *Film Quarterly* 31 (1978): 7.

⁵ Jean Rouch, "The Camera and Man," *Studies in Visual Communication* 1, 1 (1974): 38.

It seems then that the very act of shooting possession rituals, central for Rouch's 1950s and 1960s filmmaking and influenced by experimental ethnography, visual anthropology, *cinéma vérité*, the avant-garde and the auteurist cinema of the French New Wave, lifted the filmmaker-cameraman onto a plane of a spiritual out-of-body experience so that they would appear to be almost spirit-possessed to those they filmed:

I now believe that for the people who are filmed, the 'self' of the filmmaker changes in front of their eyes during the shooting. He no longer speaks, except to yell out incomprehensible orders ("Roll!" "Cut!"). He now only looks at them through the intermediary of a strange appendage and only hears them through the intermediary of a shotgun microphone [...] For the Songhay-Zarma, who are now quite accustomed to film, my 'self' is altered in front of their eyes in the same way as is the 'self' of the possession dancers: it is the 'film trance' (*ciné-trance*) of the one filming the 'real trance' of the other.⁶

In other words, by incorporating fictional aspects of the imagery with an ethnographic, empirical, objective and indexical documentary, Rouch draws numerous parallels between the transformative properties of cinema and the magical qualities of possession, thereby proposing a new definition of *cinéma vérité* capable of blending science and technology with art and spirituality. Russell confirms this view and describes *ciné-trance* as "the creative euphoria of filmmaking, of losing oneself at one's work – behind the camera, at the editing table, and writing and recording narration", which refers back to Dziga Vertov's *kinopravda* and new technologized ways of seeing.⁷ The *ciné-trance*, however, relied on the *ciné-eye* based on the idea that the camera allowed Rouch to see the gods as well as produced a cinematic truth related to that offered by *cinéma vérité*. Feld pinpoints that "for Rouch the camera is not a voyeur through which one culture may peer at another; it is a catalyst through which the ethnographer-filmmaker, as author, creates a statement about the human interaction that is the basis of the ethnographic experience."⁸ Hence, the camera conveys a highly personal, subjective and spirited first person narrative, manifested in Rouch's use of continuous take shot-sequences, which laid the foundations for the emergence of improvised fictional cinema based on sync sound, direct shooting and ethnographic realities.⁹

Similarly to *cinéma vérité*, also considered a form of observational cinema if devoid of a narrator's voice-over, the focus of Rouch's films, which draw on the genre's

⁶ Rouch, "On the Vicissitudes of the Self," 7–8.

⁷ Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: the Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 219.

⁸ Steve Feld, "Avant Propos: Jean Rouch," *Studies in Visual Communication* 1, 1 (1974): 35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

use of synchronous sounds, long takes and hand-held camera, is on minimizing the presence of the camera in an attempt to reveal or rediscover a cinematic truth and highlight often neglected subjects.¹⁰ Russell defines the ciné-trance as an ethnographic technique whose implementation results in a new form of cinéma vérité through the unity between film technology and "the mimeticism of 'primitive' religion": "Like the spirit-possessed who leave 'themselves' and become their doubles in the spirit world, the filmmaker in a ciné-trance leaves 'himself' and becomes one with the equipment strapped to his body."¹¹ Marie suggests that cinéma vérité's new authenticity of representation was due to the two key factors, namely the presence of the filmmaker in the diegetic space of the film, which did not jeopardize its veracity, as well as the use of synchronized sound.¹² While the possession ritual constituted the point of intersection in Rouch's unusual combination of the ethnographic, surrealist and cinéma vérité aesthetics, these measures allowed him and his followers to shift the viewers' attention to the act of filming rather than the profilmic event as well as the theatricality of the filmed ritual. Russell draws certain parallels between the ciné-trance and the concept of performance and ritual:

The conjunction of documentary realism and trance poses a host of contradictions concerning visual evidence, authenticity, and ethnographic subjectivity. The possession ritual is only completed by being witnessed because the performance constitutes a proof of the existence of gods or spirits. As a spectacle, it challenges conventional forms of spectatorship and passive observation, as spectators are often drawn into the trance. While this is part of the attraction of such rituals to filmmakers, films of possession do not necessarily retain the same structure of spectatorship. The difference between possession rituals and the filming of possession rituals is precisely the inscription of technology. The image of ecstasy stands in for the experience of possession.¹³

Schechner pinpoints that experimental film, seen as the performative act, draws primarily on the repetition of images to disrupt perception and consequently evokes an emotional response in the participants or enables an altered state of consciousness, which sometimes leads them to experience the sensation of possession.¹⁴ Schneider and Pasqualino note that except for the use of repetition, experimental filmmakers often employ fast or slow motion or disturb the rhythm and image sequencing to

¹⁰ See e.g. Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000), 67; Alan Rosenthal, "Emile de Antonio: An Interview," *Film Quarterly* 31, 1 (1978): 7.

