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"More real than reality": an interview with James Benning

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Image 1: *time after time* (James Benning, 2016) | © James Benning

James Benning was an invited speaker at the International Conference on Space and Cinema held at the University of Lisbon School of Arts and Humanities between the 28th and the 30th of November 2016. On the morning of the 29th, instead of delivering the protocol one-hour lecture, he presented his latest film, *time after time* – a montage of shots taken from earlier films, which the director had finished the week before –, in a world premiere at the Portuguese Cinematheque. We joined him in the afternoon for the conversation that follows, which took place on a small room at the University, with a view to the empty playground in a nearby kindergarten.

Aniki: Films such as *Grand Opera: A Historical Romance* (1978), *Him and Me* (1982), *American Dreams* (1984), *Landscape Suicide* (1987), or the more recent *North on Evers* (1992), are films of layers, in which different elements either get fused in the space of the shot, or alternate in the montage, providing documental, autobiographical or fictional density and thickness to places and landscapes. This heterogeneity, both thematic and structural or formal, is also a

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way of experimenting and playing with relations, sometimes disjunctive, between image, discourse and sound. Visual and textual elements intertwine in such a way that the private sphere intersects with the public sphere, leading the documents and records of one to become inseparable from the other, and individual history to emerge partly as a symptom of American collective history. What interested you in this way of transmitting the relationship between the landscape as imaginary or physical space and the stories that it aggregates?

James Benning: It's an important question, but it's a question that asks me to try to pin down when I became an artist and why I ended up in that position. Everything started when I was very young. I had an uncle who was my mother's brother. He liked his sister's kids as much as he liked his own and he wanted to have us together. His kids were adopted and he would take us all out into the physical world at an age of ten or eleven years old. That was really exciting for me, to get outside of who I was. Thinking about myself, I ask: "how do I define my physical world?" And I remember the very first time I escaped from my house at a very early age. It's a very early memory for me. I escaped from my house at the age of two or three. I was able to unlock the screen-door in the front by taking a chair and opening it. My motivation was to walk down the stairs of my front lawn and then down the street, to a very busy street, and cross that street. In the middle of this busy street was a traffic island – which I found interesting for being an island – and there was what we called in Milwaukee a "bubbler," which is a water fountain. I wanted to be able to get my own drink of water on this island. That was my first wandering away from home on my own. And my mother found that I was not at home and panicked. She saw me going down the street and across this busy street, Lisbon Avenue, and just as I was going to take a drink – there was a piece of concrete there, where I could step on and reach this bubbler to get a drink – my mother grabbed me and I know she wanted to shake me, but instead she hugged me. I didn't realize at that time, but it is an early memory that I think of as a gesture to define my own space as something larger, and that culminated in an act of love, which I think is quite important. My mother didn't discipline me. She made it clear that I did something wrong, but she didn't discipline me, which allowed me, to this day, to think about a certain freedom and responsibility one has with freedom. That and the fact of my uncle taking us on these trips made me think that every time I enlarge the space I'm curious about, my world grows. And sometime in the late 1980s – I had been making films for eighteen years or twenty years at that time – I decided that I wanted to continue work and that would take me to places where I hadn't been, and that those places would then reinform my greater understanding of what the world was. That became my position to continue to work: to be out in the world and to make sense of that world, to make myself understand the world better, and maybe the

ultimate goal is to become a better person through these experiences. That's how I got to this point of wandering off. Landscape is part of it, but it is also mainly *place* itself. It could be a cityscape, or it could be a rural space... But I tend to be more in rural spaces, and alone. And there is also the search for solitude. That's like a desire to be an explorer, basically.

Aniki: This visibility of private and collective stories anchored to a place is replaced, starting with the California Trilogy [*El Valley Centro* (1999), *Los* (2000), and *Sogobi* (2001)], by the physical visibility of places and landscapes. The latter demands from the spectator's perception, through an effort that is also of imagination and memory, the ability to read in the landscape and in its signs what is imperceptible in it. This time the viewer is sensitive to the audiovisual effects, here and now, of the stories that the landscapes conceal and are no longer told or given to us, as in previous films.

It is the same principle or prerequisite for both series of films – the landscape or place conceived as a cluster of stories, the image construed as a combination of "now" and "then" – but two completely different ways of making it cinematically perceptible. How do you get from one to the other?

