



El Valley Centro (1999)

shot enters the scene from the right: a seemingly never-ending train. One wagon after another rolls into the picture, dividing the shot horizontally. Their colors are luminous and astounding—rich, primary colors alternate with the brown colors of freight cars. Some of the cars are simply shells through which one can see the landscape in the background. The promising sign ‘Pacific’ can be recognized. It seems to me as if Pop Art, Minimalism and Conceptualism all meet in this one, simple shot. And the determination of the shot’s duration additionally contributes a specific, almost slapstick sense of suspense. One knows that the shot will end after 150 seconds and imagines that the train will have to behave accordingly. Will it succeed in driving through the entirety of the image and disappear stage-left, leaving the scene as empty as in the beginning. One can also get lost in thought: How many conflicts took place around the planning and construction of the railroad that cuts through the North American continent? In how many Westerns is the conflict of this furrow chiseled into the landscape? Settlers wait for the railroad to come, others want to prevent it, one hopes for the economic strength

it will bring. And, like other 19th century discoveries, the view from and sight of the train stands for a new, dynamic perceptual disposition to which cinema is closely related.

One has time to contemplate such matters as one train car after another rattles into the picture from right to left, and it is a pleasure to find a kind of counter-shot to this image in the 29th shot of *Sogobi*. Once again a train appears, but this time it emerges from the deep space on the left of the screen. It approaches upon a track bending along a lengthy curve, one reads a sign that says ‘Santa Fe’, and this time there is no chance that the countless train cars could fit into the two and a half minutes. The edit unhitches the train, but one can rest assured: The train will be continued in another film by James Benning.

Translated by Eve Heller

Nils Plath

On Future Arrivals of Container Drivers

Five Brief Comments on One Image from James Benning’s ‘California Trilogy’, expanded

1. From There to Here

On November 5, 1880 Karl Marx added a request to a letter he sent from London to Friedrich Adolph Sorge in Hoboken, New Jersey: “I would be very pleased if you could dig up something good (of significance) about the economic conditions in California, at my expense, of course. California is very important to me, for nowhere else has capitalist centralization caused such perfectly radical change in such a shameless way—and with such haste.”¹

John Muir arrived in California in 1868, and, over the course of time, became one of the West’s great environmentalists. Fourteen years after Marx’s transatlantic correspondence, in 1894, Muir published *The Mountains of California*. He finds a clearly different point of view from which to describe the California landscape: “Perched like a fly on this Yosemite dome, I gaze and sketch and bask, oftentimes settling down into dumb admiration without definite hope of ever learning much (...), humbly prostrate before the vast display of God’s power, and eager of self-denial and renunciation with eternal toil to learn any lesson in the divine manuscript.”²

These two historical descriptions make it apparent that a country is like a landscape set in the midst of various correlations of utilization.

A country, like a landscape, can only be perceived within contexts that bear witness to an intriguing relationship between absence from and presence in a given place.³ This relationship is conveyed by written descriptions and their accompanying visual images, both of which should be read as narratives.⁴ In the case of Marx’s postscript, which includes his request for archeological discoveries, the country functions as a brand name for remarkable realities with

1) Karl Marx, letter to Adolph Sorge, 5 November 1880, in: *Werke. Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels*, vol. 34 (Berlin: Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, 1966), p. 478.

2) John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (New York: Penguin 1997 [1911]), p. 132.

3) For an illustrative overview from an art historical perspective of how art forms corresponded to the need for territorial demarcation, see Martin Warnke, *Political Landscape. The Art History of Nature* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994).

4) The transportation of views and hence of perspective-shaping theory must always show us border demarcations and territorial appropriations. As J. Hillis Miller has it in his *Topographies* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), pp. 4–5: “[T]here is always a figure in the landscape. (...) Though they may not all seem at first to be connected to mappings of some landscape, imaginary or real, it is easy to see, for example, that the question of speech acts comes up in investigating what is involved in the naming of places (...) The question of transporting or translating theory from one country to another raises the question of the degree to which a given theory is rooted in one particular culture, able to function only in a specific place.”