¹¹ Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, 220.

¹² Michel Marie, "Direct," in *Anthropology-Reality-Cinema: Films of Jean Rouch*, ed. Mick Eaton (London: British Film Institute, 1979), 35-9.

¹³ Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, 194.

¹⁴ Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 35-116.

either condense or expand the concept of space and time, hence transfiguring reality and one's sense of spatiality and temporality. Besides the aforementioned traits, performance in experimental film, as analyzed in anthropological terms, shares some other essential qualities with trance and possession rituals, including the flow of a force, which typically occurs when the ritual reaches its peak, detachment from the historical time and record or loss of historical memory, sensuousness of a cinematic material as well as the politics of form.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Leiris describes the performance of a possessed person as a trance-like state halfway between life and theater, which involves an utter transformation of the subject, evident particularly in the central phase or a symbolic climax of possession. In his analysis of Rouch's *Les Maîtres fous* [*The Mad Masters*], which featured possession rituals, Taussig comments on the role of editing in altering the filmmakers' and protagonists' identity: "The film with its ability to explore the optical unconscious, to come close and enlarge, to frame and to montage, creates in this sudden juxtaposition a suffusion of mimetic magic."¹⁶ According to Henley, it is the practice of mimesis and ciné-trance that allows Rouch's camera to convey visions reminiscent to those of the possessed rather than simply shot in the manner of Vertov's ciné vérité.¹⁷ Russell's works, however, rely on elements of both ciné-trance and film-performance in a more symbolic sense; whereas *the quarry* simply attests for "the total impossibility of representing lived experience, much less the experience of the sublime",¹⁸ *TRYPPS #7* forms "a broader project of 'psychedelic ethnography' – a practice whose aim is a knowledge of the Self/self, a movement towards understanding in which the trip is both the means and the end."¹⁹

the quarry constitutes a single roll 16mm silent landscape short shot on cross-processed reversal film. In terms of the imagery, it consists of a five-minute fixed long shot of the titular mountain-capped patch of field, evoking ideas of travel, trance and hallucination rather than a genuinely sublime feeling. In other words, while clearly drawing on structural film conventions, the footage attempts to dwell in the presence of the sublime, yet fails to represent the lived experience. Shot by Russell at Raku Raraku, Easter Island on January 20, 2002 from 3:07 to 3:17 pm., the picture does not use the language of ciné-trance to imply the creative state of the filmmaker and his immersion into the surrounding reality; instead, the spectators may respond to the imagery by engaging themselves in the performance on their own terms. Particularly, it might be hypothesized that the audience is invited to celebrate one of the most

¹⁵ Schneider and Pasqualino, "Experimental Film," 11–8; One of the first directors who attempted to incorporate the concept of ritual performance in experimental film as well as viewed filmmakers as shamans and viewers as active participants of a cinematic trance was Maya Deren, later followed by Paul Sharits, Trinh T. Minh-ha and others, who is credited with returning to 'degree zero' or the core of the phenomenon of possession be means other than political.

¹⁶ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (London: Routledge, 1993), 242.

¹⁷ Paul Henley, *The Adventure of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 275.

¹⁸ Ben Russell, e-mail message to artist, December 17, 2017.

¹⁹ "Ben Russell's TRYPPS #1–7," Sight Unseen, <http://sightunseenbaltimore.com/filter/psychedelic-ethnography/Ben-Russell-s-TRYPPS-1-7>, acc. December 21, 2017.

