

Broken Circle / James Benning / Spiral Hill

NOTES FOR A ROUGH LIBRIAD

Neil Young

“My father worked at home drawing plans in the back room and tried to invent things in the basement. Sometimes he would take a break from work and play solitaire while watching soap operas on TV. He never watched the same story but would rather watch different stories as if they were one.”

James Benning, *James Benning* (eds. Barbara Pichler, Claudia Slanar), p109

Look at a car park for two days / Look at a grey port for two days

Train line, stone and grey.

This is not their town...

The Fall, ‘The Container Drivers,’ from the LP *Grotesque (After the Gramme)*.

Grand Opera constellates a ‘spherical space’ in the most literal sense. It utilizes a circular form, although this becomes apparent only at the end of the film. Shot 69 out of a total of 70 shows the explosion of a building that was alluded to in shot 6, through the use of a lengthy textual insert: “(...) the brown structure on the far right that would unexplainably explode.”

Barbara Pichler, *James Benning*, p35

Introduction

When asked by the editors of *KINO!* to review the new book on the American structuralist film-maker James Benning - edited by Barbara Pichler and Claudia Slanar - I was initially reluctant. My qualm was an ethical one: I didn't know whether it would be appropriate for me to review a book in which I myself happen to feature, albeit briefly: an interview I conducted with Benning in 2002 is briefly excerpted on pages 88 and 103.

I was eventually persuaded, but was always clear that the last thing I wanted to write was an "orthodox" review - a couple of dozen neat paragraphs eruditely analysing the book's strengths and weaknesses - as Benning himself is anything but an orthodox film-maker. Indeed, it's one of the problems with the book that it doesn't take that much of a "Benningistic" (Benningesque? Benningish?) approach to James Benning. A handsome, squarish paperback of 260-odd pages (measuring 20cm x 27cm x 2.85cm, weighing 554 grams, costing €20) it's divided into seventeen chapters, handled by thirteen different writers, including Benning himself, plus a preface and appendix - but, most frustratingly, *no index!*

Published by Vienna's Austrian Filmmuseum's Synema imprint (the sixth in an ongoing series of extended monographs) to tie in with a complete Benning retrospective mounted throughout October 2007, this is a measured, copiously-illustrated text that combines the scholarly and analytical with the anecdotal and playful as it navigates the reader through Benning's dauntingly large work - from 1971's *did you ever hear that cricket sound?* to 2007's double-whammy farewell to celluloid, *RR* and *casting a glance* (he's stated that he'll work via digital video from now on.)

Overall it's an unmistakably enthusiastic paean to Benning and his films. And, as I've more than once described in print Benning as probably the greatest of all living film-makers, I'm not exactly outraged or dismayed by such a reverent approach - although the writers' enthusiasm does take on a somewhat hagiographic tone after a while.

Then again, the mere existence of this particular book is a cause for celebration: it says much about the state of publishing that, while shelves groan with volumes on Scorsese, Lynch, Godard and Spielberg, this is - astonishingly - the very first time that a whole book has been dedicated to James Benning.

In the following pages I offer my own unapologetically idiosyncratic, chapter-by-chapter *response* to the *James Benning* book, in a piece whose (somewhat fiddly) structure is at least as important as its contents. Indeed, the substance of this article is essentially dictated by its form, in accordance with Benning's own practices - in the book he refers to "the ... kind of built-in limitations ... that help me to create structure."

The concept of the *journey* is central to most of Benning's *oeuvre*, and I thus decided that I would re-read my copy of *James Benning* (which I purchased in Ljubljana last

November) while undertaking a trip of my own: an artistic pilgrimage of sorts, and a follow-up to my excursion to Blackpool which featured in my last writing for *KINO!*, on Patrick Keiller.

But where to travel *to*? Benning has often remarked that his chief external influence is seminal American “land-artist” Robert Smithson (1938-1973). Smithson’s most famous creation is the *Spiral Jetty* (1970) in Utah’s Great Salt Lake, which is the subject of Benning’s last work on film - and the picture which I regard as his crowning masterpiece, *casting a glance* (2007). With a visit to Utah sadly impractical, I settled for the next best thing: a three-day, two-night expedition, in the middle of May 2008, to Emmen in the Netherlands. This obscure town near the German border - seldom visited, even by Amsterdammers or Rotterdammers - is the site of Smithson’s most significant project in Europe: a pair of adjoining land/water sculptures from 1971 entitled *Broken Circle* and *Spiral Hill*.

Almost invariably referred to as a though a single entity - *Broken Circle / Spiral Hill* - they were constructed as part of the ambitious ‘Sonsbeek 71’ art exhibition. The *Circle* is about 100 feet in diameter, and consists of a curving sand “arm” which extends out into the lake, reaching back - but not touching - the shore. The form of the circle continues, however, as a curved canal which reaches back into the land, then back towards the shoreline. In the centre, on the main sand-shore near the water-line, is a large boulder about 15 feet across.

The *Hill* is further back on the shore behind the *Circle*, and is essentially a tall, round mound - perhaps 30 feet from foot to base - set on the slope that leads up to the forest beyond. Originally of dark soil and sharply defined as a spiral, it has long been overgrown with plant life and the spiral form is only faintly discernible.

The book accompanied me at every stage of my journey - in a manner that repeatedly made me think of the soap carried in Leopold Bloom’s pocket as he wanders Dublin in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. According to Joyce critic Stuart Gilbert, “through the greater *Odyssey* of Bloomsday there runs a ‘Little *Odyssey*,’ ... the wandering of the soap - a comic counterpart of the heroic tale.” Gilbert named this the ‘Saponiad’ (literally, “about the soap”) - so what follows could perhaps be described as a ‘Libriad’ (“about the book”), rather than a review, combining my travelogue notes and impressions with extracts from and commentary upon the Pichler/Slanar book.

Via footnotes (which will sometimes be directly germane to the text, sometimes tangentially digressive) I also offer: snippets of Joyce’s original Saponiad; excerpts from my 2002 interview with Benning; some statements from Robert Smithson; extracts from a record of two visits made to *Broken Circle / Spiral Hill* (henceforth mainly *BC/SH*) by Sonic Youth’s guitarist Lee Ranaldo; and quotations from my own reviews of the eight Benning films which I’ve seen so far.

And they are:

Los (seen 15/11/01 in London)

El Valley Centro (7/2/02 Berlin)
Sogobi (9/2/02 Berlin)
13 Lakes (4/2/05 Rotterdam)
Ten Skies (25/6/06 Leeds, 16/11/07 Ljubljana)
One Way Boogie Woogie / 27 Years Later (26/10/06 London and 14/11/07 Ljubljana)
casting a glance (29/10/07 Vienna and 14/3/08 Bradford)
RR (14/3/08 Bradford)

Neil Young
7/7/08 Sunderland

ch1. Claudia Slanar's *Taking Position*.

did you ever hear that cricket sound? (1971) to *3 minutes on the dangers of film recording* (1975)

After a brief, two-page preface by Slanar and Pichler introducing Benning ("a body of work that deeply informs the landscape of American Independent Cinema and beyond") and the book ("essays follow the chronology of Benning's filmic production and offer close readings of certain films in particular phases of his career"), the first chapter comprises Slanar's survey of Benning's earliest shorts. While several of these are now lost, all are very seldom screened - and the book as a whole is an invaluable way for readers to "discover," albeit at a couple of removes, works which they may well never have the chance to see for themselves¹.

While this makes it hard for the reader to assess the merits of the specific points which Slanar makes, the book's existence enables us to partially circumvent what

1 NY: I presumed the non-availability of the films on video and DVD was an issue of control – that you didn't like the idea of viewers being able to pause, rewind, fast-forward... that these films must be viewed in a specific order.

JB: It's more about the way people relate to a video *screen*. They don't sit and watch the screen like they would if they sit in a theatre. My films demand your attention – and a really strong attention for them to work, and effort. But now that people have DVD players and larger TV sets, you can sit in front of a TV and almost, if you want, you can almost have a film experience. But I think it takes training and I think that the kind of casual viewing of television has affected anything played on a video screen. That can break down now, though – perhaps I need a note on the DVD case saying 'It would be appreciated if you would watch it like you wanted to look at everything in it, and concentrate on the film, and try to cast aside any kind of casual viewing that you would generally do with television while you're eating a sandwich and drinking a beer.'

Jigsaw Lounge interview with James Benning, February 2002 (= 'JL/JB')
<http://www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film/benningfull.html>

Dick Hebdige, in Ch.10, sums up as Benning's ethos of "Restricted access": 'hard-to-get-to places, hard-to-access work; hard to see (distribution); hard to screen (16mm!); hard to watch (demanding)'. The illustrations in this chapter, as elsewhere, are a crucial element in this. Nearly all are in colour, superbly capturing the strong colours and bold tones of 16mm celluloid, and if the book has an unsung hero or two, they are Georg Wasner (credited with "Frame enlargements") and J R Hughto (Digitization of images).

Slanar is much more concerned with Benning's work than his life: "let's start at the beginning with James Benning in his late 20s" (p7), she says. Of course, the *actual* beginning would be December 28th 1942, and Benning's birth in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to parents of German origin. Apart from Benning's own essay *Off Screen Space / Somewhere Else*, which forms Ch.3, biographical information is parcelled out extremely sparingly - Slanar doesn't discuss the precise happenings which led to Benning becoming a film-maker in the first place.

"After various reasons force him to quit his job as a math teacher at a college in Upstate New York," Slanar notes, "he buys a 16mm Bolex camera." (p7) And what "various reasons" would they be? We're never told. Perhaps it's best to take *James Benning* solely on its own terms, and hope that there's a biographer or two waiting in the wings to fill in such tantalising gaps - and Benning's has been, even disregarding his film-making, a particularly eventful, much-travelled, politically-engaged and fascinating life.

