

Essentials of Beat Storytelling: Images of Documentation in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and William S. Burrough's *The Wild Boys*

Peter Saltsman

Introduction

The writings of the self-proclaimed Beat Generation, starting in the late 1940s, bridge, as Robert Holton has noted, postwar "optimism and prosperity" on the one hand, and, on the other, "Cold War tension" and McCarthyism (On the Road: Kerouac's Ragged American Journey, 5). Beat Writing also serves to connect—temporally, aesthetically, and politically—the contradictions of American high modernism's nostalgia and experimentation with the later, radical questioning of countercultures of the 1960s and of postmodernism. Likewise, while acknowledging "traditional" literary traditions as influences, the Beats were also heavily influenced by the aesthetics of jazz and the blues, as well as the forms and texts of popular and mass culture. Their works formally experiment with replicating these structures in textual form.

Peter Saltsman's paper reads the work of two foundational Beat authors, Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs, through the lens of these experimentations. As Saltsman argues, Kerouac and Burroughs sit, in many ways, at the opposite ends of Beat experimentation: Kerouac, the Romantic visionary, trying to capture the essence of the Beat moment (what Kerouac calls "IT"); and Burroughs, the novelist as filmmaker, emphasizing the grotesque realities of the modern world in an attempt to shatter its limits.

-Dr. Jason Haslam

Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and William S. Burrough's *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead* play with ideas of representation and storytelling. Working within the context of an emerging post-World War II American society, Kerouac and Burroughs aim to define their formal and narrative structures in radically different ways—different from each other, and different from existing literary traditions. Kerouac's novel is emblematic of his poetic theory of spontaneous prose, a new device through which he attempts to write an epic of a generation. He uses stream-of-consciousness in order to achieve an appearance of spontaneity; the prose of *On the Road* is musical, emulating the spontaneous sounds of jazz. Burroughs, on the other hand, writes with a different medium in mind. His novel is constructed with images of film and the formal elements of montage. In both cases, the result is a text that is both unique in form and representative of the Beat Generation. Kerouac and Burroughs play with style and structures of storytelling to arrive at essentialized, purified representations of their subjects.

Burroughs constructs *Wild Boys* as a film, thrusting the reader outside the traditional literary mode. This is apparent in the opening lines of the novel: "The camera is the eye of a cruising vulture flying over an area of scrub, rubble and unfinished buildings on the outskirts of Mexico City."¹ Here the conventional role of the reader is redefined as one positioned behind an omniscient lens that surveys the surrounding landscape as a series of images. This passage is a literal bird's-eye view of the designated area, mimicking the opening shot of a film and pulling the reader into the text as a viewer. In the unique position of the assumed eye, the reader is integrated within the novel's filmic vision.

Burroughs furthers this filmic parallel through the disjointed narrative structure of his novel. Semi-coherent narrative sequences are separated by recurring interspersions called the Penny Arcade Peep Show, referring to a jukebox-like precursor to moving pictures that displays a series of spectral images for the price of a coin. These chapters separate blocks of the main narrative with a montage of static images that come and go so that “the manner of presentation varies according to an underlying pattern.”² The pattern of the Penny Arcade parallels the pattern of the book itself. Burroughs disrupts the narrative to present images “all there on screen sight sound touch at once immediate and spectrally remote in past time.”³ In this way, Burroughs’s prose distances itself from its literariness and, instead, takes on the structure of the image—immediate but ungraspable, tantalizing but transient. Just as the Penny Arcade begs the viewer to engage with its images, so Burroughs begs the reader to engage with his words; he challenges the reader to literally buy into his presentation, to see more, to watch his playful manipulation of narrative, language, image, and culture.

Kerouac, on the other hand, takes a different formal approach. Rather than focus on the visual, as Burroughs does, he chooses to focus on the aural: *On the Road* strives to capture the essence of jazz in the rhythm and movement of both its form and content. Kerouac attempts to use prose to transcend the boundaries of music, image, and word, and, in doing so, he intends to write the essence of Beat America: “holy flowers floating in the air, were all these tired faces in the dawn of Jazz America.”⁴ In claiming to write the literature of this dawning age, Kerouac’s aurally-driven, spontaneous prose imitates jazz, setting up a style and form of storytelling that resists linearity or rigidly-structured narrative development. Its dynamic poetics of rhythm and movement pulls the reader along, bopping across the page as Sal Paradise bops across the continent.

