

Atlases of America



An essay by Erika Balsom on Babette Mangolte's *The Sky on Location* and Deborah Stratman's *O'er the Land*.

The Films

"It is July 27, 1980. I wanted to see what it was like to be in unknown territory." Babette Mangolte begins *The Sky on Location* (1982) by assigning a date and a desire to her encounter with the American West. A precise location in time, an unfamiliar location in space. From Yellowstone National Park to Death Valley, from Mount St. Helens to the Grand Canyon, Mangolte travelled periodically with an assistant across four seasons, shooting landscapes mostly devoid of human presence or intervention on 16mm. The resulting film essayistically liberates landscape from its typical function in narrative cinema, where it tends to play the subordinate role of backdrop or allegory. In *The Sky on Location*, landscape assumes representational autonomy; it is a subject of interest in its own right, accorded a treatment more aligned with traditions in painting and still photography. Yet these are moving images: they flow rhythmically through the film's 78 minutes, accompanied by intermittent music, occasional intertitles, and a trio of voices – comprised of Mangolte herself and two Americans – who comment on what is presented.

The vistas of *The Sky on Location* are epic, iconic, monumental, overdetermined. In these grand expanses, Mangolte documents encounters with light and space, only to then reveal how this drama of pure vision is complicated by inherited histories and critical frameworks. Even though the filmmaker begins by expressing a desire to be in unknown territory, much of the film is devoted to the manifold ways in which this territory is indeed known, or has become known since the mid-nineteenth century. The West was won not only through genocidal violence and settlement, but also through the photographs and paintings, books and films, that circulate images of nature. Even the work's title summons the professional jargon of the film industry. Why did Mangolte first go to Monument Valley? Because she had seen these landscapes in movies by John Ford, a director she greatly admires for the pictorialist quality of his compositions. These are mediated encounters. Landscape is not, after all, synonymous with nature; it is a word that was first employed by artists to designate a painterly *gi* before it was used to refer to topography itself. Whether in pictures or in life, it is always a matter of culture in one way or another.

And yet something in *The Sky on Location* remains devoted to a sense of immediacy and awe. In a 2003 interview, Mangolte described her aim for the film: "The idea was: I'm going to do an atlas of colour in relation with sky, in relation with the land." The sky, the wind, the colours: all are consistent preoccupations of the voiceover, which tries again and again to give names, to describe, but often comes up short of accounting for the splendour of the image. If one strand of *The Sky on Location* leads to the hyper-referentiality of a postmodern picturesque, returning the viewer to the codes of pictures already known, this is braided with this altogether different thread: a sincere concern with air, light, and meteorology, with the absolutely singular experience of the sublimity of nature.

Although the vast majority of the landscapes in *The Sky on Location* betray no evidence of human activity, slowly the film accumulates vignettes in an ongoing history of intervention, manipulation, and extraction. The image of the untouched cannot hold. "Will the destruction ever end?" Mangolte asks, gesturing to the despoliation of the land in the name of development. She knows that her attraction to these breathtaking locations is inextricable from a sense of disappearance and loss. In *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875* — the sole book Mangolte acknowledges in the credits — art historian Barbara Novak notes that in nineteenth-century America, landscape became an "effective substitute for a missing national tradition" and a "repository of national pride," precisely at the moment the wilderness was facing unprecedented destruction. Onto images of pristine nature, a whole host of ideas could be projected, ideas that would build and sustain a new national imaginary. Mangolte cites this notion before going on to question how it might resonate in the late twentieth century — a time of mounting ecological devastation, when the land was increasingly viewed as a standing reserve to be instrumentalized, and when America increasingly found its abiding myths far from nature. Despite all this, over images of a misty waterfall, she says that she still finds in the landscape "a release of intentions, a lack of determinism."

