

# **Darkest Americana and Elsewhere**

## **Film, Video & Words by James Benning**

February 26–28, 2010

presented in association with  
the Film Studies Program at the University of San Francisco  
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)

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#### **Program III: *Ruhr***

**Saturday, February 27 at 7:30 pm — Presentation Theater at the University of San Francisco**  
**James Benning In Person**

After nearly three decades of creating films in U.S. locations, James Benning's feature-length *Ruhr* is his first work shot entirely outside of North America (and his first work on digital video). Commissioned for German television, the film is an outsider's portrait of Germany's Ruhr District. An industrial and working class environment—recalling Benning's hometown of Milwaukee, Wisconsin—the Ruhr is the center of Germany's coal and steel-making industries and the site of massive Allied attacks during World War II. Consisting of only six shots, the feature-length video provides lingering insight into the filmmaker's exploration of an uncannily familiar foreign landscape. (Steve Polta)

***Ruhr*** (2009) by James Benning; digital video, color, sound, 120 minutes, tape from Schaf oder Scharf Film

"Benning's move from 16mm to digital is not as drastic as it might seem: he's been editing and experimenting with sound digitally on Pro Tools for a few years. What full HD shooting has afforded him is the possibility of playing with other forms of editorial shorthand, as announced with his Viennale trailer *Fire & Rain*, a Ruhr outtake that condenses one stage of the steel-making process into about sixty seconds, via invisible edits. One could say 'cheats,' but such language would seem to invalidate most contemporary mechanical art from the photoshopped images of Jeff Wall to anything made by the American entertainment-industrial complex involving a digital intermediary. With digital filmmaking, we're in a cinematic space where the 'real' has no meaning; rather, Benning is using all the means at his disposal to create what we could call a reality-directed document. The most immediately noticeable result of Benning's technological-methodological move is an undeniable change in the quality of the image, in terms of what and how we register what we're looking at. The high-definition image is more painterly than 16mm, with sharp deep focus allowing for previously unimaginable detail, and Benning is indeed painting on a grand, at times even Romantic scale here, with deliberately composed images designed to engulf the viewer and a soundtrack (at times incorporating what sounds like an electronic drone) that attempts the same—which is why the cinema is still where his filmmaking belongs.

“Even though Benning’s previous feature *RR* (2008) was not a nature film per se, the only legitimate criticism I’ve heard directed at it is that Benning left too little time in his shots before and after each train bisected the frame, denying the locations their essential stasis and depriving them of that temporal ‘breathing space’ where they could be adequately registered by the viewer. Shooting *Ruhr*, Benning has taken this criticism to heart: in the first six shots, which range in length from six to seventeen minutes, the places Benning has chosen to record are registered with almost encyclopaedic detail, from the clothes worn by Muslims at prayer (filmed from the rear) to the colours of the window shutters and houses on a typical working-class street. Benning’s primary strategy is to record actions that are repeated over the duration of each stable take, starting with the stream of cars passing through [a] tunnel [...]. We see and hear both cause and effect: the sound of cars rumbling as they approach, and the small scattering of debris over the asphalt after they have driven into the distance; elsewhere, the slight rush of wind through the branches and leaves of trees preceding the arrival of an airplane over the Dusseldorf airport, and, then, a magnificent whoosh through the trees after it has passed. In *Ruhr* Benning shows that nothing is ever ‘at rest’ but only in a state of in-between-ness, the digital camera capturing both the anticipation of imminent arrival and departure and the subtle sensuality of things simply being alive for their own sake.

“This is a philosophical position, a way of experiencing the beauty of the world that leans towards an implication that the substance of the action doesn’t matter—what’s important is that we register the images simply as images (and, really, we need to be inside of a cinema, free of distraction, to give them the proper attention). But, being human, we are moved to search for meaning. If there is a thesis running through *Ruhr*, perhaps it should be related back to what Benning was after in the *California Trilogy* (2000–2001), which likewise examines social and labour relationships in another valley. In the case of a shot of graffiti being removed from a Richard Serra sculpture, *Ruhr* broadens out to question who decides what is art—the sculpture itself, or the graffiti being removed by soda blasting, with a declaration of love turned into a broken heart.

“The tension between registering and interpreting all comes to a head in the last shot [...]. Relieved of the necessity of changing camera rolls, Benning goes all out with a mesmerizing shot of a coke-processing tower in Schwelgern, where every ten minutes water pours down onto the base and creates a billowing pillar of steam leaking through the steel-latticed structure and into the atmosphere; the tower looks like it’s on fire. As it repeats, surrounded by clouds it itself creates, the image takes on a psychedelic quality, with each billowing blossoming into differing colours, a function of both the material being processed as well as the changing quality of the light. [...]

The tower shot, perhaps inspired by Warhol’s *Empire* (1964)—imagine what Warhol would have done with digital—brings with it associations of another New York building engulfed in smoke and flame. Despite the sound of airplanes invading the space of the tower in the shot’s first minute (soon followed by sirens), Benning says he didn’t think of the World Trade Center until sometime during the editing process. Take or leave that statement as you will: when placed in context of a number of other shots in *Ruhr*—the airplanes over Dusseldorf, that complex, always changing shot of the mosque where the standing and sitting bodies of men at prayer at times block the camera completely—well, you do the math. But, as Benning said [in a recent post-screening discussion], the images that we have come to associate with 9/11 are not the property of anyone; we need to reclaim them from those responsible. In other words, what you take the images to mean tells more about viewers than the film. Along with being one hell of a head-trip, Benning’s first digital feature is his closest to theory. More than a series of specific images, *Ruhr* is best considered a film about image-making itself.” (Mark Peranson: “*Ruhr*” published in *Cinemascope* #41. [www.cinema-scope.com/wordpress/?page\\_id=1127](http://www.cinema-scope.com/wordpress/?page_id=1127))

***Fire & Rain*** (2009) by James Benning; digital video, color, sound, 1 minute

Note that this film, a short companion piece to *Ruhr*, created as a trailer for the 2009 Viennale, will not screen tonight. To view this work online, please visit: [www.fest21.com/?q=node/76161](http://www.fest21.com/?q=node/76161)