James Benning: When I first began filmmaking I didn't know much about film history or how I fit in. I realized I didn't want to make films like the films that I knew, which were mainly mainstream, dominant cinema. I wasn't interested in that at all. But I began with an interest in narrative, and that's why films made in the 1970s and 1980s really are narrative-driven even though they are not traditional narrative films. They had, though, their roots in narrative itself and in specific stories of violence and things like that. And then in the 90s I was more interested in creating films that had text-image relationships. *North on Evers* actually has a diary text that is related to images, and the diary is from the year before the images are made. There is a discrepancy in time with the stories and then, as they are placed in the film, the diary is read before what you see, but besides that the story is from the year before. Then I did other kinds of sound-image relationships with *Deseret* (1995), *Four Corners* (1998), and *Utopia* (1998). Those films were all using text-image in different ways, and by the end of the 90s I had exhausted my interest in text-image relationships, so I began to focus back on early cinema and on the cinema of observation. The California Trilogy is about trying to make a film about what California was like for me, because I had lived there then for ten years, and it took me ten years to think about making a film about California and to do it without the help of text, and only through observation. It began with *El Valley Centro* because I was interested in that raw life in labor relationships and in the politics of large corporate farming and the number of prisons in that valley. So, there was a political connection that I wanted to be inherent in the images without having to state them through language,

which you might feel or completely miss. Once I made that [*El Valley Centro*], I wanted to make something about Los Angeles. And once I did that [*Los*], I wanted to make something about wilderness itself and how that wilderness was being taken over by industrial investigations in California [*Sogobi*]. From there I really went deeper in observation with *13 Lakes* (2004) and *Ten Skies* (2004). That kind of snowballed my interest in looking at images that would be pretty loaded politically, but not stating those politics. Most people might not even feel the politics, but I knew it was there and I thought it would be somewhat inherent in the feeling. I also investigated Robert Smithson's work, because I was interested in his ideas of entropy and land art. Everything kind of grew from one film to the next.

Aniki: In films such as *Casting a Glance* (2007), *RR* (2007) or *Ruhr* (2009), you seem to have reached another moment of exhaustion in work in what concerns your interest for observational cinema. In fact, in a film like *Stemple Pass* (2012), you focus again on the relationship between text and image. Do you want to comment on your return to the text – to the written and spoken word – in connection to the explicit political dimension of this particular movie?

James Benning: *Stemple Pass* is part of a large project, the *Two Cabins* project, which includes site specific sculptures, that is, the building of two cabins in the middle of nowhere, one similar to that of [Henry David] Thoreau and one similar to [Theodore] Kaczynski's. In that process I wanted to learn more about Kaczynski and Thoreau. I thought they were kind of opposed to each other, but through research and reading I found that Thoreau was much more complicated than just an environmentalist, as Kaczynski was much more complicated than just a terrorist; he had ideas about our environment and about technology that I was sympathetic with. Through that kind of studying, I thought the only way I could start to represent those issues was to return to using text in *Stemple Pass*, and because I had the opportunity to read all the twenty-five of Kaczynski's journals, and it influenced me quite a bit, I wanted to use the text in order to give you a flavor of that. But *Stemple Pass* was also very affected by my work in *13 Lakes* and *Ten Skies*. So when I made it, I made both films at once, where you would have one half an hour of film, and the first fifteen minutes of that would be text-image relationship in which you hardly see the image because the text was so rich and almost voyeuristic, so that you wanted to learn things that came from diaries. That would code the way you would look at an image after that. And then that text would end, and I like the idea of the text ending and the landscape coming forward again. But as it comes forward, it's completely coded by what you just heard. But then the landscape, once you pay attention to it, wins over and has its own presence again. So it was a kind of an analysis of these text-image relationships, that they're true to an extent, but then the landscape says as much as the text can; it fights back and has its

importance too. All this is inherent in the landscape. In the case of *Stemple Pass* it is confusing because my cabins are built in California and the stories are from Montana. The stories come from a completely different landscape, but similar: it's mountainous. Even though it's wrong, it's right. I was interested in all these issues. So I didn't plan to return to text-image relationships, but it came out of the process of making these cabins and doing more research and being able to have access to Kaczynski's writings, and finding that those were important to me, and I thought they would be important for people to hear.

Aniki: In fact, your interest in building and replicating the cabins was not initially connected to film, was it?