pervasive tendencies in the last twenty years of American filmmaking called perceptual retraining, defined by MacDonald as involving "the use of the film experience to retain and reinvigorate viewer perception of cinematic space and time, and in particular, the representation of place."²⁰ The trend, mostly identified with the post-1970s avant-garde and experimental works by Gehr, Gottheim, Dorsky, Rudnick, Sonbert, Hutton, Huot, Benning, Lockhart and other artists, becomes particularly evident in Russell's film, which revives the contemplative and meditative way of experiencing the imagery and offers "the possibility of renewed perceptual engagement and awareness" through its reliance on a series of silent, stationary, extended and continuous shots.²¹ To achieve such an effect, the footage draws on both slow cinema conventions evident in a frequent use of "long takes, de-centred and understated modes of storytelling, and a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday", and structural documentary representational modes, primarily the fixed frame and extended duration.²² In other words, while placing "an emphasis on the passage of time in the shot, an undramatic narrative or non-narrative mode, and a rigorous compositional form that is designed for contemplative spectatorial practice", *the quarry* exemplifies a tradition of the latter genre in which "the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified" and whose content is "minimal and subsidiary to the outline" so that the spectators are offered merely few or no distractions or deviations.²³ Similarly, it seems that akin to Benning's or Hutton's works, Russell's picture seeks inspiration from a more widespread adoption of observational practice in 1960s new wave cinema, which strove to preserve 'things' rather than to manipulate them by means of slow, minimal and often static camera movements.

Although *the quarry* relies on the aesthetic principles of the sublime or luminist landscape and the nearly-stationary, the core idea behind this work boils down to its failed attempt to deliver the lived experience and fulfill the promise of the sublime.²⁴ In his essay, "Cinema is Not the World", Russell claims that

²⁰ Scott MacDonald, "American Avant-Garde Cinema from 1970 to the Present," in *American Film History: Selected Readings, 1960 to the Present*, ed. Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann and Art Simon (Chichester: Wiley, 2016), 255.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Matthew Flanagan, "Towards an Aesthetic of Slow in Contemporary Cinema," 16:9 6, 20 (2008), http://www.16-9.dk/2008-11/side11_inenglish.htm, acc. September 25, 2017.

²³ P. A. Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-garde, 1943-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 348.

²⁴ A distinctively American tradition of depicting sublime, picturesque and luminist qualities of grand and largely uncivilized natural scenery goes back to the 19th century Hudson River School movement. While the aforementioned concepts, also inseparably connected with the school's strands of pastoral elegiac and scientific exoticism, were first proposed in 18th century European aesthetics and further discussed by Burke, Kant, Schopenhauer or Gilpin, they are also related to Turner's Frontier Thesis, which successfully advanced the myth that pioneering the American West has played a substantial role in shaping the national character, as well as Manifest Destiny, which stressed the U.S. primacy in exploring and expanding across North American territories; see e.g. John L. Allen, "Horizons of the Sublime: The Invention of the Romantic West," *Journal of Historical Geography* 18, 1 (1992): 27; Carl Carmer, "The Hudson River School. The First New York School," in *The Hudson River and Its Painters*, ed. John K. Howat (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 16-24; John Driscoll, *All That is Glorious Around Us* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 8-20; Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 67-71.

When Cinema is freed from the burden of representation and documentation, when it is properly lensed and hailed as a constellation of textures, surfaces, movements, and sound waves that both refer to the world but also constitute a world unto themselves, this is when true revelation (however monumentous or miniscule) is made manifest. Mistaking the time-image for our lived experience means not only limiting our lived experience of the time-image but, indeed, of life itself.²⁵

Similarly, *the quarry* is supposed to provide its viewers with a spectacle or a sensation rather than a record of the surrounding reality where the "cinema becomes your physical self, your sweating palms and painfully dilated pupils."²⁶ Russell discusses this concept further by purporting that "the record has been doubled into experience and the document has been denied, for this is a film that aspires to be much greater than the sum of its parts. It does not want to be just light and sound and celluloid, it wants to be you."²⁷ Therefore, while the analyzed pictures clearly draw on the sublime detectable in the featured setting, *the quarry* simultaneously fails to provide its lived representation in one's cinematic and spiritual confrontation with the natural scenery. Interestingly, the latter effect becomes conceptualized in a change of color of the footage, which consists of two consecutive and nearly identical shots separated by the intertitle, being a direct quote from Katherine Routledge's *The Mystery of Easter Island* projected in the second minute of the film.