extraordinarily strong socio-economic characteristics; in the case of Muir, the country is regarded as an incomparable object of aesthetic reflection, expressed in a language that seems to be related to the language of American transcendentalism, with its focus on divine experience rather than divine authority. Here, in the case of Marx, a country is treated as a totality, as an abstract space. It is also exemplary of a development that occurs in other places at a comparably lesser speed, although still according to the same laws over which the individual has absolutely no control. There, with Muir, the landscape is captured in words, as a kind of perspective excerpted by an individual from a larger impression, for the purpose of observing intangible greatness and internal sensation. Here, with Marx, a country or state seems to represent the fabricated result of time passing at a particularly rapid pace, the manifestation of continual changes evoked by externally determined circumstances that violently force the reshaping of landscape. There, with Muir, the visible landscape stands for the permanence of divine nature and an order above and beyond time, in the face of which, the lone human being must perceive his finite nature and meaninglessness, while at the same, he is driven by the imperative to document, through art, the perception of

his condition as an element of the landscape.

Twelve decades later, in the landscape images of his 'California Trilogy', filmmaker James Benning developed his own way to illustrate these corresponding descriptions of California as of the late 1990s. Land and landscape are framed, austere formatted, and standardized in a sequence of images recorded onto film. Originally from Wisconsin, Benning has been an outsider at home in southern California since the late 1980s. Produced in series form, his films are critical visual examinations of landscapes. At the same time the films depict an evocation of the aesthetic transcendence of individually experienced environments. Hence, the moving stills produce prospects of his California—since the trilogy can also be seen as a self-portrait—and of a California. Both 'views' of California can be seen in other places simultaneously (as a concept) and belatedly (as the materiality of filmic images that restore the past), so that more than just an image of this land and its landscape is left behind.

Benning confirmed this during a lecture in Vienna in 2004 about his filmmaking methods and how he observes himself in the process. He pointed out the importance of tradition and the creation of values, the process of framing historical spaces in order to narrate the story of a land,

and the significance of either placing himself within the frame of a filmed location or passing through it when creating images that include his person. Benning opened these remarks with a reference to the writings of John Muir: "When I started to do research for *Sogobi*, which is the third film of the 'California Trilogy', the part of the trilogy that is a portrait of landscapes, one of the first things I did was to read the works of John Muir, the nineteenth-century naturalist. And his descriptions of landscapes and wilderness were very precise. His readings, uhm, I mean, writings lead to the development of the

National Park System in the US at the time, so they are very valuable documents at this time."⁵

In other words, prospects of landscapes taken from books about nature accompany Benning when he goes out into nature to develop his perceptions. His impressions of the location, in which he is both physical body and observer, continue along the paths of two traditions. Benning's images can be seen as taking part in a project widely underway during the nineteenth century, one that turned landscape and wilderness into objects of description, thus applying Rousseau's widely accepted distinction between nature and culture to the so-called 'new continent'. This continent gradually developed over the course of the century, and the close of its frontier was confirmed in the words of a second Wisconsin native who established yet another myth about the formation of American identity.⁶ As the first Wisconsin native mentioned here, Benning has his own way of transforming descriptions of landscape into documents that will survive the ravages of time because they provide a critical commentary on the appropriation of landscape. Benning's own appropriation of the land can be described as a process of reading landscape images: when the landscape is turned into a topic of representation, it is always in the picture, captured in the frame.

5) Transcript of a lecture by James Benning, "Dividing by Zero," held at the Austrian Film Museum in Nov 2004; excerpts published in German as "Durch Null dividieren," in Pichler/Pollach (eds.), *moving landscapes. Landschaft und Film* (Vienna: Synema Publikationen, 2006), pp. 197–208. Benning names other role models for his films, such as mathematical equations, songs (such as Lucinda Williams' "Lake Charles"), or paintings by artists of the Hudson River School.

6) Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his now famous paper, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in 1893 at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. He described the 'frontier' as the territory between urbanized, civilized society and the untamed wilderness. He also labeled this frontier experience a key component in the formation of American identity, part of a rejection of the influences of outdated European civilizations. See i.e. Allen G. Bogue, *Frederick Jackson Turner, Strange Roads Going Down* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); John Mack Faragher (ed.), *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

His involuntary slip during the lecture, when he mentioned Muir's 'readings' of the landscape, but meant his 'writings', is not insignificant. Benning shows how difficult—perhaps impossible—it is to sharply distinguish between perceptive observation and the reiteration of recordings wherever they are made visible. This is especially the case when one finds oneself either in the context of the landscape itself, or lecturing about the landscape while in the context of different venues. In other words, landscape is always simultaneously read and written whenever and wherever a person places himself in it through the use of words and images.