James Benning: No, in fact it didn't even start as an art project. I wanted to build a house and I was too old and so I built a small house, and the quintessential small house was Thoreau's cabin. And then I built that cabin and I had been doing some paintings about sider artists, and I hung those paintings in the cabin, and then all of a sudden I thought: "this isn't just learning how to paint or construction. It's actually becoming, it's speaking back to me as something important." Then it occurred to me that it wasn't quite working because it needed a counterpoint, and that's when I decided to build the Kaczynski's cabin. And then it really became an important artwork for me, which generated a number of films. One of them, *Data Entry*, shows how I decode the text which you saw a part of today in *time after time*. Also *Nightfall* is part of that series. I also made a film of the Thoreau cabin, which only has been shown as an installation with *Stemple Pass*, but it is kind of a companion where there's two one-hour shots and I read two texts from Thoreau. One is a very political text about John Brown, an American terrorist who is a catalyst to the civil war, and who Thoreau supported. He not only gave money to him, but even after John Brown had been arrested and was being executed Thoreau wrote a text, "In support of John Brown," and he read it the day John Brown was executed. He was one of the liberals that supported terrorism, because he was against both the war with Mexico and slavery. There is this kind of connection that interested me. *Two Cabins* is yet another film. And then there are the paintings, and I made some quilts that are in the cabins that are based on Gee's Bend quilters. So there are references to all different kinds of work in that whole piece, in those satellite works that surround the two cabins. And I'm more interested in that now than in just creating a single cinema piece. I'm much more interested in positioning cinema within a context of art exploration, of a larger project.

Aniki: I was thinking of something you said in the conference before: that an artist's studio could be seen as the exteriorization of his/her mind. Do you see the cabins in a similar way?

James Benning: For those five years of my life, they are the result of my thinking. So, in a sense they could be thought of as a giant kind of essay, and that includes all these other things. Not just the cabins, but also the paintings and the quilts and the four films; and people visiting and sleeping in the cabin and creating a space for experience. It becomes performative also.

Aniki: Do you still see a connection between your work and Milwaukee, between your films and the impressions and memories related to your life and experience in your hometown? What's the importance of this place in your way of seeing and thinking your movies?

James Benning: It's all about from where I come from and my own position in life, coming from a lower-middle working class family. I was interested in the problems of that class and the kind of prejudice I grew up in. Poor whites and poor blacks fought against each other because they wanted the same jobs. Even though poor whites and poor blacks didn't know each other they hated each other. And they all had the same problems. It was a kind of an institutionalized racism to keep labor costs down and to keep the fighting in that part of Milwaukee and not out in the places where people have more money, so that it could be peaceful there. The battleground would be in that part of the city. I was not aware of this and as a kid I just bought into all that prejudice. But at a certain age I started to question, because I didn't know the people I was supposed to hate and they didn't know me and I didn't want them hating me without knowing me. And then Milwaukee had a very unique kind of history in the 1960s, and there was a white Jesuit priest, James Groppi. His parish was in the black part of Milwaukee and he became a youth leader for young black people. They formed a very political movement and he was part of the inspiration of that movement. That was happening when I was coming of age. So I started to visit. I was one of the few white people that would go down there to see what was happening. He led open housing marches for two-hundred and eight straight days to get legislation passed that one couldn't be discriminated by the color of skin, which was still legal in the 1960s. So there were all these marches. They didn't do much good until he started to take the marches out into the suburbs to where the local people and government lived and then those people freaked out. He was using civil disobedience in a really interesting way and he was pretty much hated by many people in Milwaukee. But he brought about a change. I mean, it's still a very prejudiced city, but he brought about, finally, an open housing law. And he certainly educated people like me that kept their eyes open. And black people too. And then it became impossible to have a white leader in a black community, and he had embarrassed the Catholic Church. So they moved him to a poor side of the south side of Milwaukee, which was poor white. He started to do labor organizing for poor white people. Finally, he fell in love with