TRAVEL LOG ONE : Sunderland to Schiphol

7.50am on a damp, grey Wednesday morning, as I drive² the 35 miles from my home in Sunderland to Middleton St George, location of Durham Tees Valley airport. On the radio news, Hillary Clinton proclaims "I will stand with you as long as you will stand by me," triumphant - but still doomed to ultimate defeat - after defeating Barack Obama in the West Virginia primary.

In other news, the Sichuan earthquake has caused "utter devastation" in China; the UN says another cyclone may be forming near Burma. The Cannes Film Festival, described as "the greatest platform for serious cinema," is about to begin, with Clint Eastwood and Steven Soderbergh mentioned as competing directors. *Indiana Jones*

2 The blood is coursing through me and I feel its rush. Three am flat in Holland night. We drove across the barren plain this afternoon, empty fields straight lines of trees, hogs and cows not raining but cloudy and w Dutch mist hanging lightly everywhere. We went to Emmen on the way to see Smithson's Broken Circle/Spiral Hill, on my insistence, everyone either half-hearted or against it. Not able to see the beauty of a wild goose chase through the flatlands. Lee Ranaldo, 24th November 1983
<http://www.sonicyouth.com/dotsonics/lee/prose/smithson.html>

and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull is premiering at the festival but, the Radio 4 newscaster solemnly informs us, is “not in competition.”

Cloudheaded dandelions cluster at the road-edge as I drive through Darlington, making decent time. It’s a tiny airport but I very nearly miss my plane, scampering across the tarmac through the rain. We take off at 9.55, and I see a cluster of burnt-out planes in a corner of the airfield. As we pass the Norfolk coastline, fields give way to the yellow swirls of sand which yield to a frozen-looking sea, the white caps of the waves as motionless as icy flecks on a winter pond. Then the sea is a disconcertingly sudden blank-blue wash.

I start *James Benning* and flick idly through *The Independent*. Inexplicably filed among “Home News”: Colourful World of the Shrimp

A species of shrimp has supersensitive eyes that can see ‘over the rainbow’, scientists say. The Mantis Shrimp from the Great Barrier Reef in Australia can see not only three primary colours – red, green and blue – they recognise 11 or 12, and others invisible to human eyes off a rainbow’s edge.

White wave-lines like vapour trails in the water, and then the shore... Ostend? Holland’s very ‘man-made’ landscapes unfold, water and land in precise arrangements... The irony suddenly strikes me of Smithson deciding³ to build a *Spiral Hill* - in famously flat Holland. Coming in to land, 10.50am Dutch time. A crossword clue, 24 Across: *Landscape artist’s beastly work, making waves, almost (5-5)*

ch2. Barbara Pichler’s *An Iconography of the Midwest*

8 1/2 x 11 (1974) to *Grand Opera* (1979)

Pichler examines the eight films Benning made between 1974 and 1979, “all informed by a high degree of diversity, even aesthetic transgression.” Once again, these films - with the exception of *One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977), later updated as *One Way Boogie Woogie / 27 Years Later*⁴ (2004) - are not widely exhibited or made

3 SMITHSON: ... out of the defunct, I think, class culture of Europe I developed something that was intrinsically my own and rooted to my own experience in America.

CUMMINGS: Have you been back to Europe since that?

SMITHSON: Yes, I have been back to Europe. I did *Broken Circle--Spiral Hill* in Holland in 1971. I consider it a major piece.

Robert Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, p284

4 As a historical record, the resulting two-hour film is likely going to prove invaluable. As a viewing experience, however, it proves more interesting and ambitious in concept than it is successful in execution: the second film essentially repeats most of the gags from ‘part one’, with similarly uneven hit-rate. Of course, the passage of time adds another dimension to *27 Years Later*, but taken as a whole the bipartite film has a laboriousness which is entirely lacking from Benning’s later masterworks. As a modest, relatively undemanding entry to his outstanding, daunting *oeuvre* for curious newcomers, however, it makes a more-than-useful

otherwise available, as Benning has never let any of his works appear on DVD. Television transmissions are also exceedingly rare, with the exception of screenings on the Westdeutscher Rundfunk channel on German TV which has often funded his work.

Pichler places Benning's work within a specific cultural and artistic context - "The films of this period are also the reason that Benning is categorized as a structural filmmaker and belonging to a 'cinema of structure in which the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape which is the primal impression of the film,'" (p21) she says, quoting P Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film*.

Benning's work, she says, "reflects larger and sometimes conflicting concerns preoccupying the independent film movement of the 1970s--the attempt to reconcile [sic] structural filmmaking and narration... playing with narrative conventions, thus "revealing the inadequacies [sic] of linear narrative and space." (p23) The proofreading in the volume (credited to Teresa Devlin and Kellie Rife) seems to have caught most of the typos, but to find two on the same page is disappointing (likewise p38's mention of 'structruel filmmaking') - although the latter is a direct quotation from an essay by Benning himself, so the error may well not be Pichler's.

Indeed, Benning is quoted at length and frequently by many of the contributors, making the book at times come across rather like a *Benning on Benning* book from Faber & Faber (nice, but somewhat fanciful, to imagine the esteemed publishers actually coming up with such a volume). Benning is an articulate analyst of his own work, an astute theoretician of his own methods who may well be his own best critic: "By the time the film [11x14] is finished, it will have been possible to relate shots in a number of different ways.

"This sort of cross-referencing is what I mean by 'spherical space.'" (p26). "I suppose if I think of my films as dealing with politics, it's with the way you look at the screen. If you look at things differently aesthetically, maybe you'll look at things differently politically." (p34). At times, Benning's descriptions achieve an inadvertent kind of blunt poetry, as when he instructs the viewer thus: "Keep your eyes on the brown structure. Two planes will pass overhead, it will explode and a mushroom cloud will cover the city." (p37)

ch3. James Benning's *Off Screen Space / Somewhere Else*

After seven pages of photographs covering 1972-79, the only chapter written by Benning himself, whose prose style is staccato, no-nonsense, functional, almost hard-boiled, with a dry wit occasionally discernible: *The roar of blast furnaces vibrated*

starting-point.

Jigsaw Lounge review (= 'JL'), <http://www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film/content/view/706/1/>

through the air. I rode around US Steel and was stopped and questioned and told to leave. I made it to Milwaukee by noon. (p47). The next day I decided to look for the Spiral Jetty, built in 1970 by Robert Smithson. I remembered that it was somewhere off Rozel Point in the Great Salt Lake. Smithson described the surrounding salt flats in his writings. Caught in their sediments were countless bits of wreckage. He said that the site gave evidence of a succession of man-made systems mired in abandoned hopes. (p48)

Benning discourses engrossingly on his own family history and that of his Milwaukee neighbourhoods, discusses his specific intentions and methods in filming *One Way Boogie Woogie*, its *27 Years Later* sequel, and *casting a glance*⁵, and also provides the summary of his career which features on the book's inner cover: "I decided I would need only two criteria to keep making work. One, make films that would take me to places where I wanted to be. And two, make work that would put my life in a larger context. Both somewhat selfish reasons, but very workable."

While invaluabley insightful and revealing, this chapter, ranging as it does across various phases in Benning's career, does feel slightly out of place within the main body of the book - it should perhaps have been placed in the Appendix, alongside Benning's self-compiled 'Timeline.'

5 I was fascinated, while watching the film, by what I interpreted as Benning's heroic persistence as an artist: the fact that, during the years in which the jetty was submerged (which it was for a long period in the 1980s/90s) he kept going back to it, his persistence and faith ultimately rewarded when the jetty unexpectedly reappeared a few years back due to global warming. And then there's the wider passage-of-time aspect to the film, the impression given that it took 37 years to film (which would suggest Benning started it when he was 28)... I'm now in an odd position: my interpretation of *casting a glance* as a masterpiece was based on a misunderstanding. Discovering the "truth" forces me to reassess everything I have thought about the film, both during and after the screening. One constant is the simple visual appeal of the images - but everything else is, for me, now a maelstrom in full swirl...

JL, <http://www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film/content/view/698/1/>

TRAVEL LOG TWO : Schiphol to Emmen



I depart from the Schiphol train station at 13.18, on a train to Zwolle that's scheduled to take 86 minutes. I continue with the *Benning* book, bearing in mind his dictum about the importance of "looking and listening" as the train makes its way through the Dutch landscape, urban development quite quickly giving way to forests, small country towns. I note down various signs whose meaning I can't penetrate ("Transferium"), the names of bridges ("Rozenvoordbrug"), outside graffiti ("RHYME") on the sides of rolling-stock and minor railway buildings alongside the tracks. It's a semiotic universe of abundant text, but the sun is bright on the green trees, horses are walking in wide fields, we pass through Duijvendrecht.

Insignificant things, a neat pile of small grey bricks in a back garden that somehow takes on a 'Smithsonian' air. Weeded mounds on the edge of a farm, likewise. The pattern of cut grass on a long narrow farm-field, just before Nijkerk. A crow lands on rough sandy ground among farmland and unidentifiable, still-in-construction commercial structures⁶. Sandy, quasi-desertine expanses fly past the window, treelined. Ways through the woods quickly reveal themselves then are gone. A stack of flagstones just before Wezep.

I change trains in Zwolle. Graffiti reads : SEEM. A white horse, with spectacular brown speckles on its coat, munches. After Dalfsen, I see a stack of shiny plastic

6 Of course, every film is an experiment, so that's kind of a foolish title to qualify films. But mine are... different. I've always been interested in creating new forms, and a different way of speaking. But not in reaction to dominant cinema, because it's kinda like saying an artist and an accountant both do the same work because they both use pencils... We're that different, though I'm not saying they're the accountant and I'm the artist, I'm just saying that we're that far apart. I don't work *against* Hollywood – I rarely go and see Hollywood movies. I see 'em on airplanes, but without the sound because I listen to music. So I've seen every Julia Roberts movie ever made, without sound.

cubes in a field: some kind of cut crop, tightly bound, arranged just so, arranged for my perspective. Unexpected rivers appear; underpopulated, forested zones. A solitary cyclist among the trees, like Magritte's 'lost jockey'.