2. Looking Down from Above

At first sight, just a still image shot on the diagonal, a view from above a mostly blue surface: a moving, watery surface is seen. A broad, shadowy line overlaps the lower edge of the picture while two thin, barely perceptible, linear shadows run parallel through the frame. This shot is from *Sogobi*, the third film of the 'California Trilogy'. It was filmed with a static camera, like all the other shots. It is more than just a random image, since it includes a form of filmic self-reflection: the camera (and therefore the viewer) stares at a watery surface—considering what there is to be seen, it takes more than a moment

to orient oneself. This is the fifteenth shot in *Sogobi* and appears more than thirty minutes into the film. Preceding images consistently featured a horizontal landscape and the viewer oriented his gaze accordingly. This shot breaks the pattern: it confuses the eye, expressing a disturbance in the mathematical strictness of the film's structure and thus commenting on the format of the prior images. The viewer is hereby made aware of perceptual conditions. Yet it is not immediately obvious what kinds of visual and proportional relationships are being set up within the image. Nothing immediately betrays the real size of what appears in the frame. A film in which landscape is always and solely present in a series of images makes it clear how dependent a viewer is on both perception and modes of mediated communication. In the above case, the eye keenly detects this dependency. The ensuing images show completely different views of a land portrayed as a singular entity, yet composed of heterogeneous shots of the landscape. Only after long periods of time—during which the viewer has become accustomed to seeing nothing more than obscure reflections of light on a restless surface of water—does an object suddenly enter the image from the right-hand side of the image. This moment is a definite surprise, because stillness

dominates the scenery in *Sogobi*. In most shots, changes often occur in a barely perceptible way, and are then contrasted to images that feature repetitive, automatic motions (construction and agricultural machines at work, cars on streets, freight trains moving in and out of the picture). Although not initially discernable, because it simply appears as a shadow jutting into the image, the object gradually penetrating the frame can finally be identified as a freighter laden with containers. Once it slides completely into view, the color of the container ship makes it look like some sort of foreign body. This in turn allows the composed image to be recognized for what it is: the ship moving within a still frame defined by the motionless camera. Time passes quickly. The freighter rapidly moves out of the picture, disappearing almost as soon as it has completely filled the frame and leaving behind an image with altered coordinates. The trace of a whitecap on the formerly all-blue, moving surface is seen. It lasts a few seconds, presenting a visible recollection of the no-longer-visible means of transport: a recollection that will also disappear. And yet, in the eye of the beholder, nothing is as it was before.

This sequence ends as abruptly as it began. It is two-and-a-half-minutes long, like all of the shots in the 'California Trilogy'. Only during the

final credits, when the locations in *Sogobi* are listed, is it revealed that the shot was taken from the Golden Gate Bridge and that the ship was a freighter belonging to the Hanjin Shipping Company. This (belated) localization explains the barely visible, shadowy lines, and single-handedly transforms the individual shot into a component of a particular narrative. The identification of the bridge by name reveals a deliberately chosen perspective; a means of transport, the property of a company that operates worldwide, is consciously brought into the picture, while the location of the viewer as its observer on the bridge is put into perspective. Other Benning films contain corresponding images: in *El Valley Centro* there is a shot of a freighter moving through the landscape of California's Central Valley, the agro-industrial landscape portrayed in the film. *Los*, a portrait of Los Angeles and its surroundings, presents the harbor of San Pedro. The films in Benning's trilogy contain many correspondences of this kind—topographies seen again and again, shots of streets, rivers, creeks, intersecting paths, trees, or large signs. Benning creates montages of images and text in his other films of the West—such as *Deseret* (1995) or *Four Corners* (1997), for instance, which evoke memories of Babette Mangolte's more epic travel narrative, *The Sky on Location* (1982). Unspoken

