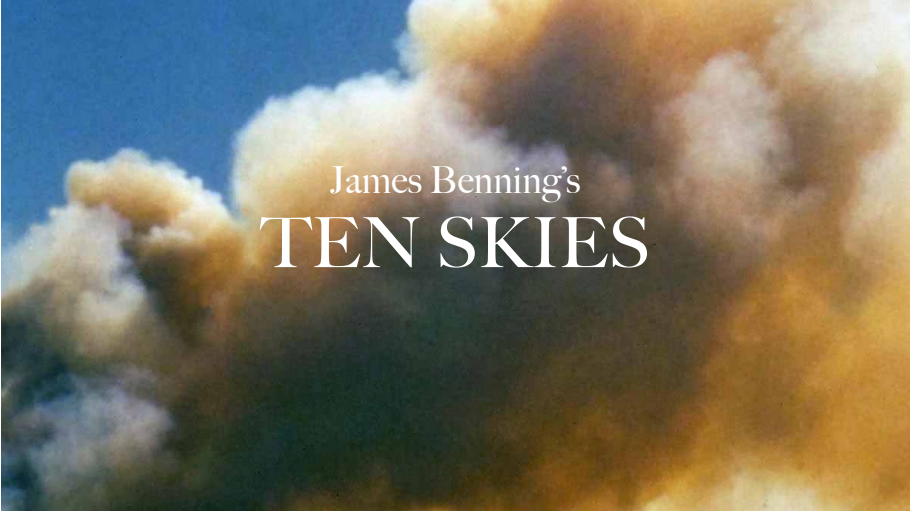


Acropolis Cinema
presents:



June 16, 2021 - Dynasty Typewriter at the Hayworth

ABOUT THE FILM

Filmed around Val Verde, California, this series of skylscapes gracefully visualizes human civilization's interaction with, and impact on, the landscape. The skies and cloud formations chosen by Benning are affected by pollution from an industrial factory, jet trails, and smoke from an accidental wildfire, all clearly legible upon the firmament. And yet, despite these ominous environmental undercurrents, Benning conceived *TEN SKIES* as an anti-war film, describing his work to be “about the antithesis of war, [about] the kind of beauty we're destroying.” This intention is affirmed in the reflective serenity of his images; the varying tones, textures and colors of the atmosphere, and the shifting transformations of billowing clouds that produce astonishing perceptual revelations about scale, ephemerality, and the cinematic frame.

101 min. | USA | 2004

Testing Your Patience by Scott MacDonald

The following is an excerpt of an article originally published in Artforum, September 2007

James Benning established himself as an important contributor to American independent cinema in the mid-1970s with *II x I4* (1976) and *One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977), formally inventive and visually engaging representations of urban and rural America. That the places in Benning's early films were midwestern (he himself grew up in Milwaukee) gave notice that the so-called cinematic flyover zone—the territory between the centers of film production in New York and California—could not only be the focus of interesting work but could nurture an important avant-garde filmmaker. Later, Benning would move to New York City and then on to California (where he began teaching at CalArts in 1987), expanding his horizons while continuing to make a film every year or two. Given the considerable body of work he has created and the intense focus on place in so many of his best films—including the recent *13 Lakes* (2004), *Ten Skies* (2004), and *RR* (2007)—it now seems fair to say that Benning has become the foremost filmmaker of the American landscape.

His work has always been challenging. *II x I4* and *One Way Boogie Woogie* were made in the aftermath of Andy Warhol's long slow films and of the “structural films” that followed. (Warhol and Michael Snow, Ken Jacobs, Ernie Gehr, J. J. Murphy, and others used extended duration and repetitive structures to contest not only the commercial cinema and its reliance on conventional narrative but also the various forms of personally expressive cinema that had dominated the 1950s and early '60s film avant-garde—most obviously, the work of Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, and Jack Smith.) Benning's roots in structural film have remained evident throughout his career and have

remained evident throughout his career and have informed his filmmaking in a variety of ways. Early on, he used depictions of place as the backdrop for witty formalist games (for a full minute in *One Way Boogie Woogie*, an off-screen sound seems to approach, but never enters, the frame) and for redirecting conventional narrative expectations (early in *II x I4* a pair of lovers is introduced; not only do they not meet again during the film, but by its end they seem to have become different characters).