I move on from Ch3 (Benning) to Ch4 (Lockhart). I see 'land art' everywhere I look, Smithson rivalling Benning as the presiding spirit of my excursion. It's for both of them, of course. 15:25 and I'm feeling the heat; train makes its way alongside a long, straight canal - how deep? - and there's a pile of long white stones, Smithsonian, on a bank. Sweaty, I look forward to a soapy⁷ shower and a lie-down, see an empty shop opposite Coevorden railway station that seems to be called WARMING (explanation: a smaller sign around the corner on another wall: *Chris Warming's Diesel-Service*). And then into Emmen, residential semi-detached houses, 15:50, arrival. BC/SH is on the far north-eastern edge of town⁸ - over the border into the neighbouring municipality of Emmerschans, if GoogleMap is to be believed...

ch4. Sharon Lockhart's *Milwaukee's Finest*

A short chapter "based on a conversation with James Benning at *The Country Girl Saloon in Castaic, California on May 16, 2007*," which deals glancingly with Benning's early years and ties it into Milwaukee's celebrated status as America's brewing capital - and is followed by an eight pages of photographs of vintage beer-bottles from Benning's own private collection. These are presented, in a style reminiscent of Benning's framings, with each bottle appearing exactly the same height. A nice little touch in the first of two biographical tributes written by women who know Benning first-hand (the book is notable for being that rare critical compendium on a male film-maker where male contributors are outnumbered by their distaff colleagues.) Elegaic, too: "Of the 57 breweries from James Benning's past, only Miller remains in Milwaukee." (p56)

7 I'll take one of those soaps. How much are they?

--Fourpence, sir.

Mr Bloom raised a cake to his nostrils. Sweet lemony wax.

--I'll take this one, he said.

James Joyce, *Ulysses*, p85

<http://www.octc.kctcs.edu/crunyon/CE/Joyce/gilbert17.htm>

8 By the time we reached Emmen, night had fallen, but still we pressed onwards. Too late to turn back. We were told it was down a dirt road and »not to get our hopes up« because it was in a very deteriorated state. Drove the whole bumping length of the road in the just darkling night and came to the end w/o finding anything. Drove back along, slower. Found just a no parking sign, then I spot a rise of earth through the trees, which of course stands out a bit here in sea-level-land. We see there is a small break in the fence w signs saying No Trespass, and No Dogs and No Swimming; BUNCHA NOES. We figure this must be it.

Lee Ranaldo, 24th November 1983

ch5. Sadie Benning's *Walking and Talking*

While it's nice to see that IMDb.com is aware of Benning's existence - listing 40 of his works on the page <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0072159/>, biographical information is skimpy beyond his date and place of birth. In the "trivia" (sic) section we find one single tidbit: "father of Sadie Benning," the latter being, for a time, a prominent avant-garde film-maker in her own right, and pioneer of 'Pixelvision' in the 1980s.

Now perhaps best known for her stint in "riot grrrl" combo 'Le Tigre' (the band's name strangely italicised in the bio at the back of *James Benning*), Benning Jr contributes this warmly affectionate letter to her father - "When I am with my dad we are usually hiking, driving or headed to some kind of shrine, ruin, sculpture, or-alternative reality" (p65) which the elder Benning replies to in his usual gruff/tender style ("I am happy you recalled that moment.")

As with Sharon Lockhart's preceding beer-vignette, 'Walking and Talking' - illustrated with two pairs of landscape photographs by Sadie - has its charms, but it's debatable whether it really manages to pull its weight as a component of *James Benning*. A distanced comparison of the works of the two Bennings might perhaps have been a more productive use of the space - not least because Sadie Benning's work has fallen into semi-obscurity and is long overdue a critical reappraisal.

TRAVEL LOG THREE : Emmen, Wednesday 7.32pm

Room 247 of the Tulip Hotel, Ten Cate, on the town's southern fringes. Curtains drawn, balcony door open, middle-distance sounds of a tennis game, voices in the car-park. Soon I'll head off for Emmerschans - in a taxi, most likely, as I've walked enough this hot afternoon. This is a pilgrimage⁹ I should have carried out in the winter, though at least this evening will be light till pretty late, and I've decided that I will make just the one visit to *Broken Circle / Spiral Hill*. Tomorrow daytime will likely

9 NY: Do you have faith in film to provide the answers you seek?

JB: For me it's not necessarily the film, but the process of going through to make the film, that I learn from. The film is kinda like the residue of that process. And that's what I hope affects other people - obviously some of the process is captured in the film. That's where the strength of my films lies.

NY: Is this why they so often take the form of journeys?

JB: I think so. I'm very interested in place itself, and the difference of place - a journey is necessary to make those kinds of comparisons. I think journey is a way to put things both in political and social perspective.

JL/JB

be baking-hot again.

The Tulip wasn't my first choice - but option A (town centre, independent pub-type place) and B (Best Western - De Giraaf) were both full, meaning I had to schlep out here. I've flushed my feet in the toilet (an old travellers' trick) then showered, then napped, dipping into the *Benning* book at various points. De Groothuis - a big, characterful old cafe near the station - wasn't serving food for another hour when I arrived at 4pm; a Turkish cafe in a mall was more accommodating: feta salad, and cheese burek, plus milk. Dairy-heavy.

I obtained a map, which shows *BC/SH* on the upper fringe, while wandering round Emmen: from what I can see, not so much a town as an adjunct to the Zoo. Nice animal sculptures dot the Centrum, otherwise a bit of a concrete-and-glass jungle. Perhaps Smithson¹⁰ stayed here in '72? The building might conceivably be old enough. Plan for the expedition: taxi to Emmerschans, a north east suburb of Emmen which I expect to be small and nondescript then, on foot, as close to *BC/SH* as I can manage¹¹. Benning, of course, travels by car... I *might* walk back.

ch6. Claudia Slanar's "*I'll Sneak in the Back Door.*"

Installations in the Art World: 1978-1985

"His apparent frustration with an audience that searches his films for conventional narratives is combined with being frustrated by critics who categorize him as a mere epigone of structural film, instead of a filmmaker dedicated to developing an independent form." (p68)

Umm... what's an epigone? Sorry if this appears ignorant, but in the three and a half decades since I've been reading, I've never actually come across this word before. Perhaps it's in the old dictionary I keep on my shelf for just such occasions... Hmm. Epiglottis. Epigram. No sign of epigone. I'll text a proofreader friend of mine. She

10 RECENTLY, WHEN I WAS IN HOLLAND, I WORKED IN A SAND QUARRY THAT WAS SLATED FOR REDEVELOPMENT. THE DUTCH ARE ESPECIALLY AWARE OF THE PHYSICAL LANDSCAPE. A DIALECTIC BETWEEN LAND RECLAMATION AND MINING USAGE MUST BE ESTABLISHED. THE ARTIST AND THE MINER MUST BECOME AWARE OF THEMSELVES AS NATURAL AGENTS.

Smithson, p376

11 A break in the fence, a dirt path and yes, feeling our way through darkness, moon under cloud cover so there is little light, vision a haze which clouds the darkness, can see merely basic shapes, color contrasts. But it is *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill*. We ginger down the path to it, through underbrush which has grown, is growing, over it, reclaiming the place in a way RS would surely; have loved. The hill is now a rough mound, its clean lines long gone, shrubs growing on its sides, and grass, it was a large sad heap, not really sad but no longer w new shoes, shall we say.

Lee Ranaldo, 24th November 1983

must have come across it.

Anyway, Slanar's use of this particular word is in keeping with the tone of her chapter, which is much less aimed at "general" readers than any of the three that precede it in the volume. On page 69, she breezily mentions the "documenta" without any explanation of what it is (it's a modern art extravaganza that takes place once a lustrum - i.e. once every five years - in the German city of Kassel, and which hosted the world premiere of *casting a glance*¹² in 2007). That's what footnotes are for!

My proofreader friend texts me back. "An inferior follower or imitator. had 2 look it up!" My worries are assuaged - this proofreader friend has worked on countless books of all kinds every year for decades, and graduated with a degree in English from Cambridge University. Actually, perhaps Ms Slanar isn't entirely to blame - like many of the chapters in *James Benning*, it was translated from German into English by Eve Heller, and there are the very occasional 'rough spots' here and there where the English has a slightly lumpy feel.

Slanar's chapter, chronicling what we might call Benning's "extra-curricular" activities, turns *James Benning* down a more unashamedly scholarly track than before - reminding us that the principal target audience for the book is more academics, experts and Benning aficionados than casual passers-by. Information on Benning's various installations is brought together in one handy, compact resource - culminating in the 1985 computer program *Pascal's Lemma*: 'An overkill of information is thrown into the mix, including contemporary pictograms, news reports, and direct statements addressed to the audience: "You're manipulated!"' (p74)

ch7. Barbara Pichler's *American Dreams, American Nightmares*.

Him and Me (1981) to *Used Innocence* (1988)

Slanar hands over the baton to her co-editor Pichler for a survey of Benning's tricky "transitional" films - the section of his oeuvre which is perhaps the least exhibited and understood, and which this make particularly absorbing reading for those of us who discovered the director relatively "late in the day." It comes as a major surprise, for example, to find that Benning once worked with a bona-fide movie star: Willem Dafoe, in Benning's final short film, *O Panama* (1985), co-directed with

12 After two viewings - the first in ignorance of Benning's methods, the second in full knowledge - I'm convinced it's the crowning achievement of his career. A tribute to land-artist Robert Smithson, it's the »fictionalised« »biography« of Smithson's most famous work, the *Spiral Jetty* in Utah's Great Salt Lake, tracing its appearance, submersion and reappearance due to fluctuating water levels. Beautiful, mysterious, challenging, the film exerts a stimulating but hypnotic effect on its viewers, resulting in an experience unlike anything else in current or recent cinema. In more ways than one, Benning is out there on his own right now.