some woman and quit the church. He became a bus driver. Unfortunately, he died at a young age of a brain tumor, at the age of fifty-two or so. That was a very unique time in my life and Milwaukee provided that, because of its own racist nature, but also because there was this dynamic person there and people were fighting for something. I mean, that was happening in many places in the US, in the 1960s, but it's kind of unique in Milwaukee that white people were taking part in it. Not many, but it was possible to take part of that. I'm very close to all those things. My neighborhood now, where I grew up, is totally black and it has the worst poverty of Milwaukee and it's very dangerous there. In a sense it's also sad, there's still a lot of discrimination in Milwaukee. The black community, certain parts of it have been moved out and pushed out into others ghettoes outside. They spread them around, but there hasn't been a real solution. Maybe that's what is part of the problem of America. This kind of racism still exists and it seems to be ramping within police departments. Although Milwaukee has a really interesting chief of police now, and even though Milwaukee had a shooting this summer that caused a riot again, I have much admiration for the current police chief. He is a white man, but he was the first police chief in the US to demand that the local cops would wear video, so they would be held accountable. I guess they can still block them, or whatever they figure out. And certainly the blacks in Milwaukee aren't happy, because they were rioting just this past summer. But it's complex. I have a few friends there and I go back and visit, we have great connection. I kept going back to make *One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977), which I have done three times.

Aniki: In the same way that the stories that inhabit the landscapes tend to become less evident in your films, so does your own working process, i.e. the adventures that lead you as a filmmaker to a certain place and the efforts associated with getting the shots you want to get – tend to become less and less visible and explicit in the shot, and more and more an element of the off-screen space. Do you agree?

James Benning: I guess I agree. The way I lived my life, probably has become more of that too. When I bought a place in the mountains, there was an idea of experiencing solitude. And the whole *Two Cabins* project is basically trying to make sense of solitude and "outsiderness" and all that. I guess as I get older I have less confidence in humanity and people, so I become kind of jaded in a sense that I don't want to be, because I do like people too; but I think we have a really bad track record. So maybe that's what pushed people out of my films. But they are always hinted at, you will see evidence of them in the landscape. It may not be as obvious. When I began making films... Because I had done political organizing when I was younger, and I first picked up a camera, I was still doing organizing, and I thought "I'm going to make films but they are going to be apo-

litical completely." Because if I want to do politics I have to stay and do the organizing at the grass roots level and actually see some evidence of change even if it's on a very small scale. But once I started making films, I realized those politics kept creeping in. And then I allowed them to creep more and more and I focused on them until I started to push them back again. But I think they are maybe stronger when they are pushed back, because they allow the viewer to make their own sense more. It's asking for your own politics to be implied or confronted when you watch these things. And sometimes that's hard work and confusing for people and they give up, because I don't give them as much of a way into the politics as I used to. But I'm hoping that if you have to bring that up yourself that is a stronger kind of ... you stay with it longer. I don't give solutions. So it questions your own politics. But maybe I'm also hoping.

Aniki*: Natural History* (2014) is a different film from the others, yet I read that you consider it a landscape film. What kind of landscape film is this? Can you tell us how you came to direct it, and how does it relate to the rest of your work?

James Benning: The easy answer is that I was invited to the Museum of Natural History in Vienna, by the director. Because he goes to the Austrian Film Museum quite often, he knew of my work, and he also curates a room in the Museum of Natural History where he allows artists to do some work. He invited me there to see if I would like to do something, and then he gave me a tour of the storage areas, and that very much interested me because it's like you're exploring something hidden. It makes me think of landscapes, in the sense of finding these hidden spaces, and that's why I call this a landscape film too. In addition, they were very trusting of me; they gave me keys to the museum, and I could stay in it as long as I wanted to. I was all alone filming for eleven days, and the experience was pretty much like being alone. It was in Summer, so I hadn't brought warm clothes, and all of the storage rooms are climate controlled, but some were kept at 40ºF [c. 4ºC] to preserve the things that are being stored, so I was very aware of the weather from one room to the next, which is a frequent concern when you're outside – how do you dress? I had to buy clothes that I hadn't brought in order to manage the climate down there. It became very much about being outside, and then there were all these animals that should be outside. One room is called "Noah's Ark Room," because they have there every animal, and it's a very strange kind of space. Then the hallways in part of the museum are very much like caves, it's all construction, and one of the shots in the film I showed today, *time after time*, is from there, and it's one of those cave-like openings where you can hear the sound, the different sounds of wind. All the movement in *Natural History* is the air moving, and there's nothing really else moving. Occasionally one or two people move, but it's mainly the sound of different air systems. All in all, I felt very much that I was dealing

with environments that would be similar to a landscape, and I also thought that it took time to feel each place, like a landscape has to be felt, so I gave it a different kind of time. The biggest difference in the film is that time is constructed by the digits of Pi, which is a famous number in mathematics which I think can be about life in a way. So this whole collection of structure, images and sounds is kind of documenting different kinds of life and forms.