In a private email correspondence from December 17, 2017, Russell accounted for the use of the aforementioned color effect as follows:

I believe that it is a change of exposure that produces this color effect – but either way, the shift draws our attention to how this particularly specific landscape has been transformed into an image-object. Generally speaking, we accept the aesthetic conditions of images as they are presented to us – it is only when there is a rupture that our attention is drawn back to the construction of the image.²⁸

Further disruptions are also evoked by subtle variations in the imagery that occur both in the foreground and background, namely the flowers' swaying in the breeze and the clouds passing in the sky, which, on the one hand, creates an atmosphere of sublimity and transcendence and, on the other, fails to "reproduce the lived moment" and instead replaces it "with one that is equally wondrous."²⁹ In the same correspondence, Russell defined the latter moment as cinema itself:

²⁵ Ben Russell, "Cinema is Not the World" *INCITE: Journal of Experimental Media* 2 (2010), <http://www.incite-online.net/russell2.html>, acc. October 2, 2017.

²⁶ Ben Russell, "Cinema is Not the World," *INCITE: Journal of Experimental Media* 2 (2010), <http://www.incite-online.net/russell2.html>, acc. October 2, 2017.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ben Russell, e-mail message to artist, December 17, 2017.

²⁹ Russell, "the quarry."

It is cinema! The transformation of the real into a different real comprised of vibrating silver halide crystals dyed into just-strange colors; the activation of time as a subject that can be seen and not just felt; the unnatural condition of silent-space made natural. All of these elements conspire to produce an effect in the viewer that is something like awe but also occasionally like boredom.³⁰

Meanwhile, *TRYPPS #7*'s reliance on ciné-trance and film-performance is manifested in both the director's heightened creativity and his use of an intimate long take featuring a young woman's narcotic trance.³¹ The camera, mounted on a tripod, faces a barren canyon and focuses on the protagonist who has just taken LSD "before descending into a psychedelic, formal abstraction of the expansive desert landscape" achieved with hand-held and rotating camera movements.³² Whereas the woman, framed from a lower angle, glares at the viewer, occasionally smiling or closing her eyes that gradually become glossy, the imagery is enhanced by a loud bell chiming, birds chirping and the sound of a rustling breeze, which makes the camera bob slightly. Goldberg sees Russell's "looking glass film" as a mysterious object playing with the viewers' perception of distance from and proximity to the settings "staked against the self-evident image [and] risking basic cognitive dissonance as to what [one is] even looking at."³³ Meanwhile, Hansen makes an interesting hypothesis that the picture, while examining trance-like capabilities of moving-image media, is primarily pre-occupied with deception and the audience is confronted with a deceptive representational reflection of the depicted rather than the actual place, hence referencing to Andy Warhol's or Michael Snow's works.³⁴ Below Hansen provides an account of the film's climax:

When the camera whirls downward and begins to rotate more rapidly, *TRYPPS #7* showcases its initial deception – it is not the camera that is shifting, as in Snow's film, but rather a double-sided mirror, a reflective apparatus, which, strangely enough, has literally been cracked. We have seen the woman, but only through the representation of a mirror. Between the mirror's rotations, the actual canyon can almost be seen, but

³⁰ Ben Russell, e-mail message to artist, December 17, 2017.

³¹ In the aforementioned email correspondence, Russell suggested that a single take *TRYPPS #6 (MALOBI)* is the only film from the *TRYPPS* series, which evokes immediate associations with the phenomenon of trance or possession and "offers a strikingly contemporary take on a Jean Rouch classic" (Ben Russell, "TRYPPS #6 (MALOBI) (preview only*)" *Ben Russell on Vimeo*, <https://vimeo.com/6975261>, acc. January 22, 2018).

³² Michael Green, "UBS 12 x 12: New Artists/New Work: BEN RUSSELL. Sep. 4–27, 2010," *Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago*, <https://mcchicago.org/Exhibitions/2010/Ben-Russell>, acc. October 3, 2017.

³³ Max Goldberg, "Direct Address. IFFR 2011: Gianfranco Rosi's *El Sicario Room 164* and Ben Russell's *TRYPPS #7 (Badlands)*," *MUBI*. <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/direct-address-iff-2011-gianfranco-rois-el-sicario-room-164-and-ben-russells-TRYPPS-7-badlands>, acc. January 18, 2018.