JL, <http://www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film/content/view/765/1/>

Burt Barr, which ‘confirms his decision to work alone. “Collaboration is interesting, but difficult,” he says, once again affirming his renunciation of traditional narrative cinema, a form which he finds too expensive, belabored and over-directed.’ (p83).

This chapter features the closest thing in the volume to direct criticism of Benning’s films, although *Used Innocence* (1988) is only (faintly) damned in relation to *Landscape Suicide* (1986): it “never reaches the intensity of its predecessor... *Used Innocence* does not succeed in establishing as effective a focus...” And it’s left to Benning himself to actually pass judgement over the earlier film: he “has expressed reservations about *Used Innocence* and today finds it to be too personal and perhaps transgressive.” Typically, this intriguing perspective - how can a film be “too personal”? what does such a statement say about the person behind it? - goes unexplored. Indeed, it might have been an advantage to have included among the contributors an intelligent, respected critic who *isn’t* a fan of Benning’s work - just one among the dozen, in the interests of balance and variation.

TRAVEL LOG FOUR : Ten Cate to Emmerschans

23 degrees in the evening. Taxi from Tulip Hotel, Ten Cate to Sportpark, Emmerschans. €5.60 on the meter as we start. No scrap of litter visible anywhere on the streets. A slightly cooler evening, but still OK for shorts, short-sleeve shirt, no coat, no watch (and no book - too heavy!). Passport in my shorts pocket¹³, just in case of cop-hassle (I have a premonitory paranoid vision of riding back to the hotel to retrieve it). Leafy green-bosky surroundings. A Wednesday evening in May... why are two out of three hotels in the “sleepy ville” full?

After ten/twelve minutes, we arrive at Emmerschans’ main draw, the “Sportpark” stadium, often used for youth athletics and football, the driver genially informs. €13 on the meter. A long street through the trees, alongside the running-track, named Parochieweg. Sun lowering through trees. Dog walker (a half-tree in the big dog’s big mouth), cyclist, runners. They all say *hej*. Long straight concrete path. Woods on left, Sportparken on the right. Redtipped trees.

The quarry lake now visible on the right. Blue-white water, just as L.Ranaldo described it in 1983. Ducks, unidentifiable birds. Benningistic gunshot-echoes! (as heard in *Ten Skies*, *13 Lakes*¹⁴, etc). Noisy invisible insects in the forest clicking

13 He took out his handkerchief to dab his nose. Citron-lemon? Ah, the soap I put there. Lose it out of that pocket. Putting back his handkerchief he took out the soap and stowed it away, buttoned, into the hip pocket of his trousers.

Ulysses, p123

14 ‘Crater Lake,’ in which a multi-coloured range of mountainous hills is reflected in the limpid water, the results resembling a weirdly organic totem-pole stretching across the whole of the screen from right to left. Over the course of the ten minutes we can - and should - tilt our head

as evening falls. Barbed-wire fenced-off lake. Access frustrated by fence and/or brambles. Until forest on the left suddenly gives way: open, ploughed field with sun in the distance. Sound of crickets? Distant traffic. And then, a gap in the fence : just wide enough to ascend. I ascend. I look across the quarry lake¹⁵.

I see the Broken Circle. I see the Spiral Hill.

ch8. Julie Ault's *Using the Earth as a Map of Himself. The Personal Conceptualism of James Benning.*

For me, perhaps the most effective of the chapters is Ault's - regardless of the fact that this is the section of the book in which I myself obliquely "appear". Whereas several sections either veer towards a drily academic dissection of Benning's output (complete with sometimes alienatingly arcane vocabulary) or else are too chummily effusive, Ault's free-ranging commentary - which covers Benning's *California Trilogy* (1999-2001) before 'flashing' back to *Him and Me* (1981), *American Dreams* (1984), *North on Evers* (1991) and then forward to *casting a glance* (2007), and then back to *Four Corners* (1997), then forward to *27 Years Later* (2004), then back to *Utopia* (1998) - strikes a delicate balance between the two.

In lively prose (unmediated by translation), Ault traces her subjective individual reaction to Benning and his movies - "Although I enjoyed watching them, they seemed fairly impersonal, not quite the match I imagined with the artist I had met on several occasions." (p88) While clearly a fan, almost gushing when praising Benning's "vast and deep knowledge of the regions he explores," Ault is able to appraise, with a clear critical eye, his methods and results, punctuating her own acute observations with judicious quotations that encapsulate her subject's philosophy ("He has said on numerous occasions that a good artist is "someone that pays close attention and then reports back through their work." [p91]... "The painter Edward Hopper once said, "The nucleus around which the artist's intellect builds his work is himself (...) and this changes little from birth to death. The only real influence I've ever had was myself." [p105.]

to examine this breathtaking image from all possible angles, while we hear the distant reports of hunters' rifles echoing across the vastness. This measly text description does little justice, however, to what is quite simply one of the greatest sequences in motion-picture history - proving that anyone who doesn't rate James Benning as the most brilliant and important American director currently working just isn't paying enough attention.

JL, <http://www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film/content/view/120/1/>

15 The circle was also fading, the water inlet still seemingly intact for the most part, the large central boulder still holding, claiming its ground. The jetty was completely submerged, back to the quarry-sea, like *The Spiral Jetty*. Whether it hovered inches below the surface we could not tell in the darkness.

Lee Ranaldo, 24th November 1983

Astute and erudite but always accessible, *Using the Earth as a Map of Himself* is the closest thing the book has to an overview of Benning's career - as well as providing the most satisfactory definition of Benning's role as an "independent" filmmaker¹⁶. As such it perhaps should actually be read *first* by those who haven't experienced one of his films themselves, and could easily stand alone if excerpted into a cinema-related periodical such as *CinemaScope* or *Sight and Sound*.

ch9. Barbara Pichler's *Into the Great Wide Open*.

North on Evers (1991) to *UTOPIA* (1998)

In their preface, the editors describe their methods in compiling *James Benning* as akin to the film-maker's own concept of "spherical space," with numerous textual overlaps, echoes and repetitions hopefully building into a three-dimensional whole. This largely works pretty well, but perhaps comes slightly unstuck in Pichler's third and final essay, which explores similar terrain to that so elegantly traversed by Ault in the previous chapter - with the addition of much more material on Benning's 1995 study of Utah, *Deseret*.

Via Heller's translation, Pichler's analysis, while meticulous, intelligent and sympathetic, provokes numerous unanswered questions along the way, such as when she notes that Benning "denies consciously referencing [Ansel] Adams or agreeing with him conceptually," (p123) without actually stating the nature of Adams' "concepts." In her analysis of *Four Corners*, Pichler informs us that "The four parts are meant to be equivalent to one another which is why each of the written texts have the exact same number of characters--1,214--and the spoken text has the exact same number of words--1,186" (p124), but doesn't explain the significance of these specific numbers, or if they have a specific significance at all.

She states that Benning "achieves an extremely tight interlacing of image and sound, the visible and the spoken, and the historical and geographical spaces," but 'extremely tight' seems an odd, unhelpful way of describing Benning's 'achievement.' And to report that "the composition of image in *Deseret* is very rigorous" doesn't really help, when pretty much every page of the book hammers home the idea that pretty much *everything* Benning has ever filmed has been "rigorously" composed¹⁷.

16 NY: Do you accept the term 'avant-garde' as a description of yourself as a film-maker?

JB: I'm certainly not a mainstream film-maker, and certainly am an independent film-maker, because I do everything myself. From buying the film at Kodak to cutting the negative. I don't think 'avant-garde' is necessarily a negative term, I wouldn't disagree with it. But "advance-guard" of what, I guess is the question.

JL/JB

17 NY: Have you never considered using a different size of film than 16mm - super 16 or 35mm perhaps?

Pichler's most glaring 'sin,' however, comes when she mentions biographical details on Medgar Evers, partial inspiration for *North on Evers*, and a footnote reveals the source of the information: 'Based on an entry in Wikipedia for "Medgar Evers," accessed in August 2007, www.wikipedia.org (p118.)' Wikipedia is hardly the most reliable source of *any* information, and Evers is surely a sufficiently prominent figure in American politics that Pichler could have gleaned the relevant details from a more reputable source. It's only a small detail, but *James Benning* is otherwise such a classy, impressively-researched tome that relying on Wikipedia in this way really does stand out to an unfortunately conspicuous degree.

TRAVEL LOG FIVE : Emmerschans

Across the lake, much evidence of activity on the opposite bank. *BC/SH* to the left. The hill a mossy mound, receding into the landscape, the spiral of ¹⁸sand jutting out into the water in front of it, a boulder solid its centre. I stand, conspicuous, on a grassy bank, joggers and cyclists passing now and then. The circle doesn't look like part of the lake but of the shore and the sand. A bigger artificial "island" now juts out, from the quarry-side¹⁹, yellow amid the green-blue. *BC/SH* doesn't look like

JB: They should be 70mm of course, but then I couldn't make the film. Because most of the images in all three films are somewhat stolen. A lot of times I'm illegally on land – I'm doing things where I have to go in very quickly and get out of there very quickly. Especially when I'm in the middle of a military installation, or a cement quarry – those kinds of places where they don't like you filming there. It would be difficult to steal those kinds of images. I certainly agree that in a cinema this big 16mm starts to break down, especially when images are held for two and a half minutes and you're begging for the best possible projection you can get. I also want to keep making films cheaply – all three of these films were made for less than \$15,000. I want to make films at that cost or less... I kind of find it criminal when it costs more than that, because there are better places to put money.

JL/JB

18 So we came and saw, or rather felt the deteriorating beauty, the end of everything, return, return, return, we speak of truths that deteriorate naturally over time. Worn out by the sun and moon, the tides. Time stands still we know, and yet time is all surrounding, a misty beaming stream in which we grope.