references to texts by others are likewise consistently present in images of the trilogy, which feature only buildings and vehicles, or even simply vegetation. And yet, this visible non-presence of writing and words in the film makes the human presence in the landscape all the more apparent. This is how the presence of history is continuously maintained when 'nature' is shown as a result of image production. As means of transportation, as metaphors in an empirical reality, both bridge and ship are actually not meant to determine perspectives, but to transport things, bridge distances, connect landscapes.⁷ What do they reveal in the single shot under discussion? What do they allow to be seen? Without actually being in the picture, the bridge as location determines this single, particular image, which subsequently comments upon other images in the series: the Golden Gate Bridge as scenic viewpoint—the tourist's take on San Francisco,⁸ the perspective of tourists on the beaten path, in pursuit of stereotypes and clichés representative of the city. Visual fantasies and narratives of freedom become reality, while simultaneously attaching themselves to a marked place, turning a structure, which also happens to be an emblem, into a location some seek out in order to jump. In Benning's film, the eye does not catch sight of the city.⁹ This is a

7) And even though they are used as means of transportation, both bridge and ship have had a long history of serving as symbols—to name only what are perhaps the most prominent discussions of the twentieth century: Martin Heidegger's "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971), and "Excursus I: Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment," in Theodor W. Adorno/Max Horkheimer, *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

8) Alfred Hitchcock utilizes this bridge as a prominent set piece in one of his films (*Vertigo*, USA 1958), as famously commented upon by Chris Marker (*Sans Soleil*, France 1983). In doing this, Hitchcock (unlike Benning) views the Bay Area with the eyes of a tourist, as Thom Andersen has it in the commentary of his seminal portrait of a city in moving pictures, *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (USA 2003): "Just as there are highbrows and lowbrows, there are high tourists and low tourists. Just as there are high-brow directors and lowbrow directors, there are high tourist directors and low tourist directors. Low tourist directors generally disdain Los Angeles. They prefer San Francisco and the coastline of northern California. More picturesque. The greatest low tourist director is, of course, Alfred Hitchcock, and he set four memorable films around the San Francisco Bay Area."

9) The city that likes to be referred to as 'The City (by the Bay)', San Francisco, is not only known as one of the most-photographed cities in the world, it is also one of the first American cities shot in panorama format. See for example William Shaw, *San Francisco from Rincon Point* (ca. 1852), George R. Fardon, *San Francisco Album: Photographs of the Most Beautiful Views and Public Buildings of San Francisco* (1856), Carleton E. Watkins, *View from San Francisco from the Base of Twin Peaks* (1866–74), and Eadweard Muybridge's *Panorama Images of the City* (1877, 1878). For a depiction and discussion of San Francisco, see Peter B. Hales, *Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839–1915* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984).

statement in itself: there is the water, and there is the transportation route clearly marking the ship as a ship per se by deliberately placing it in the image,¹⁰ and yet, at the same time, making the ship exemplary. The San Francisco Bay is also a harbor, a gateway to the world, a docking point for immigration narratives coming west from the Far East, which lies westward. The Oakland harbor lies in the distance, on the other side of the bay—its unique landscape is not included in *Sogobi*. Oakland is currently the fourth-largest harbor in the United States and one of the twenty biggest harbors in the world, a place where goods from all over the world find port, a destination inscribed in the topography of global trade routes.¹¹ San Francisco harbor thus takes the form of a place and a history—two sides simultaneously present, yet rarely obvious to the consciousness of those who try to gain a perspective from on top of the bridge.

10) And at the same time, the ship visible in the moving image can also be looked upon as a reference to Peter Hutton's film, *Study of a River* (USA 1996).

11) See: *Pacific Gateway: An Illustrated History of the Port of Oakland*, Woodruff Minor (Oakland: Port of Oakland, 2000).

12) Karl Marx, *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*, Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels. Collected Works, vol. 28 (trans. Ernst Wangermann, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986), pp. 49–537; originally written in German between 1857 and 1861 and published as *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*.