[...] Benning's long-standing fascination with place and steadfast commitment to exacting formal organization have increasingly served an understated, indeed largely implicit, environmental politics. His California Trilogy (*El Valley Centro* [1999], *Los* [2000], and *Sogobi* [2001]) and three of his most recent films (*13 Lakes*, *Ten Skies*, and *RR*) confront the hysterical consumption modeled and sold by American commercial media and attempt to retrain those who come to see the films, testing viewers' patience in order to reinvigorate their perceptual capacities. The three California films use an identical structure (thirty-five rigorously composed two-and-a-half-minute shots) to map the state, visualizing its beauty while examining the politics of water and of ethnicity.

The formal rigor of the California Trilogy is taken to even greater lengths—literally—in several remarkable recent films. *13 Lakes* presents thirteen ten-minute, tripod-mounted shots of thirteen American lakes, each shot composed so that the film frame is precisely divided between the surface of the lake and the land and sky. By the second or third shot, it will have become clear to the viewer that the film is an extended sequence of ten-minute durations and, further, that these segments will be, at least compared with nearly all moving-image experiences in film and on television (even in comparison with most avant-garde experiences in film and on video), unusually minimal: Almost nothing will happen. Once this realization has come, viewers must decide either to leave the theater or to accept Benning's challenge. The fact that, at least in my experience, nearly all of those who come to see *13 Lakes* do stay for the entire experience is something of a victory for Benning's artistry and demonstrates that, although he has refused to provide what most people go to the movies for—most obviously, character and narrative—what he has provided is not only enduring but engaging enough to sustain a 130-minute experience.

So what is it that Benning provides? The composition of the individual images in *13 Lakes* and the slow, steady revelation of lake after lake create a kind of spatiotemporal grid within which the audience can measure the subtle changes that occur within each shot over time and register the distinctions between one lake and another. While some of the images of lakes are more visually arresting than others (Benning is certainly capable of stunning imagery but generally resists "beautiful" shots), and while some of the transitions from lake to lake are more dramatic than others, it is the viewer's growing awareness of his or her own perceptiveness that replaces character and narrative within the film. By the time the end credits identifying the lakes begin to roll, Benning has transformed his audience by modeling and demanding a more perceptually active sensual awareness of the world. This awareness argues that our culture's tendency toward relentless distraction and hysterical consumption (and the latter's planet-

despoiling implications) need not be the inevitable product of modern life, and reminds us, as Thoreau reminded us in *Walden*, that slowing down and appreciating the moment-by-moment incarnation of the physical world can transform our sense of what we are and what we—as individuals and as a culture—need.

Ten Skies is a companion to *13 Lakes*—Benning presents a series of ten assiduously composed shots of different skylines—and, as in *13 Lakes*, offers the possibility of perceptual retraining and psychic cleansing. *RR* (as in railroad) is somewhat less spare than *13 Lakes* and *Ten Skies*; it presents a series of forty-three shots of trains moving across the American landscape, each shot as long as the train's journey through the frame. Here, Benning's concern with the issue of overconsumption is more overt (the railroad system, after all, remains a crucial element of modern capitalism), though the strategy of confronting the issue by means of testing the viewer's patience, and hopefully expanding his or her powers of observation and of concentration, is familiar from the earlier films.

While in American avant-garde circles Benning remains identified with the 1970s, his ongoing productivity and the consistent quality of the films he has made since 1990 have earned him a berth in the pantheon of contemporary independent filmmakers, and his influence as both teacher and filmmaker is widely evident, both in the United States and in Europe. ♦



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