Textual dynamism occurs in *Wild Boys*, too, though differently. While Kerouac evokes the dynamic quality inherent in musical rhythm and motion, Burroughs’s filmic montages create the effect of dynamism through the combination of static images, splicing frozen moments together to create fluid action. His montages combine these singular, fragmentary images “to create a sensation of speed as if the pictures were seen from a train window.”⁵ In the novel, the movie director the Great Slastobitch—a Russian name that perhaps makes reference to Sergei Eisenstein, Soviet filmmaker and inventor of the filmic montage—makes a revealing statement about the nature of film: “the movies must first be written if we are to have living characters. A writer may find it difficult to make the reader see a scene clearly and it would seem easier to show pictures. No. The scene must be written before it is filmed”⁶ This validation of writing gives weight to Burroughs’s project. Language must be redefined as image. Burroughs wants to translate the ostensibly dead literary form into the imagistic world of cinema; he wants to evoke the dynamism of film in the written word. Writing in images and writing dynamically can rejuvenate the written mode into one that is better able to represent the changing conditions, surrounding culture, and experience of the wild boys and their generation.

The manipulation of the stagnant image into motion through montage is a formal reflection of the novel’s cultural project to animate the dead. Referring to the novel’s subtitle, “A

Book of the Dead,” Timothy S. Murphy, in *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs*, suggests that *Wild Boys* is structured as a traditional book of the dead, intended to “provide guidance, in narrative and ritual form, to souls seeking paths through the dangerous and uncertain lands of the dead to the promised land.”⁷ This evocation of lost souls in need of guidance implies that Burroughs’s book is about a generation left for dead. Burroughs is writing post-war America of fear, a generation that perpetually replays images in which “the atom bomb explodes over Hiroshima” and the home front “does not like to hear the word DEATH.”⁸ Not only is this a generation rooted in fear and obsessed with death, it is equally a generation marginalized and left for dead by the controlling dominant culture of Old Sarge and the “decent, church-going, Bible Belt do-rights.”⁹ Burroughs takes the wild boys—figuratively dead, immobile, and stagnant—and attempts to write them out of the margins of society and into his novel. Just as with the filmic montage he arranges static images into a fluid motion, so Burroughs’s book of the dead writes a dead generation into motion, challenging the stasis of their marginalized position in society.

While Burroughs brings the wild boys’ generation to life through fluid images, Kerouac is interested in conceiving a form that documents the act of writing as much as its subject. In *On the Road*, Sal Paradise identifies himself as a writer. He chronicles his life as a story, letting Dean take him away because, as he says, “I was a writer and I needed new experiences.”¹⁰ These “experiences” refer both to Sal’s needs and to Kerouac’s; both are writers playing radically with the form and structure of writing, conveying the writer’s new experiences by creating new, formal experiences for the reader. Sal’s experiences with Dean further this as he talks of “trying to communicate with absolute honesty and absolute completeness everything on our minds.”¹¹ This purity of communication—getting down to an essence of thought and emotion—is at the core of *On the Road*, a novel as much about the act of writing as about the Beats.

Kerouac discusses his new project of writing in the treatise “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose.” He asserts that his new kind of writing is an “undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, blowing (as per jazz musician) on subject of image.”¹² Here Kerouac firmly connects music and image, the aural and the visual. His spontaneous writing creates an association of the senses through the written word, asking the reader of spontaneous prose to engage with the written text in a new, more essential way. For Kerouac, the result of spontaneous prose is “always honest, (‘ludicrous’), spontaneous, ‘confessional’ interesting, because not ‘crafted’ Craft *is* craft.”¹³ This idea of craft is important to Kerouac’s project. He wants to evade craft insofar as it is a manipulation of ideas and artistic form that detracts from purity of representation. Kerouac engages in spontaneous prose in order to free himself from the constructs of art as craft; he repositions his work as authentic, essential, and truer to its subject.