4. Futurity in Use

Where image meets landscape, the topic becomes individual property rights. These necessarily renewable claims to space and time need media in order to be delineated, communicated, preserved, and continually re-presented. Claims need time in order to be established, as well as revoked and contested. Claims need containers in which to be kept, so that they can be re-published, re-assessed, re-read in the form of images. Storage places are sought where they can also manifest their own claims over time and demonstrate their relevance to what can be called proper identities of communality. That requires some work, as one might imagine. Karl Marx's manuscript, "Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie," written between October 1857 and May 1858, is a rough draft of his major work, *Das Kapital*.¹² Here, the author indirectly speaks of the availability of land as property, as well as the claims to it as claims to property in general. He identifies one of the crucial conditions of capital as the separation of free labor from the objective conditions of its realization. For Marx, this dissolution is a backdrop that arises from the division between "the means of labour and the material of labour." He explains that the worker lives an object-related existence in front of this backdrop:

"Hence the labourer has an objective existence independent of his labour. The individual relates to himself as proprietor, as master of the conditions of his reality."¹³ Here, the context maintained expresses something about the attitude of a proprietor and how circumstances of time and place determine his conditions. Benning presents himself as someone who questions and affirms the right to possess something, that is, landscape: despite the fact that it is shown as an image to a general audience, landscape cannot actually be turned into property.

Even the undeniable fact that property ownership is registered and documented in land registries—thus clarifying and proving property rights over time—does not contradict this assertion. In his images, his own view of landscape, Benning shows something that he also wants to have understood as a collective fact. Landscape exists only as it is claimed by many (and by a multitude of collective histories), and therefore as an historical condition. Hence, the possession of landscape is never final, and its use is always a process, a series of ways of utilizing it. Landscape must be received in order to produce an image of time. While the body serves as a temporary storage medium for impressions, while it can be visible in the landscape, it will ultimately disappear from the

scene, for its physicality is finite. It is precisely this fact that also makes it necessary to store impressions outside of one's own body, so that these impressions can be taken to other places and other times. This idea can be seen as a motif in Benning's filmic work—the formation of the self as a recording medium that needs another medium in order to gain a place in time. As John Muir finally wrote several decades after his trip to the Californian mountains: "Never while anything is left of me shall this first camp be forgotten. It has fairly grown into me, not merely as memory pictures, but as part and parcel of mind and body alike." In other words, without what "is left of me," namely, his words and his sketches of Sierra vegetation printed in his book (as a message), there would be nothing left anywhere else: no trace of what he described, according to his impression, as "eternal-enduring."¹⁴

In a very similar way, Benning stakes claim to the landscape depicted; it must be stored (on film) to be distributed, yet it will nonetheless never belong to him or be his alone. Moving pictures are his only means of both manifesting a claim and expressing it in representative

¹³ Marx, *Outlines*, p. 399.

¹⁴ Muir, *First Summer*, p. xi.

terms, in locations very different than those seen in the films—that is, in movie theaters in the many different towns, cities, countries, and continents where his images of California are shown. His images prove that places and representative spaces have their histories of use (and thus their temporal value).¹⁵

As a filmmaker, it appears that Benning is interested in coming to terms with the relationship between the internal (so-called organic) and external (so-called structural) characteristics of whatever he portrays. He achieves this by rediscovering himself as an observer in the landscape, by making an image of it for others, as a perceptive being in space, as someone absorbing impressions in the landscape. For Benning, what is seen and shown are each the result of labor, of the process of developing a stance toward one's surroundings—the outcome of laborious processes of development, in a very real sense of the word: the history of film as the development of technology, as both aesthetic and political. To bear witness means to depend

upon a futurity which one has to create oneself, with one's own images, to explore past formats of perception.

In his "Grundrisse," Marx describes "the communality [*Gemeinschaftlichkeit*] of blood, language, customs," represented "in the clan society," as the primary prerequisite for the (temporary) communal appropriation and use of land. The *earth*, writes Marx, is "the original instrument of labour, both as workshop and repository of raw materials; however, appropriation not by means of labour but as the prerequisite of labour. The individual relates simply to the objective conditions of labour as his own, as the inorganic nature of his subjectivity, which realizes itself through them. The chief objective condition of labour does not itself appear as the *product* of labour, but is already there as nature [or divine presuppositions]."¹⁶

Of significance here is the appearance of the word 'appear': that is, the conditions required for display are not simply fact, but have to be regarded as a process involving modes of representation.