Aniki: Can you tell us something about your fascination with the number Pi? You mention it in several interviews, and it also appears in some of your films in various ways. You just mentioned that *Natural History*'s editing is based on it, but I also recall a girl in *Youtube Trilogy* saying the number out loud and with her eyes closed. What does Pi represent for you, and how may it be related to your work?

James Benning: I studied mathematics, and it's everywhere. It's in the normal curve, it's in the circle, in the relationship between the circumference and the diameter. So it's a very special word, and I also like it because it's irrational, that is, it can be expressed as a fraction, and it can only be expressed as a decimal, and the decimal goes on forever, so its actual definition is never defined. You only can define it between limits, and you can make those limits get smaller and smaller, to the point where you don't need to have it more accurate than that. But mathematicians have obsessed over this word, and once computers were designed it's now figured out to billions of places. But for years it was done by hand, so if you got up to a thousand places it might take nine months of calculations to do that, so there's kind of a general obsession about the number for all of those reasons. I have my own obsession with that obsession.

Aniki: In other landscape films the stillness of the camera is in contrast with the movement on the landscape, which creates interesting dynamics in films such as *RR* or *Ten Skies* and *13 Lakes*, because the camera is still but there's always movement. In *Natural History*, however, the immobility of the stuffed animals mirrors the immobility of the camera. The film reminds me of something that French film theorist André Bazin wrote in his famous essay on the ontology of the photographic image: that the indexical cinematographic image suffered from "the complex of the mummy," as if film images were in fact time and movement embalmed in a material fixed form. This could make us think of cinema as an unlimited archive of images, ultimately analogous to a museum of natural history, because it perpetuates, for people and for things, another kind of life, an *embalmed film-life*. Were you also considering this ghostly dimension while making the film?

James Benning: I had thought about it, but maybe in a different, more abstract, way. I think it was in the 1970s, maybe early 1980s, that Douglas Huebler, who is an American conceptual artist

that I admire very much, had a project to do a still photograph of everybody in the world, and he did that by taking pictures of large crowds, and then isolating every face, which is of course an impossible task. It's this idea of categorizing and the hopelessness of actually doing that, and the fact that the world changes and the people in the world change from moment to moment. Somebody dies, somebody is born. His idea was essentially about the impossibility of cataloging every face in the world, and I kind of think of film in those terms too, even if I don't conceive my projects in that grand scale of capturing everything.

Aniki: Maybe it's a more personal experience with you?

James Benning: It's about capturing what I have an interest in, and that can take a while or may be done quickly, because I do change and what I am interested in also keeps changing. However, I think that even if my films may be very diverse, they are authored, you somehow can see that I made them, which I think is a good thing.

Aniki: In connection to that idea, you think about indirectly, in the sense that your work is also archiving a change, and so things transform, things are no more, and then you go back to certain places to see that in landscapes...

James Benning: I do that also in my daily life too. I like to return to places. Maybe I filmed them or maybe I didn't, but I like to see how they changed since the time I have been there before because there's something pleasing about that, because it also enables me to measure my own change between those times. In the late 1970s I lived in Oklahoma, and I taught at the University of Oklahoma, and every Friday afternoon I drove outside of Norman, Oklahoma, which is a rather small town, to the North Canadian River, which is a name I never understood because Canada is nowhere near Oklahoma. I would go there to look at a river that had water in it, which would meander and change, and sometimes it would have more water or less, or it would move this way or that way. I went there every Friday and I wanted to experience what I felt there in that space. I didn't film or anything, it was just like a performance for one. But I also wanted to think about how I felt, so I was trying to measure the change of a place and my own change at the same time as the measuring sticks were changing, so my relationship to that particular space on any Friday can be due to how it changed or how I changed, and I was interested in that comparison. As a performance I found it really enlightening for myself because it made me think: "what's changing? Is the measuring stick changing or did I change?" And I think maybe that's kind of a model for all my work. I always make films that are considering change in myself, or show how I perceive what I'm looking at, or reveal what interests me in what I'm looking at on a particular day.