The changes that come about are as if from thin air. We want, we love and hate, we gnash our teeth on stones, unwilling to yield.

Lee Ranaldo, 24th November 1983

19 I was looking for an area that was somewhat raw because Holland is so pastoral, so completely cultivated and so much an earthwork in itself that I wanted to find an area that I could mold, such as a quarry or a disused mining area... With my work in the quarry, I somehow recognized a disrupted situation and brought it back into another kind of shape. The quarry itself was surrounded by a whole series of broken landscapes, there were pasture lands, mining operations, and a red cliff--it was kind of a sunken site.

Smithson, p253

much from this distance, and could have been missed by a casual passer-by. I suspect this vantage-point has been created by previous visitors. Distant voices, rock splash, but no sign of activity on the far bank. A scooter passes.

The sand-*Circle* is rough, as if worn in place by working earthmovers. The hill resembles some kind of Saxon burial mound. It's as if the *Hill* is crumbling down the slope into the spiral... Or, alternatively, it could be seen as a huge slug-like organism, recently emerged from the water, a pioneering amphibian, frozen in place, leaving its 'spoor' (Dutch word!) It's somehow H P Lovecraftian, squat monument to Cthulhu... and is it riven, a deep gouge or wound down one flank?

It's 20:40 and, emboldened by sudden silence, I stand for a better view. In front of me, striated yellow clayey cliffs slope quickly down to the eerie white-green water. It's a big lake, and there are numerous incursions into the landscape, Smithson's dwarfed by the quarry-activity on the eastern shore. I hear a dog-walker shout for their errant dog... "Sheba" it sounds like. Or is it "Shiva," goddess of destruction?

I recall Smithson's fascination with entropic forces, with mutability - the way the *Spiral Jetty* alters, vanishes, reappears in *casting a glance*. The lake here is much less dramatic, the *Broken Circle* pretty much intact, no danger of disappearing just yet. But the *Spiral Hill* has a more transient feel: once stark and dark against the surrounding greenery, now overgrown, a mossy hump of amphibian/Lovecraftian amorphousness.

ch10. Dick Hebdige's *Reeling In Utah: The Travel Log Trilogy*

Reeling in Utah is the only section of *James Benning* that has been previously published (in *Afterall* magazine, which came out in late 2003) and it chronicles a five day location-scouting road-trip undertaken by its author and Benning - who is mainly here referred to as 'JB', accidentally prefiguring his 2007 film *RR*, aka *Rail Road*²⁰.

Although studded with vital 'Benningisms' (including the passage about "built-in limitations" which I quoted at the start of the piece), I've always thought that there's something arch, self-regarding and slightly contrived about Hebdige's abbreviation-happy jottings ("I buy 2 bottles of red wine in a liquor store before we head 50mi N on the 70, crossing into Utah W of St George before veering E 5mi N of Central

20 Shots may be very brief ... or punishingly long - indeed, the film itself is all about *duration*, an irresistibly big, blunt, unadorned, uncompromising monolith of an artwork which unfolds majestically, relentlessly, indifferently, elusively as we watch. It's a tightly-constructed exploration of space, time, colour and movement: the mechanisms of cinema reduced to their barest essentials. A journey into linearity and direction, set to the soothing, soporific rumble of wagon wheels on metal tracks.

JL, <http://www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film/content/view/765/1/>

where we stop at the Mountain Meadows massacre site...” [p131].)

Admittedly, Hebdige’s “take” on Benning and his work-practices is inevitably rather more up-close than any of the book’s other contributors - and ‘JB’ does open up in informative style once he’s on the road, making *Reeling In Utah* an unofficial companion-piece to Reinhard Wulf’s documentary *Circling the Image* (also 2003).

But Hebdige’s writer-as-fan enthusiasm sometimes gets the better of him, and his entertainingly discursive “log” frequently tips over into Hunter S Thompson ‘gonzo’ reportage - alongside off-puttingly ‘cute’ touches such as the movie-style closing “credits” which rather cheekily elevate Hebdige to the level of creative collaborator on a Benning ‘project’ (“Directed by....James Benning / Written by....Dick Hebdige”).

ch 11. Amanda Yates’s *Looking and Listening*

After Hebdige’s mini-memoir, another subjective chapter in which Benning features as much as a personality as a film-maker. *Looking and Listening* - which for me is perhaps the most dispensible of the sections - is written by one of Benning’s former students at CalArts (a.k.a. the California Institute for the Arts, where Benning has taught since 1977) and describes the class which provides the essay with its title.

In an attempt to widen his charges’ range of perception, Benning takes them out into the forest (where they encounter “a park ranger with big German Shepard [sic] and a rifle” [p161]), or up a hill, or into unlikely corners of Los Angeles, where they are encouraged to simply absorb the world around them. According to Yates, this process can yield mystical results: “Just quietly observing, something magical happens. When the clouds of our psyches lift, our internal monologues fade into silence, and our focus expands to accommodate the world, reality appears in all its glory, its strife, its majesty, story upon story and world upon world into the infinite.” (p164)

While several of the chapters are clearly written from a position of critical enthusiasm for Benning’s work, *Looking and Listening* reads more like an adoring testimonial for a man who comes across as more new-age guru than politically-engaged artist. Some of his methods sound, shall we say, a little questionable, as when the group are sent to Skid Row - “James told us that part of him felt guilty every time he did this portion of the class. Guilty for sending the art students from the elite art school down to gawk at the poor as part of a class field trip” (p163) - but Yates’ text is too much of a celebration to ponder alternative viewpoints. As elsewhere in *James Benning*, a little more grit in the oyster might well have yielded bigger pearls.

TRAVEL LOG SIX : Emmen, Wednesday 1.04am

Back at the Tulip, long after midnight, showered and dried²¹, *James Benning* placed on top of *Das Neue Testament*, on the bedside table. The book's pale green cover reminds me of the waters of the quarry lake - a nice contrast with the half-bible's vexed-tomato red leather. On the cover, Benning's portrait in monochrome, one eye visible and fully open, mine closing after rather a heavy day. I followed Parochieweg to a junction, turned right, found myself walking down another road. To my left: the forest behind *Spiral Hill*. Another gap in the fence, through which I chanced - stumbled through undergrowth and nettles, rough branches scraping my bare legs.

Stumbling semi-blind until the forest cleared and I found myself on the hill's shoulder -- the sculpture feeling somehow, overwhelmingly, organic. I lingered for just a few moments then, feeling like a conspicuous trespasser, feeling distant eyes picking me out, darted back to the safety of the road. Along, then down the length of Emmerhoutsraat to a bus-stop in front of a (closed) Chinese restaurant, but the scheduled bus failed to appear.

Not wanting to walk all the way back, I phoned a taxi - which eventually came after a half-hour wait. Famished, I ate well at an amiable Turkish restaurant, the only eaterie open in the city centre. Leaving, I saw a large, exotic beetle on the restaurant's rug, which I picked up and warily carried across to the nearest tree, all the while fearing a sudden bite (perhaps it "escaped" from the zoo?).

At midnight, I sat out on the hotel-room balcony, listening to the gentle thwack of moth upon lightbulb, pondering *BC/SH's* inaccessibility. I'd been warned that it wasn't open to the general public, and that visits had to be arranged by calling a certain number. I demurred, reasoning that Benning never sought permission²² for *his* "site visits", and that L.Ranaldo²³ had ignored a "buncha noes" on his nocturnal missions. But

21 Mr Bloom inserted his nose. Hm. Into the. Hm. Opening of his waistcoat. Almonds or. No. Lemons it is. Ah, no, that's the soap.

Ulysses, p375

22 JB: I lived in Milwaukee for the first 18 years of my life, then I moved every year for 20 years. I lived in Oklahoma, Missouri, Illinois, southern California, upstate New York, back to Wisconsin and away again.

NY: A deliberate strategy?

JB: Some of it was, some of it was things blowing in the wind, and going towards desires and away from rainstorms... but it was very valuable because it gave me lots of experience in different places. I lived in a hunting cabin for a year in the Adirondack Mountains, and I lived on a cattle farm in Missouri for a year... followed the migrant stream, worked with migrant workers for a year... lived in a black-white ghetto doing neighbourhood organising. It politicised me, my travels.

JL/JB

23 went to emmen today, way home from groningen in holland north, dragged them all down the same dirt road to see it again. it was so fast i barely remember it. the sky was clouded over, just after the rain, a nice pale blanket. the water was a lovely green as though mixed with white. such an odd color. the day clearing up (from rain) just before we arrived--i took it as a

having made one “unofficial” visit to *BC/SH*, I now realised that a second, “official” visit was in order. I fumed at the sculptures’ inaccessibility - or was that part of Smithson’s point?

ch 12. Claudia Slanar’s *Landscape, History and Romantic Allusions*.

El Valley Centro (1999) to *RR* (2007)

In terms of direct personal knowledge of Benning’s work, ch.12 is effectively where I join the debate. Covering *The California Trilogy*²⁴ up to *RR*, Slanar’s second and final contribution provides a close and persuasive reading of Benning’s most recent works - including *Sogobi*, the Benning film with which I myself have had the most trouble.

Unfortunately Slanar shares with her co-editor Barbara Pichler an unnecessary reliance upon a certain internet-based ‘free encyclopaedia’ of notorious unreliability - her description of Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* is based “on an entry ... in Wikipedia, accessed in August 2007” (p177), while it’s a minor but careless detail to leave the month of Smithson’s demise (“july 1973”) uncapitalised.

Translated by Renée von Paschen and Eve Heller, *Landscape, History and Romantic Allusions*, like Pichler’s *Into the Great Wide Open*, thematically overlaps with Julie Ault’s superb *Using the Earth as a Map of Himself*, and the comparison isn’t, on balance, to Slanar’s advantage. On the plus side, her selection of illustrations is particularly judicious and helpful, especially the water-level charts from the Great Salt Lake which Benning used when planning *casting a glance*.