Both Benning and Marx want the seemingly obvious assumption that nature is naturally given (or God-given, as Muir had it) and, conversely, that culture is cultivated and hence historical, to appear as nothing but the construct of

¹⁵ History and utilization of landscape, commented accordingly, could be turned into ideologically critical picture books. See, for example, Robert Dawson, Gray Brechin, Farewell, *Promised Land. Waking from the California Dream* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1999).

¹⁶ Marx, *Outlines*, p. 409.

relationships in which one's own production—the production of the self—expires with time.

Thus it might be that the task is to show signs of wear when depicting landscape; and perhaps this task should be carried on in a kind of futurity—the future seen as a manifestation of the representation of things past. Collected images speak to this idea. A chapter heading in a book published decades ago and re-read in many ways displays a related message, translated from the French: "Wears and tears (tableau of an ageless world)."¹⁷ Time leaves behind temporary traces—that is nothing new. Surfaces can be described—literally for inscription—to be inscribed. And each of the reading modalities that corresponds to its own place in history can be read from their inscription. Furrows and traces, those are signs of the time the reader will find. A wake as reminder. Thus writes a reader who understands Marx as the originator of the "wears and tears (tableau of an ageless world)." The book in question, *Of Grammatology*, was published in French a year before the Paris uprisings of May 1968. In it, Jacques Derrida included some sections that can be placed in direct context with a discussion about gestures of articulation, the formation of language based on material conditions, and the questioning of linearities in the application of different histor-

ical kinds of writing. For Walter Benjamin, the narrator's perception of his own landscape was an important task as well as a cultural asset (albeit outdated by his time), for an oral-narrative sense of communality transmitted over time.¹⁸ In contrast, Derrida looks at representational modes of writing, cultivated by eye and hand. "The visual economy of reading obeys a law analogous to that of agriculture," Derrida says after establishing the different directions motion can take as one reads and is involved in the system of writing, which is determined by the hand. He then speaks of an unstable compromise between these two economic prescriptions: "The same thing is not true of the man-

17) Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx, the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York: Routledge, 1994).

18) In his "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin describes two exemplary figures, through which experience is passed from person to person. "If one wants to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, one is embodied in the resident tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman (...). The resident master craftsman and the traveling journeymen worked together before he settled down in his home town or somewhere else. If peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university. In it was combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place." Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller. Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections* (trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 84–85.

ual economy of writing and the latter was predominant during a specific era and period of the great phonographic-linear epoch. The wake [fashion] outlives the conditions of its necessity: it continued till the age of printing. Our writing and our reading are still largely determined by the movement of the hand."¹⁹ There, as here, the divided presence of processes of exchange determines the relationship between a settled existence and subjects as 'transported beings' [*Transportwesen*, in German] in a different way than it used to just a few decades ago. Derrida's words serve as a reminder that one needs to pay attention to the manual, to the hand, and the instability involved in continuing to write in linear fashions. What is at stake is the notion of working with one's hands; the manifestations of appropriation produced by grasping and comprehending, which appear in the face of a determinist use of language; the dictates of a kind of instrumentalization of manual work; and the resistance stemming from one's own obstinacy. The ability to act—and to write—and therefore to manifest wealth, property, competence.

19) Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976), p. 288. [Translation slightly altered, N.P.]

20) Ibid., p. 287.

21) Ibid., p. 287.

Derrida expatiates on the traces left by the utilization of land: "The furrow is the line, as the ploughman traces it: the road—via rupta—broken by the ploughshare. The furrow of agriculture, we remind ourselves, opens nature to culture (cultivation). And one also knows that writing is born with agriculture which happens only with sedentarization (...)."²⁰

Derrida expatiates on the traces left by the utilization of land: "How does the ploughman proceed? Economically. Arrived at the end of the furrow, he does not return to the point of departure. He turns the ox and ploughs around (...) writing by furrows was a movement in linear and phonographic script. (...) Why, however, is the ensuing question, did the economy of the writer break with that of the agriculturalist?"²¹

This question had to be reintroduced, owing to the new conditions brought about by changed ways of writing in an era of altered transportation. When writing, setting down the hand or lifting it again produces gaps in time, moments in which linearity stops, creating time for reflection in the leap from line to line.