Deborah Stratman's *O'er the Land* (2008) can be seen as providing an answer to this same question, albeit one somewhat different from Mangolte's before her. Stratman dispenses definitively with Mangolte's lingering attachment to the nineteenth-century landscape tradition, emptying the genre of its association with the picturesque and redirecting it towards a reckoning with the ambient fear spilling across the country in the post-2001 period. The idea that representing the American landscape would first and foremost be an act of making beauty visible through a pure act of perception — an act already compromised in 1982 — is by now historically unavailable. "Threat level: elevated," say the signs at the roadside.

The contingencies of *O'er the Land* are less the gusts of wind and textures of rock that form such a central part of *The Sky on Location*, and more the shot of a gun, a falling body, or a terrorist attack. Stratman draws the title of her film from a line that closes each verse of the United States national anthem, The Star-Spangled Banner: "O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave." It is telling that she omits the line's second half, evoking it only through erasure. Freedom and bravery are everywhere throughout the film, yet they appear not as honoured ideals but rather as hollowed-out and perverted, appropriated by the tides of political reaction. As they figure within the sustaining myths of the United States, perhaps this is what they always were.

American violence appears in *The Sky on Location* as a subterranean concern set into tension with a wondrous appreciation of the vistas of the West. The film's gaze is conflicted, as Mangolte's distinctly European fascination with the apparent newness and emptiness of these locations butts up against her recognition of the problems inherent in such a stance. *O'er the Land*'s view from the inside is more resolved. Here, American violence quietly comes to dominate the frame. This is not unknown territory, but inhabited, quotidian, militarized territory; it is a land of scars, force, and blight. Gone are spectacular images of natural beauty. Where Mangolte dreamed of an atlas of colour made from sky and earth, capturing the bewildering hues of Mono Lake, Stratman uses 16mm to show firefighters, border patrol officers, gun ranges, and Civil War reenactors. Any hint of the tourist's gaze disappears. Hers is an atlas that joins historical memory with our present emergency, slowly accumulating images and sounds across 52 minutes to map a terrain as psychic as it is geographical. Gradually, the banalities of American life are married to fantasies of exceptionalism and masculinist ideas of territory.

The story of Lieutenant Colonel William Rankin punctuates the film, appearing at its beginning, middle, and end. In 1959, Rankin, a veteran of World War II and the Korean War, survived a fall from his fighter jet at 48,000 feet, spending 45 minutes trapped in a thunderstorm cloud before hurtling back to the soil of North Carolina, bleeding from his eyes, ears, and mouth. His plane, crashing without him, left a crater of oil and metal. In this narrative, the jet, with all its symbolic resonance, transforms from icon of progress to a smouldering wreck. The human body, vulnerable and porous, is engulfed by the caprice of inclement weather. Fifty years after this episode, Stratman finds in this story what she has called a "vertical allegory," one that opens onto the dreams and fictions of progress, autonomy, and freedom that course through *O'er the Land*'s vignettes. Unlike Mangolte, with her trio of commentators, Stratman offers no external narration, drawing her intermittent voiceovers from the scenes she films, leaving her own position on the represented events to emerge tacitly through the constellations of montage.

In the images of caged birds Stratman films at the Mockingbird Research Facility at Indiana University, Bloomington, it is difficult not to see an emblem of life policed, life entrapped. Is this the fate of nature in America? Or of all living beings within its borders? It could be. Yet in the film's closing moments, Stratman returns to precisely the same topographical feature that had been so crucial for Mangolte in summoning the "lack of determinism" that images of landscape can offer: a waterfall, in this case Niagara Falls, on the US-Canada border. From nocturnal images of flamethrowers, she cuts to the awesome force of water pushing over the edge, blue sky against bluer current. Then, the falls are seen from the other side, all cascades and mist. Here, perhaps, is another image of freedom, another kind of free fall, another way of moving over the land.

Portions of this text are adapted from Terra Cognita: Babette Mangolte's The Sky on Location, America: Films from Elsewhere, ed. Shanay Jhaveri (Mumbai: The Shoestring Publisher, 2019).