It’s here that we also encounter the origin of the latter masterpiece’s (carefully uncapitalised) title: Smithson’s quote “A great artist can make art simply by casting a glance,” which leads in to Benning’s interpretation of “Smithson’s philosophy beyond *Spiral Jetty*. Smithson conceived of history as a non-linear space in which different layers of time are interwoven.” (p178)

sign of something. anyway, i saw it. climbed through the gate which read (i think, in dutch) »keep out« --i don't know why-- climbed through and under the barbed wire into the adjacent cow pasture, for a better photo view.

Lee Ranaldo, Mar/Apr 1985

24 Benning has been one of American leading avant-garde film-makers for over 20 years, but remains barely known by the wider cinemagoing public, especially abroad - partly because he doesn’t allow his works to be available on video. And while *Los* is no-one’s idea of ‘commercial’ film-making, Benning’s low profile is an indictment of the timid policies of our supposedly adventurous arthouses: this is much too fascinating a *use* of film for it to be relegated to art galleries... In terms of an artist *using* cinema to express himself, it dwarfs almost all this year’s ‘conventional’ releases: if *any* film of 2001 can possibly change the way its audiences think about and view their world, it’s James Benning’s mysterious, majestic, magical *Los*.

JL, <http://www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film/los.html>

ch13. Volker Pantenburg's *Encyclopedia Americana. James Benning: Times, Places, Perceptions.*

James Benning has many virtues, but too seldom do its contributors directly compare and contrast the film-maker with his peers and predecessors - and there's virtually nothing about the work by the many film-makers whom Benning has influenced, either directly or indirectly. Volker Pantenburg commendably bucks this trend, by juxtaposing Benning with Frederick Wiseman - the latter's approach being to "[characterize] the USA in terms of its institutions, his point of departure being the places and social situations in which the individual is confronted by societal regulations and procedures." (p181)

Pantenburg goes on to locate Benning within various traditions of North American non-mainstream cinema²⁵, from Maya Deren (whose *Meshes of the Afternoon* Benning regards as a particularly seminal part of his development into a filmmaker) to Hollis Frampton and Michael Snow, paying particular attention to the "structuralist" elements which inform Benning's output. Like Ault in her chapter, Pantenburg is also able to incorporate what Robert Warshow called "the immediate experience" - the way Benning's films are received in the real world, which in practical terms (because of Benning's own stipulations) means the film-festival circuit: "the 'proper' location for Benning's works is the same as for the films of Maya Deren or Hollis Frampton: the movie theater with its capacity to project 16mm film and, above all, its clear indication of when a film starts and when it ends." (p184) "One can ... watch the films in a packed theater with a randomly gathered festival audience that has no direct connection to the films and often reacts impatiently to long takes²⁶."

25 NY: Do you ever feel tempted to make a more conventional documentary on such subjects, or are you now firmly occupying a different kind of space?

JB: I admire people who try to do things that will cause political change to better this world. I admire that, but at this point I'm much too selfish for that. I'm much more interested in making films that make me understand life more, and hopefully *that* changes things. In an indirect way. I think I can be more passionate that way. When I look at documentaries that address issues I think need addressing so many times the way they're made is so corrupt I almost want to change sides (laughs)... change my religion, you know... they're so dogmatic in their approach, so overly conventional, so conservative in their style, it somewhat contradicts its own message.

JL/JB

26 There *are* longueurs here and there, and *Ten Skies* perhaps isn't the best starting-point for a Benning newcomer. But you don't have to be an aficionado of avant-garde cinema to appreciate the merit of what is the liveliest and perhaps most thought-provoking sequence, in which the 'natural' clouds are obscured by the violently up-billowing smoke from an unseen chimney. These almost fill the screen at the start of the shot, but have subsided towards the end, allowing the 'real' sky behind to dominate the shot: it doesn't seem too fanciful to discern an oblique comment on (or rather a visual metaphor depicting) man's transient, explosive tenure

Perhaps the most effective showcase of Heller's translation skills, Pantenburg's high-brow but characterful and approachable chapter is also itself quite appropriately "Benningistic" in the way it can simultaneously focus on the 'big picture' also allow us to see the smallest details within it. It's perhaps no accident that Pantenburg's contribution, like Ault's, scores by being allowed to range relatively widely across decades - or that both have written only one section apiece. Where Slanar and Pichler's chapters represent a dutiful chronological tour, these 'guests' make the most of their relative freedom, delivering personal responses within a single, self-contained, economic "frame."

TRAVEL LOG SEVEN : Emmen, Wednesday 10.55am

Awake at various points before rising at 0930, breakfast in near-deserted, muzak-piped Zaal 1. Scanned the "local" (i.e. north-Netherlands) paper and found the *bioscoop* listings for the local Kino: *Street Kings*, *27 Dresses*, *Meet the Spartans*, *Iron Man*²⁷. I called the Smithson number, and have arranged an "official" visit to *BC/SH* for 12 noon. I have to get to no138 Emmerhoutstraat. I'll likely taxi to the bus stop and walk from there. Arranging a 'proper' visit does still seem un-Benning-like and non-Ranaldo-esque²⁸ but it seems to be the only way I can get a proper look at Smithson's sculpture. And Benning is always on about the importance of properly "looking and listening". Eleven o'clock: checkout time at the Tulip. Telltale scratches on my bare legs; sun glinting off shiny brown tiles of opposite house. Umm... does Cannes start today?

on earth.

JL, <http://www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film/content/view/442/1/>

27 My original intention was to move the boulder outside the circumference of *Broken Circle*. I was told that only the Dutch Army could do such a thing. The reason why the boulder was there in the first place was accidental. A blunt peninsula of sand extended into the water directly in front of the boulder. It was the only place in the quarry where the circumference could be integrated. The sand flats were to be a field opening up into a range of vacancy, a site unburdened by any middle point. But then, by an unforeseen chance, I was trapped in Emmen with a monstrous point to contend with.

Smithson, p258

28 what else about the smithson piece? in the sleepy ville of emmen, which seems to maintain the piece in one breath, and to be unaware of its existence in the next. on our first visit in november 83 no one seemed to know of it at all... all that remained unchanged was the central boulder, and that, which smithson had disliked to begin with, has become the single most immutable facet of the piece. maybe that's the very reason he disliked it--its central focus and its resistance to erosion, to time. but i suppose at some point it too will shudder and tumble into the quarry lake.

Lee Ranaldo, Mar/Apr 1985

ch14. Nils Plath's *On Future Arrivals of Container Drivers. Five Brief Comments on One Image from James Benning's 'California Trilogy', expanded.*

Given the choice to watch any current director's films, I would choose Benning. Given the chance to listen to any current band, I would choose The Fall. Imagine my delight, then, when I realised that Nils Plath's chapter on Benning took as its partial inspiration a song by The Fall - 1980's 'The Container Drivers' from the album *Grotesque (After the Gramme)*. Or rather, as the book's footnote rather sloppily renders the details, 'Container Drivers' from the album *Grotesques (After the Gramme)*.

My delight evaporated somewhat when I started reading the essay itself - of all the contributions, this one feels the most squarely oriented at an academic readership. Tying together a wide range of cultural, historical, sociological and artistic reference-points in support of a thesis which I must admit, after three careful readings, I'm still not entirely able to comprehend, Plath - via translator Allison Plath-Moseley - touches *relatively* lightly on Benning's work, spending at least as much time discussing Karl Marx and Jacques Derrida.

I can see the merit in such an approach, and it will no doubt provide ample food for discussion among future Benning scholars - who will, it scarcely needs pointing out, regard *James Benning* as an invaluable resource-cum-godsend. But it left me somewhat cold... Maybe there's simply more of a gulf between JB and 'MES' (The Fall's Mark E Smith) than I'd like to pretend.

ch15. Scott MacDonald's *James Benning's 13 LAKES and TEN SKIES, and the Culture of Distraction.*

Although concentrating on two specific films, MacDonald's essay also projects forward into Benning's immediate future: "When I finish *casting a glance...* I plan to buy a DVD camera and start a new career. No more 16mm filmmaking: the lab work is too stressful, and projection is getting worse than terrible. I'm going to make small DVD works and only show them to friends" (p218) - this from an 'email to the author 4/4/07'.

It's interesting how often the chapters in *James Benning* rely on this kind of direct communication between critic and subject - one of the chapters, as already noted, is based entirely on a conversation that took place in a pub! I myself have had the occasional e-mail exchange with 'JB' - including, most memorably, a rather withering response to my cooler-than-lukewarm review of *Sogobi*, pointing out, with pedagogical patience, exactly what I had overlooked and/or misinterpreted.

MacDonald's piece - the last 'analytical' chapter before two more fanciful and discursive sections - links together the five extended-shot movies from 1999 to 2004

(*The California Trilogy* plus *Lakes and Skies*), which he views as a series of “challenges” - “on a continuous, unrelieved sequence. [emphasis his] Benning’s separation of each of the shots from the next by a moment of darkness (a bit over eight seconds long) further retards the velocity of both films...” (p223) McDonald then assesses a crucial element of Benning’s work, which we may label the ‘walk-out’ factor. It’s also a factor in the disparity between the passion Benning initiates seem to quickly develop for the films, and the relatively low profile Benning enjoys, even among many cultured worldwide cineastes.

While less of a patience-test than, say, the multi-hour extravaganzas of Lav Diaz or Yang Fudong, Benning’s films are, in a word, somewhat difficult²⁹. As MacDonald puts it, “for first-time viewers, the films tend to require, early on, some decision-making. During my first experience of each film--and I am sure my experience is relatively usual--the relentlessness of Benning’s durational strategy seemed a bit frightening, in a manner that reminds me of my experience of many horror films.