³⁴ James Hansen, "On View: Ben Russell's *TRYPPS #7 (Badlands)*," *Out 1 Film Journal*, <http://www.out1film-journal.com/2011/01/on-view-ben-russells-TRYPPS-7-badlands.html>, acc. January 18, 2018.

only in the briefest of glimpses. The crack in the mirror indicates our illusion has been broken and the deception uncovered. [...] As the speed of the mirror increases, making perspective and the space nearly indecipherable, the woman leaves the frame, but the mirror continues to spin. Here, *TRYPPS #7* shows our initial 'tripping' with the woman has shifted. This is not only a vision of tripping on LSD or merely a film questioning the representative status of the image [...]. Instead, it becomes a trippy reflection of the cinematic process actualized. The mirror, ultimately serving as the shutter and douser, rapidly rotates, breaking up our vision, yet a constant stream of different images (enacted by the mirror reflecting in all directions of the somehow unseen camera) flickers before our eyes. *TRYPPS #7* shows us a reflection of a world and a reflection of a reflection of a world.³⁵

Indeed, whereas Russell describes his work primarily as "regarding LSD, brass bells, the youth of today, Terence Malick and *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND*, phase cancellation, the Pine Ridge Reservation and the Romantic Sublime", the idea of deception clearly comes to the fore as the imagery simultaneously transcends and plays with the spectator's rational sense of space and perspective.³⁶ Similarly, Goldberg notes that when the woman disappears, the viewers "are left with the mirror's quickening spin, a figure of intermittence that is simultaneously a metaphor of film projection and, in this landscape and on this trip, an invocation of the American secular sublime."³⁷ Thus, the act of performance staged in the Badlands National Park is not only a significant continuation of the filmmaker's investigations of cinematic transcendence, but it also constitutes a "live enactment of cinema's persistence-of-vision," which culminates in "a tremendous perceptual bolt."³⁸ In other words, the rotating apparatus blocks and shifts the camera's multiple perspectives and hence simultaneously denies access and exposes the audience to the full spectrum of the woman's LSD trip suspended between the gullies and horizons of the featured setting, which "becomes a portal into a psychedelic rendering of the desert landscape."³⁹ In this way, *TRYPPS #7*, which aims to top off the whole *TRYPPS* series with the depiction of a subjective acid trip,⁴⁰ makes some explicit references to the phenomenon of possession in an attempt to "produce a cinema that operates on its own terms, that produces its own experience, that can function as a site of transcendence unto itself"

³⁵ Hansen, "On View."

³⁶ "TRYPPS #7 (Badlands)," *Fandor*, https://www.fandor.com/films/TRYPPS_vii, acc. October 8, 2017.

³⁷ Goldberg, "Direct Address."

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ "TRYPPS #7 (Badlands)," *Wexner Center for the Arts*, <https://wexarts.org/film-video/TRYPPS-7-badlands>, acc. October, 2017.

⁴⁰ The title, *TRYPPS*, is a fabricated Old English word and serves as a guiding principle for the series of seven 16mm films conceptually organized around a phenomenological experience of physical and psychedelic travels as well as the world in general.

rather than simply to document an experience of someone in an altered state.⁴¹ Akin to other TRYPPS films concerned with the themes of trance, travel and psychedelic ethnography, *BADLANDS* indulges in the alchemy of cinema and the semiotics of the moving image while folding the body of the artist into the filmmaking process and negotiating structures of spectatorship.

Interestingly, following Cashell's analysis of the Hirstean aesthetics, it may be argued that the imagery is also likely to evoke the Burkean terror experienced as a precipitated sublime feeling and associated with the anticipation of a mediated danger, which is often deliberately neutralized and rationalized into delight in contemporary art or film.⁴² Particularly, *TRYPPS #7* seems to inspire a terrified awe, existential anxiety, phobia and astonishment, the latter defined as "the effect of the sublime in its highest degree",⁴³ by depicting a hallucinogenic and to some extent hostile environment whose condition may threaten one's sense of safety and self-preservation. Moreover, the sublime imagery, used quite extensively in both pictures, can be related to the transformative and magical properties of film, discussed at length by Moore as part of the broader film theory,⁴⁴ where audiences, constantly shifting from boredom to absorption and attraction, are confronted with hypnotic visions of movement and color or other visual thrills, hence relying on what Gunning refers to as early cinema's "phantom embrace".⁴⁵ In this sense, *the quarry* and *TRYPPS #7* may be read as evoking Burch's view on the relationship between 'primitive gaze' or naïve spectatorship and avant-garde forms of cinema whose nonsensical structure, arbitrariness, repetition and lack of narrativity gives rise to the viewer's encounter with a cinematic image that takes on some qualities of a sacred rite.⁴⁶