Aniki: *Ten Skies* and *13 Lakes*, especially, are films that clearly answer to a formal structure but deal, in fact, with the domains of the unquantifiable or the unmeasurable. Because the matter of these films is that of the air, the clouds, and the water, which are paradigmatic figures of movement that always escape our attempts to grasp them or even perfectly perceive them. In a way, I think we can watch these films as dealing with the position of humans in the world, and our inability to absolutely grasp or perceive an ever-changing natural reality. This makes me think that you are, in fact, a very romantic artist, in the vein of eighteenth and nineteenth century Romanticism. Your films recall, in a very different setting, some paintings by German painter Caspar David Friedrich, and particularly those paintings with a *Rückenfigur*, a man or a woman seen from behind, watching the world in front of them, which would be you off-screen. This state of wonder, which is not a passive wonder but something very much connected to a quest for knowledge, is something that one perceives in your films. And maybe that's why your films are very personal. What seems to interest you is how you relate to the world and how you experience it.

James Benning: It comes directly out of what I just said, of this performance. And I suppose that one can call it rather romantic to have the privilege to take the afternoon every Friday to think about who you are and what relationship you are today in with the world. But I think it's an important romantic notion, so I'm guilty.

Aniki: And that happens always in relation with the space you inhabit, which links to your travels around America. That's very interesting because, in fact, you are documenting your own circulation on space and the way you look at things, so it's always your perspective, and that's what gives the films a form.

James Benning: I agree, and I suppose this experience of going to North Canadian River was important. Oklahoma has a really interesting weather pattern. It always involved changes in weather, but also there could be one day I would go there and all of a sudden there were two rubber tires from a truck that had been discarded in the river. Then you have something that interrupts your notion of change due to weather, but it's very man-made or woman-made or whoever threw it there, right? So these kinds of politics that are written in the landscape are written naturally by the way things change but also just from human intervention. I became very aware of that, of those kinds of footprints that are also left there and that suggest other politics that I might have. So it is somewhat romantic but is also very real, about reality and change.

Aniki: One can say that environmental awareness and the destruction of the environment, even if they develop more clearly since films like *Deseret*, are present in all your films. In them, the American landscape reveals precisely the various damage that our way of

life has inflicted upon it, in a combination of a natural history and a human history of destruction. It is a landscape irremediably marked by man, for the good, but especially for the worst; a landscape of the Anthropocene... Recent films like the already mentioned *Stemple Pass,* or *Two Cabins*, explicitly raise the issue by summoning the Unabomber manifesto as well as Thoreau's experiment, and articulating them with views from the interior of both "authors"' huts – huts that you have replicated. How do you see the pervasiveness and constancy, even if with differentiated contours, of this concern, which one could call *ecological*, throughout your work?

James Benning: *Deseret* really has different histories written into the landscape both from more modern history of the Mormons to more ancient history of Anasazi Indians, to geological changes that can happen over time. So there is this looking at time and history in many different ways. One could call the Mormons a more local recent history and Anasazi is relatively recent history too compared to geology, and then you see the way mountains have turned up and geological markings that describe something that really puts a perspective on time. So I'm interested in all of that, and I guess in Oklahoma I wasn't aware of the geological changes as much as more recent kind of meanderings of the river, which can happen over a month and is a quicker change that one can observe.

Aniki: You are changing to digital, which is a very interesting turning point in your work. We could be tempted, when we see your recent use of digital technology, to organize your films into categories, because you start doing other things when you change to digital, not only the landscape films but also some kind of archival films, where you go back to your own work and even to works by other directors, such as Cassavetes [*Faces* (2011)] or Dennis Hopper [*Easy Rider* (2012)]. But this may be a simplification, and maybe what happens is that you have a really new field of possibilities that digital brought you and to a large extent you feel that the way you're using slow motion, for instance, is not very different from the way you deal with duration over a landscape. So they seem different, but they are kind of connected. At the same time, you became once again interested in the portrait, something that was present in your first films and which you abandoned, only to return to it, as we saw earlier in your latest film, *time after time*, where there are some shots from other films: the girl that is reading,[3] and also your students in *After Warhol* (2011). How does the digital allow you to explore multiple ideas and multiple ways of working, and what has changed for you in your working process, namely in relation to some fundamental ideas like your conceptualization of landscape as a function of time, and also the indexicality of the images, that in some films, like *Small Roads* (2011), you manipulate in an imperceptible way.

[3] *Readers* is a work in progress planned for 2017.