“In a horror film that gives every evidence of being truly scary, viewers must, at some point early in the screening, make a decision to endure whatever the film is about to send their way...” He then compares this with the experience of discovering Benning via either *13 Lakes* or *Ten Skies*: “By the second or third shot of either film, it has become clear... [that] almost nothing will be happening. Once this realization has come, viewers must decide either to leave the theater or accede to Benning’s durational challenge.” (p224)

In an ideal world, of course - where a selection of Benning’s films would be shown in every major city on a monthly basis, via pristine 16mm prints through faultless 16mm projectors - audiences would be sufficiently *au fait* with Benning’s “strategy” beforehand that there wouldn’t be any walk-outs at all. However, I can attest from personal experience - a public screening of *13 Lakes* at the prestigious, relatively highbrow IFF Rotterdam of 2005, that, partly thanks to what MacDonald calls the “culture of distraction”, Benning’s work can strike even members of a theoretically ‘self-selecting’ festival audience as laughably pretentious, unbearably punishing and intolerably austere³⁰.

29 By largely removing man from the picture, Benning ends up with a film which is political only in the most frustratingly oblique way - *Sogobi* would only really make sense when shown straight after its companion pieces. You certainly wouldn’t show it to any newcomer asking to be convinced that Benning deserves front rank among American film-makers: it’s such an exercise in tedium that even the most hard-core devotees may find themselves glancing at their watch and heretically toying with the prospect of walking out. Corporate America is Benning’s *bete noir*, but *Sogobi* proves he needs it much more than he perhaps suspects: everybody knows that ‘Hamlet’ without the Prince is a bad idea, but the absence of Claudius is, it turns out, even worse.

JL, <http://www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film/sogobi.html>

30 NY: Has being from Wisconsin made a specific impact on you as an artist?

JB: Oh yes, oh yes, I’m a product of the midwest, I think it’s a really down-to-earth place, and

It's an uncomfortable, inconvenient truth for we aficionados, which is too rarely acknowledged within the volume under 'review' - but the further Benning's profile rises, and *James Benning* can only assist that process, the more accepting audiences will perhaps become. A sign of optimism: when I programmed *casting a glance* at Bradford this year, all 36 patrons stayed in their seats till the very end, despite truly horrendous projection issues that delayed the start for over half an hour. Then again, I *did* carefully explain in my introduction exactly what the film consisted of - if memory serves, the Rotterdam screening came on "cold", without any preparatory statement, so perhaps it is just the old case of 'forewarned is forearmed'...

TRAVEL LOG EIGHT : Ten Cate to Emmerschans

11:30 Thursday and another taxi-ride, this time in the daylight, from Ten Cate to Emmerschans. I ask the driver to deposit me at the bus-stop where I waited the night before, near the 'Wok Palace' restaurant (closed till 4pm). At the bus-stop the previous evening I'd noticed a rather large spider lurking in a corner between by two pieces of metal, hanging in a ragged-looking web bearing many seed-heads. Now the web has been woven again, fresh for the new day, and I can see the spider's legs poking out from behind the metal. I find some leaves of grass, slice off the tips with a fingernail and gently throw them into the web.

As I'd hoped, the spider emerges, quickly binds them together, and retreats - he's clearly something of a pro³¹. As I watch, a large red van turns the corner from Emmerhoutraat into De Boslaan, and passes - on the side, I see the logo of the firm which owns the quarry along the street, and I realise that the stylised dot and half-spiral represent *BC/SH* itself. The lorry thunders past, vaguely sinister, stirring movie-memories of *Quatermass II* and *Hell Drivers*, nefarious cargo being transported through the Home Counties countryside. I leave the spider to his business, and, the hot sun nearly directly overhead as noon approaches, start walking down Emmerhoutstraat, for my "official" visit.

I learned to be pretty straightforward from being there. I try to be pretty direct - I think my films are pretty direct because of that. They don't try to be purposely complicated. I think they're complicated, but I don't try to make them... oblique.

JL/JB

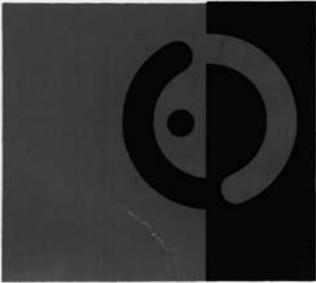
- 31 (*He points to the south, then to the east. A cake of clean lemon soap arises, diffusing light and perfume.*)

THE SOAP

We're a capital couple are Bloom and I;

He brightens the earth, I polish the sky.

Ulysses, p440



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ch16. Michael Pisaro's *James Benning, musician*

James Benning is deliberately constructed as a gathering of disparate voices, providing a multiplicity of perspectives (albeit all fundamentally positive) upon Benning's work. This penultimate chapter approaches 'JB' from an unusual angle, as Pisaro - according to his bio - "is a composer and a member of the Wandelweiser Composers Ensemble. Concert length portraits [sic] of his music have been given in places all over the world." Audiences who mainly know Benning from his output over the past decade - and that's likely a considerable majority - may be surprised to find Benning being analysed in terms of his music, but even in his most recent works, there's invariably *some* kind of song³² or music in there somewhere. The rendition of

32 this year in contrast the piece was restored, everything back to some approximation of the original relationship. like a folk song it is rebuilt w slight alterations, the spirit remaining more important than specific boundaries. we saw it in wonderful cool diffused light-- rich pale greens and blue-greys. this piece reminds me of his PARTIALLY BURIED WOODSHED in many ways ... it seems closer to that piece somehow than to the mirage of SPIRAL JETTY, which existed in its perfect state and then was suddenly gone, as though a figment. like the artist himself the Jetty went from full flower into memory, no intermediate stages, no slow fade of the kind built into the WOODSHED piece, or that which has taken place with BC/SH.

Lee Ranaldo, Mar/Apr 1985

“Love Hurts” in *casting a glance* - via a car-radio - is so quiet as to be barely audible, but for me it’s arguably the highlight of the film (and not just because it indirectly reveals the artifice behind what’s ostensibly a straightforward documentary chronicle.)

Pisaro responds to Benning as one artist to another, able - unusually in this collection - to look Benning squarely in the eye as a creative peer. He also happens to be pretty decent prose stylist, and this combines to provide numerous stimulating insights into Benning’s work and its wider contexts: ‘We live in a world in which layers upon layers of things happen. (Worlds on top of worlds, worlds inside worlds.) We know this, but we are seldom made conscious of it. We need the discipline of the recording device, of the frame, and especially of the person recording, to make us reinvestigate what we are living in and through.’ (p235)

And, fascinatingly he turns on its head the usual viewer reaction to Benning’s images - that they’re slow, uneventful, allowing us to absorb every possible scrap of information before the camera moves on to its next subject: “In a Benning film an image is made to *last*. Moving at the normal rate of 24 frames per second, the individual image is trying to sustain itself, to prolong its existence by adding one tiny increment after another.

“This can be viewed as being a very fast rate, since it so effectively convinces us of continuous motion; or it can be viewed as a very slow rate, because of everything it leaves out between the frames... There is a fundamental issue of continuity for all of the time-based arts. For a musician who occasionally works in digital media, the difference between film’s rate of 24 frames per second and, say, the 96,000 per second sampling rate of a modern digital sound recording seems numerically staggering.” (p236)

At six pages, Pisaro’s is among the shortest chapters, but it’s also perhaps the most original, surprising and, page-for-page, rewarding. Indeed, one wonders if the editors should perhaps have approached other artists from different disciplines - a painter, sculptor, maybe a choreographer - to give *James Benning* even more variation and depth.

ch17. Allan Sekula’s RR JB

It’s a matter of some debate among Benning scholars whether *RR* or *casting a glance* (both 2007) should be regarded as his “final” 16mm work: *casting a glance* premiered first, but was completed later. Sekula - a photographer, documentarian, and lecturer at CalArts (in the Photography and Media program, as opposed to Benning’s Film and Video) - concentrates mainly on *RR*, in which he describes Benning revisiting “the longstanding affinity between the cinema and the railroad, both of which are falsely rumored to be obsolete and irrelevant in today’s world of instantaneous electronic communications.’ (p239)

In a short essay - a slightly anticlimactic ending to the main body of the book, from my perspective - Sekula also talks briefly about the replica of H D Thoreau's Walden Pond cabin which Benning has recently built in the Sierra Nevada mountains. The tone is chummily collegiate - a companion-piece to Amanda Yates' chapter, perhaps - as Sekula mentions a photograph published in *Vogue* magazine (of all places) showing Benning swimming "naked in the CalArts pool... Why this photograph never became a recruiting poster for the school is a mystery yet to be explained."

TRAVEL LOG NINE : Broken Circle / Spiral Hill

12:30. Resting my notebook on the boulder. A big, unround, dark granite rock, centrepiece of the *Broken Circle*. Behind, the *Spiral Hill*. Ahead, the lake. Drawn a line from hill-peak to rock, continue it across the lake : an artificial, quarry-formed peninsula, then trees, a gap through which allows sight of a big blocky (residential?) building. Deliberate leyline³³? Was the building there when Smithson came? Issues of intent and mutation surround this work³⁴. The boulder, moss-grown, dank green mud in its lees (I took a smear, smeared it over the title-page of the *Benning* book which I fished out of my rucksack).

The hill, overgrown with a creepery, dark-green bush growth that isn't visible anywhere else round here. Seeded by Smithson? Otherwise it's all in decent nick. Tractor-tracks on the circle, now added to by my Puma prints. I found a medium-sized stone, pushed it an inch into the sand at the spiral's sand-extremity, drew a canal/moat around it with my finger. Something for the next "pilgrim" (they get 100+ per year, my driver informed me, from as far as Japan and Los Angeles³⁵) to

33 Benning works at the interface of mathematics and geography: the exact position of the camera is absolutely crucial - he's faced with an infinite number of possibilities, and the essence of *El Valley Centro* lies in his process of selection. Timing is equally important - there's no environment in the world where this kind of film *can't* be made, provided the *right* two and a half minutes are chosen. Benning's judgement is exceptional, and he's also aided by some providential turns of fate, trains and cars coming into our out of shot at just the right time... This is a film whose every single shot deserves a full-length essay of its own.