In an interview given for the Bucharest International Experimental Film Festival, Russell commented on his goal as a filmmaker as follows: "I never thought about film as a tool for translation but rather as a way of conjuring, as a means for bringing the unseen out of the shadows and transforming time into a body that we all could understand."⁴⁷ Likewise, the analyzed material uses a highly creative imagery that lies at the intersection of ethnography and transcendence as well as aims to evoke a psychedelic state of mind and hence contributes to what has become associated with Russell's cinema seen as a site for both personal and collective transformation and defined by the artist as "a kind of choreography that relies on the viewer's reception as one of

⁴¹ Andrew Rosinsky, "7 Question Interview with Ben Russell, Artist & Filmmaker," *Dinca*, <http://dinca.org/interview-ben-russell-chicago-based-filmmaker-artist/6256.htm>, acc. January 18, 2018.

⁴² Kieran Cashell, *Aftershock: the Ethics of Contemporary Transgressive Art* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 176–82.

⁴³ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 53.

⁴⁴ Rachel Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

⁴⁵ Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator," *Art & Text* 34 (1989): 45.

⁴⁶ Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film* (New York: Amo Press, New York Times, 1972), 50, 48.

⁴⁷ "RIVER RITES – Interview with BEN RUSSELL," *Bucharest International Experimental Film Festival*, <https://bieff.wordpress.com/2013/12/12/river-rites-interview-with-ben-russell/>, acc. January 18, 2018.

its conditions."⁴⁸ When asked if he considers *the quarry* and *TRYPPS #7* capable of producing a transcendental cinematic experience, Russell responded that "*TRYPPS #7* self-consciously enacts a few devices to shift the perceptual experience of the viewer – the semblance of diegetic sound and 'real-time' movement the slowly becomes something else; the non-illusory image that becomes illusory that becomes abstract; the play with temporality both in image and in time."⁴⁹ At the same time though, he noted that "all of these moves were made in a gambit to set up the conditions for a kind of kino-transcendence, although I'm not entirely sure what that looks like as an actuality as it is so contingent on the audience member experiencing it."⁵⁰

As can be seen, it seems that despite differing in a specific choice of narrative and editing, *the quarry* and *TRYPPS #7* seek inspiration from the notion of ciné-trance (*TRYPPS #7*) and film-performance (*TRYPPS #7* and *the quarry*) on both literal and metaphorical level. Although Russell purports that the camera was not intended to act as a catalyst for the filmmaker's trance in any of these films, the viewer may still experience a profound sense of community with the filmed subject and a spirit emanating from them.⁵¹ Moreover, the camera lens' exploration of the surrounding reality and one's states of altered perception juxtaposed against wilderness are reproduced in the first person narrative, thus engaging in a form of ethnographic dialogue with the artist and his audience, particularly evident in their attempt to invoke the idea of both psychedelic (*TRYPPS #7*) and physical (*the quarry*) travel. As noted by Zimmerman, while "entering into the phenomenology of vision and cinema, Russell's films are more of a constellation exploring the literal and metaphoric journey of experiences beyond the rational, scientific realm of existence."⁵² Indeed, in both works, a single long shot conveys a sense of voyeurism rather than engages in a conventional storytelling and hence separates the viewer's experience from a cinematic and actual representation of the filmed subject. On the other hand, both perspectives merge at some point and a trance-like quality of the imagery allows the spectator to indentify in a more personal manner with the depicted settings and actions.⁵³ Whereas in the case of *the quarry*, the viewers are confronted with the cinema itself and its record of the so called reality, in *TRYPPS #7* they "enter into the swirl of tryping across the Badlands, whose overwhelming natural beauty is accentuated by the uncertain perspective" generated by the spinning mirror.

⁴⁸ Ben Russell, e-mail message to artist, December 22, 2017.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Christopher Zimmerman, "TRYPPS 1-7 & River Rites. Eight Films by Ben Russell--IVAC 2012," *cmzimmermann*, <http://cmzimmermann.blogspot.ro/2012/07/TRYPPS-1-7-river-rites-eight-films-by.html?view=sidebar>, acc. January 18, 2018.

⁵³ Michael J. Kramer, "tryping the badlands fantastic," *michaeljkramer*, <http://www.michaeljkramer.net/ct/the-sixties-in-the-mirror-part-i/>, acc. January 18, 2018.

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