James Benning: In *Small Roads* it is kind of a collage. By manipulating the image I make things more real than reality. But that is a big question, so let me do the easiest part of it first, which you haven't referred to and maybe don't know about. Last year I made fifty-two short films, all appropriated from the Internet, so digital media allowed me to steal media from the public domain. So I made a film a week for all of 2015, and that project is supposed to be presented as an installation on fifty-two laptops, and we were going to do it last year at Art Basel, and then my gallery decided to not do it this year. Meanwhile I put this thing aside, so it hasn't been shown, but I have shown some of the films individually. And then I also made a number of films separately from the Internet about Voina, a film called *The War* (2012), which is about a Russian activist group of artists of which Pussy Riot came out. I made it two years ago, and I finished it the day before the three members of Pussy Riot were sentenced to jail, because I wanted to finish it before there was a verdict for that. So that's one way that digital media has allowed me to not need a camera, basically, because there's so much available. And this is all about not only the digital, but it is the Internet itself that makes things available. Then the other big thing affecting my own filmmaking is, in fact, a number of things: one, I can use longer durations now. I remade *RR* as a one three-and-a-half-hour shot in the desert called *BNSF* (2013), so it allowed me to have these longer takes through which I can really study change over a longer period of time. And then the other thing is post-production. Now I can change contrast, and you could already do that on film by printing it on a different contrast dot, but you couldn't do it scene to scene, and so there wasn't that kind of control, but now there's such a greater amount of control and color correction and contrast. I can make images that I want to make much easier, so I don't need a lab anymore. I don't need to worry about how bad lab services are, and I don't even have to worry about projection as much, because digital projection is getting better every year and analog projection is getting worse every year. So those are the advantages, and of course once I have the equipment it doesn't cost me to make a film. For instance, the film I showed today didn't cost anything, because I used images that I'd made before, and I made that in an afternoon last week, and I think it's actually quite a beautiful film. I'm very happy with it and I think I will probably do this performance more. So I am very excited by digital, and I didn't think I'd ever change, but the stress of getting good prints and good projection just got too overwhelming for me, so I stopped. There is so many people now that are fighting to keep film alive, and I find them annoying.

Aniki: But once you used to do that fight, right?

James Benning: I did that fight, but I think it's crazy at this point. It will all go its course. And I guess what I'm put off by the most is that I like that a lot of young people want to keep it alive, but

then they don't know the history enough, they just keep doing things that have been done. Some of them could continue and add to that history, but a lot of it is just stating what I've seen a million times. That's alright, because when you are young you have to learn that, but I'm hoping that we just don't keep doing these kinds of films that Brakhage has done. He has done enough of them, we don't need another one. Just like we don't need another good narrative film, there's enough of those, even too many produced, at least in the States, every year. I'd like to make work that adds to the film culture and I think digital has allowed me to really have a different voice all of a sudden and to keep me interested. I do miss working with film but I don't expect that I will ever do it again.

Aniki: What do you miss exactly in working with film?

James Benning: It's funny that you ask, because in a way I have to get over this. For instance, I can recall the time when I made the California Trilogy. The first two films, *El Valley Centro* and *Los*, have thirty-five shots each. Well, in fact the three of them have thirty-five shots, but I shot thirty-eight shots only for the first two and then for *Sogobi*, which was out in the wilderness and I liked doing more, I did about seventy shots. I ended up throwing away almost half of those shots, and I enjoyed trying to get a shot without a huge ratio on the first two. I had to do it this way because I didn't have a lot of money for the films, and I like the constraint and the idea of construction, and also the idea of nailing a shot, the feeling of doing it in one take and it's there. These days I shoot a lot and I can pick that three minutes out of four hours if I want, so it isn't quite as satisfying. That's more about fishing than about filming. With digital you don't have to wait for the perfect light because you can make that light later, you can make every shot like it was shot as the sun went down. There is a kind of a cheapness to that, but I got to get over it, because ultimately it's what it looks like at the end, and not how easy or how hard it was.

Aniki: Even though that hardship is something one can feel it's there, present in the images...

James Benning: I think people still give you more credit if you get it on film, because it was harder to get, but that's kind of silly because now we have technology so you don't have to stress like that, and ultimately you can get the good shot. So I have to get over that. A lot of people are nostalgic for film and want to keep that alive, but it's so hard to get the shot, and that's why I quit doing that. I say: "What are you, a masochist?"