JL, <http://www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film/elvalleycentro.html>

34 ... I'm interested in work, and who does work, and who makes money off that work, and who participates in the profits and who doesn't. *El Valley Centro* is very much trying to negotiate that. I'm interested in place, so I'm interested in the Valley as a place, in Los Angeles as a place, and wilderness as a place, and how those places are somewhat distinct, but at the same time they have connections.

JL/JB

35 I heard from Mr. Oxenar from the Krölller-Müller Museum that a show like that (Sonsbeek 71) would be inconceivable this year because of the change of government. They had a Liberal Christian party there, or something, and art was the first thing to go. Konrad Fischer also said the same thing, that the political pressures from both left and right see art as the first thing

ponder. Took some leaves, put them in the *Benning*-book, like the old Bible trick... Would Smithson approve? Would Benning?

Birdsong, and drifting scum on the lake. Feels like I'm simultaneously on the Spiral Jetty in Utah. Tadpoles abundant in the water (cf. my emerging-amphibian impression from last night), bulbous black heads and thrashing tails. They investigate my fingertip as I tentatively insert it into the untrustworthy quarry-water.

What lurks on the hill? At least four types of moss - some intertwined - on the rock, a 2mm black spider picking his way over the granite roughness. Speeding... where? Some quarry-activity round the "shore", but not that much. At 11.50 at #138, had to fill out a form with personal details, reason for my visit (my answer got a bit verbose). A bigger, green-speckled spider on the rock's southern face. White butterfly flickers over the hill's left-side base and all I can think of are the two white butterflies glimpsed in *RR*.

My shadow on the impacted sand at the spiral arm's base. Galaxy-shaped, mathematical but rough and childlike. Lake on the far end of the spiral arm quickly shelves into invisibility, accumulated strata of scum on the waterline. Gentle undulation of the sedimentary accumulation, as in *casting a glance*. I find a block of wood, small and square, to which I add a pebble "passenger" and raft out over the lake.

I stand at the foot of the hill. It's nature that diverts: a black fly-beetle on the drifting scum. An ecosystem exists, albeit an unlikely one... Tadpoles fascinated by a small, thin branch at the water edge: is why they came out of the water. A long-tailed fly touring the long grasses. My raft and its pebble-passenger now are feet out and edging towards the rushes. A solitary traveller, gone beyond the point of rescue. 13:04 and the raft is drifting back to land. I find a smoothed piece of wood and place it at the end of the water-arm, a gift for the tadpoles. The eyes of their spawn stare, tinily, up at me through the water.³⁶

to be axed out.
Smithson, p263

36 i felt greatly privileged to see the piece. i had to drag the same carload of disgruntled folks that came there one and a half years ago--no-one could understand my need to return to see it again. perhaps the most important artist of the century, he himself might not have understood the need to see this »crystal out of time.« he lives on as a memory, his work carried forth mostly in terms of abstract thought or the museum pieces. how many who have seen and liked one of his »non-sites« have actually been spurred on to visit the original place? is this an important consideration? somehow even in the »flesh« the exhibited pieces seem abstractions, while a visit to BC/SH is something of another sort altogether. a spiritual reunion. a confirmation of things known and unknown.

Lee Ranaldo, Mar/Apr 1985

ch18. Appendix

1) Title-page: white text 'Appendix' on a black background, edged in white. Sober, with just a hint of K.S.Malevich's *Black Square* (1915)?

2) A *Timeline* compiled by Benning himself, illustrated with four photographs tracing Benning's progress from chubby-cheeked proud parent (1975?) to grinning *mensch* (1979?) to furrow-browed Artist in open-necked shirt (1987) to grizzled frontiersman/sage (1998). In a book which largely skirts biographical examination, these two pages teem with tantalising fragments:

1968 : In spring attends a community organizing conference in Denver; meets the radical organizer Rennie Davis; while in Denver buys a [sic] 8mm Bolex camera. In fall moves to Saint Elizabeth, Missouri to teach math in a small rural high school; lives on a cattle farm; goes coon hunting with the high school boys; makes his first 8mm film (lost), a portrait of prairie grass along the Osage River." (p242)

3) 12-page exhaustive *Filmography*, with a small monochrome still from each of Benning's 34 extant films, and a section on his eight *Installations*.

4) *Selected Screenings and Exhibitions*. A year-by-year survey from 1973 to 2007; would have been useful to have had this information listed geographically as well as chronologically, so that the reader could find which Viennales, for example, Benning's work has been screened at.

5) *Selected bibliography*. Articles, websites and books dealing with Benning's work, from D.-L.Alvarez's "Tortured Landscapes" and John Anderson's "13 Lakes" to (ahem) Neil Young's "Homeland Security" and Danni Zuvela's "Talking About Seeing."

6) *Contributors* and *The editors would like to thank*.

... And then -- nothing. No index, as previously noted. Just a flyleaf filmography, and a back cover featuring Benning in shades, sitting on the floor and eating what looks like junk-food at what looks like CalArts. And the text:

James Benning's films are among the most fascinating work in American cinema. Since the early 1970s, Benning has produced films that defy categories, but nevertheless echo major directions the avant-garde tradition has taken since 1945, including structural film and the new narrative movement. Benning explores the relationship between image, text and sound while paying expansive attention to the 'vernacular landscapes' of American life. His films offer a complex and idiosyncratic view of American politics and culture in the late 20th century and beyond. This volume traces Benning's artistic career as well as his biographical journey through the USA, from Wisconsin to the East Coast to Southern California.

James Benning by Barbara Pichler, Claudia Slanar (Eds.)

Milwaukee-born James Benning is among the world's most respected and accomplished film-makers, but the fact that he plies his trade at what many may

view as the far edge of the avant-garde means that his name is unknown even to many hardcore cineastes.

That's slowly starting to change, as films such as *casting a glance*, *Ten Skies* and *13 Lakes* have received increasingly widespread coverage over the last few years - and ambitious, exhaustive retrospectives have started to pop up via adventurous curators such as the Austrian Filmmuseum's Alexander Horwath. Not everyone could get to Vienna for the month-long Benning jamboree last October, of course, which makes this accompanying volume, simply entitled *James Benning*, all the more invaluable.

A handsomely-produced paperback compendium of essays about - and, in one instance *by* - Benning, the tone is sometimes drily academic, sometime collegiate and chummy (among the contributors we find Benning's daughter, one of his fellow lecturers at CalArts, where he has taught since 1987, and one of his former pupils), and it's perhaps regrettably that so little criticism³⁷ is allowed to intrude into what often reads like a hagiographic tribute.

But for the most part the writers manage to contain their (entirely understandable) enthusiasm, and strike an engaging and informative middle-ground between the scholarly and the journalistic. Lavishly illustrated with a fine selection of stills from Benning's three decades of 16mm film-making - at 65, he's now moving into digital - it's particularly tantalising as the director doesn't allow his work to appear on DVD and public screenings are all too few and far between. For Benning aficionados, this first-ever book dedicated exclusively to the master is ludicrously overdue and should satisfy expectations. And for those who've never heard of James Benning, this is an excellent and accessible place to start.³⁸

Neil Young

[300-word review, written as if for general-readership political magazine *Tribune* (London)]

37 I found [*casting a glance*] contemplative, engrossing, interesting to be directed to look at something one would without such restriction look at differently - but in the end frustrating because increasingly I felt held back from the images, I wanted to be there and out of the warm and artificial setting of the cinema, to experience physically the air and smells, and to cast my own glance. I didn't feel, honestly, that looking at the art work in this mediated and constricted way actually intensified or opened it up to me, or showed me a way of seeing that would illuminate my viewing of the world otherwise.

Sheila Seacroft, *Floatation Suite*

www.floatationsuite.com

38 NY: If someone was approaching your work for the first time, where would be a good starting point?

JB: I'd probably tell 'em to watch *11 x 14* so they could start at the beginning and work their way... north.

EPILOGUE : Supersnack, De Boslaan, Emmen

It's 13:50 Thursday and, having completed my second visit to Emmerschans, I'm back over the "border" into Emmen, drinking several bottles of chilled water and eating a falafel-type sandwich in a near-deserted roadside fast-food joint. The bloke behind the counter tells me that the buses are on strike, same as they were last night. As I munch away, finishing the last chapter of the *Benning* book, my eye is caught by a large poster which covers half of the wall in front of me. *Indiana Jones and the Temple of the Crystal Skull*.

After two visits to *BC/SH*, I feel that I have completed the "pilgrimage" - maybe not to Ranaldo's satisfaction³⁹, or Smithson's, or Benning, but to my own. I read again about the "gyrating space" where "formal logic's logic fails to hold: the primes, the 'irrational' numbers, incompleteness, what Smithson calls the 'surd,' the entropic principle toward which so much of Smithson's work, and most spectacularly *Spiral Jetty*, was ostensibly directed." (p149)

Tired of reading, tired of making notes, I read (p119) how Benning sometimes wants to "convince people that language is not that important and it's okay to quit on it for a while." And then I turn to page 143. *I walked slowly back under a scorching sun*.⁴⁰

39 someone else in the car cynically remarked that they didn't see very much, and jokingly or sarcastically queried where was Smithson now, where did this get him? (admittedly it was my folly, my trip, I had dragged them all along). All I could think to answer as we jolted our way back up the wet and crusty road was that it had »gotten« him everything, and that he was right back there, behind us, passing through a rusty gate portal and out into the open landscape.

Lee Ranaldo, Mar/Apr 1985

40 Canvasser for the Freeman, pray for us.

Charitable mason, pray for us.

Wandering Soap, pray for us.

Ulysses, p498

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