Although both Kerouac and Burroughs engage in formal experimentation, Burroughs’s project is ultimately more transgressive than Kerouac’s. In his essay “Word Begets Image and Image is Virus: Undermining Language and Film in the Work of William S. Burroughs,” Douglas Baldwin asserts that Burroughs’s barrage of difficult and explicit images and the subsequent “blurring [of] narrative levels undermine the reader’s safe role as a member of an

uninvolved audience.”¹⁴ Burroughs wants to push his novel and its characters across every conceivable threshold, including that which divides bystander and participant, reader and character. In the final moments of *Wild Boys* the wild boys attempt to escape the constructs of dominant culture: “we ran on and burst out of a black silver mist into the late afternoon sunlight on a suburban street, cracked pavements, sharp smell of weeds.”¹⁵ The wild boys have run into a strip of film, “a black silver mist.” Rather than attempt to escape popular culture, Burroughs appropriates it, making it belong to the wild boys and the Beat generation. By having both his characters and the formal structure of his novel shatter the boundary between image and text, Burroughs forges a new relationship to culture, and, in doing so, he affords the reader an active role in his movement.

Where Burroughs wants to bring the reader into social margins with his writing of the wild boys, Kerouac, as Howard Cunnell suggests, more passively “writes from those margins.”¹⁶ He writes as a figure searching for something more than America seems able to offer—as one of the Beat Generation, but also as an observer marginalized in relation to the Beat movement. *On the Road* does not challenge boundaries or “blur narrative levels”; it maintains them. It tries to capture a movement already in action, to codify a time and sentiment without pushing for change or inclusion in the way *Wild Boys* does. It is an attempt at achieving the essence of the Beat Generation in writing—writing “with such infinite soul exploratory for the tune of the moment that everybody knows it’s not the tune that counts but IT.”¹⁷ IT, that artistic, sensual moment, is what Kerouac is after, even though the concept defies real description throughout his novel. IT is the power of the aural image, the communal feelings rendered by jazz musicians and yearned for by Dean Moriarty and the Beat Generation—a sound that defies the tune, seemingly impossible to recreate on the written page.

Unlike Burroughs, whose frantic images pull the reader into his text, Kerouac’s text becomes simply an attempt to document his life. While Sal Paradise begins *On the Road* hoping that “somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to [him],”¹⁸ for both Sal and Kerouac this spiritually transcendent gift is only tenuously accomplished. That is, any transcendent or spiritual dynamism is merely documented—an experience of IT that can be old but not necessarily shared, observed but not participated in. Kerouac’s formal challenge to communicate experience directly only serves to document the experiences of the characters in his novels and, by extension, a cultural moment. It is not, as with Burroughs’s total manipulation of traditional literary forms, an attempt to draw the reader in, to transcend the barriers of text and of dominant culture. Kerouac’s spontaneous prose is not an attempt to make “*the wild boys smile*.”¹⁹ While Burroughs writes to break through positions of liminality, Kerouac ultimately writes just to tell a story.

Both Kerouac’s *On the Road* and Burroughs’s *Wild Boys* try to capture the Beat Generation and its relationship to America through prose experimentation. Burroughs’s novel reads as film, as images cut up and pieced together in the telling of a rather disjointed narrative. Kerouac, on the other hand, follows a comparatively steady narrative arc at the same time as he structures his prose to mimic the sounds of jazz. In their individual ways, both authors challenge

dominant cultural codes, projecting the Beats from the margins and into the throes of culture itself. Burroughs does so by challenging the perspective and participation of the reader, Kerouac by taking on a role of extreme marginality through observation, attempting to portray the world without a filter, exploring representation in mere representation. In both cases, some new, more authentic mode of representation ultimately documents not only a generation, but the author's own challenge to language and the structure of storytelling itself.

Notes

- ¹ William S. Burroughs, *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead* (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 3.
- ² *Ibid.*, 40.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 42.
- ⁴ Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 204.
- ⁵ Burroughs, 41.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.
- ⁷ Timothy Murphy, *Wishing Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 148.
- ⁸ Burroughs, 168-9.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.
- ¹⁰ Kerouac, *On the Road*, 7.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ¹² Jack Kerouac, "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," *The Beat Generation Course Package*, ed. Jason Haslam (Halifax, Dalhousie University, 2008), 57.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 58.
- ¹⁴ Douglas Baldwin, "Word Begets Image and Image is Virus: Undermining Language and Film in the Works of William S. Burroughs," *The Beat Generation: Critical Essays*, ed. Kostas Myrsiades (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002), 161.
- ¹⁵ Burroughs, 183.
- ¹⁶ Howard Cunnell, "Fast This Time: Jack Kerouac and the Writing of *On the Road*," *On the Road: The Original Scroll* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2007), 8.
- ¹⁷ Kerouac, *On the Road*, 207-8.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ¹⁹ Burroughs, 184.