Aniki: One of your premises is "*landscape is a function of time*." This is inseparable from a specific exercise of "*listening and seeing*," which works simultaneously as a methodology and as a pedagogy (understood as an extension of your own working process). I'm not only referring here to your Course at CalArts with the same

name, but also to the interest you have shown in carrying out some experiences with children at this level. In an interview, you mentioned that it would be nice to teach a 'Listening and Seeing' class to children in the History Museum of Vienna. How does this articulation take place, between your method and its potential pedagogical dimension, in the sense of being useful to others, children, students, filmmakers? I read that you were preparing a book about one of your films where each shot is commented by children. How is it going?

James Benning: That never happened. I just had Thanksgiving with the woman who teaches that course, and we talked about that. She has all of the tapes still, so we could do that. It is about eight or nine-year-old children who watched the California Trilogy, one shot a day for a hundred and five days, after which they had a half-hour discussion. I visited the last day, and they thought that I was like God. They analyzed the film better than anybody because they had a frame enlargement of all hundred and five shots on the classroom walls, and they could identify them easily, and talk with each other about it. It was quite amazing. I would like to do the book. And all of this reminds me of a story when Douglas Gordon was showing his installation of *The Searchers*, that would be projected for seven or nine years. So it slows down *The Searchers* to be the time that the story takes place, and there's an argument whether *The Searchers* is a seven years search or a nine-year search. I don't know the answer, nor do I care. It's very slowed down. Each frame is on the screen for two minutes or three minutes, to slow it down, maybe even longer, five minutes. And he was also showing *The Searchers* at the local drive-in and everyone went there. I stayed to watch just the slowed down version and he started it when the sun was still up, so you couldn't see anything. As the sun set, it kind of faded in like a polaroid, but much slower and it asserted itself. And I was watching it. I knew how long each image would be. And a young little boy came out and sat down next to me and watched it for a minute or two and he said: "Aren't you bored?" and I said: "No, no. I'm not bored. See that piece of dirt on the left side of the frame? That's going to disappear in about two minutes," and he said: "How do you know?," I said: "You just watch that." And two minutes went by and it dissolved to the next frame and when it went away he jumped up and said "wow!" "You see... You are not bored either." Then he sat next to me and he told me that he likes skateboarding and stuff like that. Then he did get a little bored, but he went up and he started to do shadow play, because the projector was low enough and he started to pick John Wayne's nose with his shadow. So, he was having fun. And then he sat down again and said: "More dirt, more dirt." He got into this. And his mother finally came out. She probably was worried that he was sitting with this guy for so long, and she kind of whisk him away. Then the next day I told Douglas Gordon the story, that there was this young boy and that he really had loved his film. First he asked me if I was bored, and I told him the whole story, and Gordon said:

"You are making structuralists out of little kids, now?" It was a really nice experience to talk to this little boy because obviously you would think that that was kind of boring, but then he got it. I told him what it was about, and how cool it was.

Aniki: One of the surprising things in *time after time*, the film you presented earlier today at Portuguese Cinematheque, was the use of music, because it's something unusual in your films. In fact, some of your initial movies have music, but not so much anymore. What is your relation to music?

James Benning: Yes, *American Dreams* has twenty-four pieces of music, and *11x14* (1977) has the same full Bob Dylan song twice. I think it is the only film that uses the same piece of music twice, and it's a seven and a half-minute song, which makes fifteen minutes of Bob Dylan in the film. In fact, the shot in *time after time* with music is actually already in the film from where I took it, *Easy Rider*, and I used it there because it was a remake of Hopper's film, where I chose to bring the music to the foreground, basically. But even if music is not in most of my films, it's important for me. The first time I realized there was a different world from the one I grew up in was related to music, from a woman on a record store. I was around fifteen and she was an older woman with around twenty-six, and she didn't want me to buy an Elvis Presley record. She told me to buy a vocal jazz record by Lambert, Hendricks & Ross instead, and I bought it and I took it home, and it was so different and weird from what I was used to hear. I thought I hated it, but I kept listening to it and in a few days I started to think it was the most remarkable thing I'd ever heard. It was outside of my world completely, and this made me realize that there was something out there. I didn't define it as art at that point, but it was one of the first contacts I had with art. That was my first introduction to a kind of thinking different from the narrow thinking with which I grew up in the working class. This thinking is still very important for me, but this new music was opening up something more special for me. It was making me experience difference and realize that art could be a profession. I didn't really understand that until years later, of course, but it was the first opening to that idea.

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