

Darkest Americana and Elsewhere Film, Video & Words by James Benning

February 26–28, 2010

presented in association with
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and the Exploratorium's Cinema Arts Program

Since the early 1970s, James Benning has created a body of formally innovative, long-form film works which use duration, understated camera work and (at times) elliptical narrative to examine cultural assumptions and contradictions with American culture and history, often revealing darkness or ideological conflict lurking beneath the surfaces of everyday appearances. A filmmaker committed to navigating his own deeply ambivalent relationship with American culture and history, Benning's works explore the intersections of landscape, history and ideology as elegant monuments to contemplation and the passage of time. This three-program series presents two early films, his first foray into digital video and a detailed artist presentation that trace these threads in Benning's work. (Steve Polta & Jonathan Marlow)

Darkest Americana and Elsewhere Program I

American Dreams: Lost and Found

Friday, February 26 at 7 pm — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

The weekend of works by James Benning commences with two mid-'80s films exploring the dark alliance between the American landscape and the U.S. psyche. Incorporating biographical presentations of Hank Aaron's spectacular baseball career, would-be assassin Arthur Bremer's drive toward murder and aspects of James Benning's own life, *American Dreams* is a thorough examination of obsession and drive. (Steve Polta & Jonathan Marlow)

American Dreams: Lost and Found (1984) by James Benning; 16mm, color, sound, 56 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

"In his next three features—*Grand Opera* (1978), *Him and Me* (1982) and *American Dreams* (1984)—Benning attempted to find ways of adding human content back into his films without using conventional approaches to character and narrative [...].

"*American Dreams* combines three simultaneous levels of development, each of which adds a narrative progression to a film that *looks* less like a conventional narrative than any other long Benning work: the first is a front-and-back chronological presentation of items in Benning's extensive collection of Hank Aaron memorabilia; the second is a handwritten text that runs across the bottom of the image from right to left; the third involves the soundtrack, which alternates between brief excerpts from notable speeches made during the years Benning was growing up and brief passages from popular songs of the era. Superimposed texts regularly identify the speechmaker, the occasion, and the date; the name of the song and the singer; and regularly provide us with the grand total of home runs Aaron had hit by the end of each year.

"That *American Dreams* is a film for multiple viewings is obvious the moment one discovers at the conclusion of the film that the diarist is Arthur Bremer, the man who dreamed of becoming famous by killing a public figure (first Richard Nixon, the George Wallace) and finally shot Wallace in Laurel, Maryland on May 15, 1972. In isolation, Aaron's relentless quest of Ruth's home-run record seems natural and heroic, and symbolic of the black pursuit of full recognition by the majority society. But as wonderful as Aaron's accomplishments were, the meaning is altered by the Bremer text. While Aaron's dream may be positive and Bremer's negative—they represent polar opposites of American dreaming—Benning's juxtaposition

brings out parallels: both men seem involved in the same set of assumptions about how men demonstrate worth as men.

“The Aaron/Bremer parallel is further confirmed and extended by Benning’s recognition of his own involvement with these assumptions: his choice of a continuous, relentlessly regular minimal structure for *American Dreams* is implicitly a critique of the male-dominated structural cinema that was developing during the years of Aaron’s and Bremer’s final achievements. Of course, just as Aaron’s accomplishments strengthened the position of blacks in American life, the accomplishments of the structural filmmaker opened new territory for feminist filmmakers concerned with confronting Western consumer culture’s imaging of women and men.” (Scott MacDonald: introduction to an interview with James Benning in *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*. Published 1992 by the University of California Press)

Darkest Americana and Elsewhere
Program II
Landscape Suicide
Friday, February 26 at 8:15 pm — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

A bleak companion to *American Dreams*, *Landscape Suicide* finds parallels of isolation between infamous mass murderer Ed Gein’s life in 1950s Wisconsin and that of teenager Bernadette Protti, convicted of killing a classmate in mid-’80s Orinda, California, as reconstructed from the substantive details of each “true crime” case. (Steve Polta & Jonathan Marlow)

Landscape Suicide (1986) by James Benning; 16mm, color, sound, 95 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

“*Landscape Suicide* offers portraits of two murderers whose motivations (or lack thereof) appear to have links in each person’s home environment: Wisconsin farmer Ed Gein, who murdered and taxidermized his victims in the 1950s, and Bernadette Protti, a fifteen-year-old California teenager who stabbed a classmate to death in 1984.

“Still’ imagery of the hometowns of Gein and Protti reflect the spiritless and vast emptiness which encapsulated them; Gein, the despair of poverty-stricken Plainville; Protti, affluence without import in suburban Orinda, CA. This is contrasted by long takes that guide the viewer through each mundane community. What could they have offered Gein and Protti? And why do these communities ultimately fail them?

“Yet the chills in *Landscape Suicide* come not from the shots of cold isolation, but during the talking-head sequences. One cannot help but feel utter discomfort when watching the young Bernadette Protti describe her rather elaborate, yet quite simply executed murder of a popular cheerleader/classmate. What becomes even more disturbing is the realization that Protti is being played (with unemotional, matter-of-fact detail) by a young actress recruited to portray this cold-blooded killer. Rhonda Bell as Protti plays it so blasé and stolid that it is difficult to believe we are watching an actress, and wonder if this ‘honest’ performance could be elicited from a subject aware of the camera. Elion Sucher’s Gein provides an articulate while hazy delivery of the courtroom testimony, which encourages us to look past the madness and recognize an ultimate indifference to human life.

“Benning’s long, framed static shots are intercut exclusively with blackouts, distorting the viewer’s sense of continuum. Often the only sound we hear is the high-tonal buzz of Orinda’s power lines, or the wind sweeping over Plainville—sounds of nothingness which quickly become one with Benning’s landscapes. Musical interludes add ironic commentary to the grisly narrative provided by Gein and Protti. Ultimately, it is the dialectical symbiosis of the formal qualities of Benning’s cinematic compositions with the construction of a narrative that engages the viewer in a rigorous reflection on the traditional discourse of film.” (San Francisco Cinematheque Program Notes, October 11, 1998. Compiled by John Mrozik from “Portraits of two killers: Murders in mind,” by Brian Lambert, published October 1, 1986 in the *Twin Cities Reader*.)