A closer look makes it easier to see how Derrida's remarks on the traditions of writing are in conjunction with the model of land use appearing in Benning's image. In their images of ground conditions, both are concerned with

how temporary signs of usage are perceived. Both are concerned with new technologies used in production and transportation, and the question of the economic usage of time and the future. Derrida's passage addresses the same topic of future arrivals by means of economically determined processes in the same way that Benning stages it in his image of the bridge. What is at stake is the notion of linearization, literally, which actually means: material, furrows and wakes, strips of film, passages of time; the media that transport places and times, which—in the case of the world conveyed by the film through a series of still shots, and its fragmented descriptions of perception—is an opportunity to reflect on proprietary conditions and the ability to represent, portray, and depict sensory impressions. There must be space in which to reflect upon images and time. And since this space has become historical, it is therefore possible to outline an idea of it. It is an inconstant, restless space, and yet one that has to be familiar with a certain kind of stasis in order to become a place where bodies can exist.²² John Muir's words also reveal this relationship between standstill and motion so crucial to the perception of landscape, and they resonate in Benning's stationary images. Muir describes his record of the Sierra as a series of

detailed observations of movement in nature—from trees swaying in the wind to raindrops falling from the sky. His description is embedded in a narrative which tells how he himself moves from one point to another in this natural landscape over the course of a summer, occasionally coming to rest, and yet still considering himself part of a divine plan for the orderly turn of nature's tides.

4. From There, Away

James Benning's three landscape films, *El Valley Centro*, *Los*, and *Sogobi*, present a three-part portrait of the 31st state of the union in the form of

22) "[T]he space of geometric objectivity is an object or an ideal signified produced at a moment of writing. Before it, there is no homogenous space, submitted to one and the same type of technique and economy. Before it, space orders itself wholly for the habitation and inscription in itself of the body 'proper'." (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 288) Possessive claims, physicality, and the idealized unity of the two, as well as the intactness that must be equally demanded of them—the sense of space—all of these assemble to form a concept. Therefore: when landscape comes to mind, it is about the body in space—one that has been put there. One that is in front of the us, forming a communal body, and yet absent, like a monument made to disappear into its surroundings, invisible to the eyes of passersby. A body that helps to define the space, even if invisible to itself. And thus the notion of landscape requires that the transportation of the body be reflected—something that requires work and creates a work—through the ages and from space to space.

an almost seamless network of individual shots of the Californian landscape. The films also show what it means to use time: they demand time. Their austere composition, which is also a practical calculation in many of Benning's films made since the 1970s, underscores this demand. Each of the three films consists of thirty-five 'static' shots, each about two-and-a-half minutes long—including the head and tail leaders,

23) While watching the trilogy, viewers might think they recognize famous scenes from Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (USA 1959) and from Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (USA 1970), for instance, when a crop duster flying over a field repeatedly flies toward the camera in *El Valley Centro*. Numerous filmic citations or allusions that seem like reconstructions in the documentary-like setting of the landscape give the trilogy a multiplicity of internal and external references.

24) This view is also a prerequisite for interpreting landscape images that can convey an understanding of time as well as a discursive consciousness of history. See Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects" (1968), in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 110: "The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which evade the rational order, and social structures which confine art. In order to read the rocks we must become conscious of geologic time, and of the layers of pre-historic material that is entombed in the Earth's crust. When one scans the ruined sites of pre-history one sees a heap of wrecked maps that upset our present art historical limits. A rubble of logic confronts the viewer as he looks into the levels of the sedimentations. The abstract grids containing the raw matter are observed as something incomplete, broken, shattered."

which simply display the title of the film and the list of final credits, including the name of the filmmaker and the film's locations. This results in a running time of ninety minutes for each film. The 'California Trilogy' is a unified whole: the last shot of the first film, *El Valley Centro*, is also the first shot of *Los*, the second film; the last shot of *Los* is the first shot of the final film of the series, *Sogobi*. And the final shot in *Sogobi* returns us to the first shot in *El Valley Centro*.²³ Benning's films are informed by structuralist film tradition and are uneconomical in a particularly pleasant and compelling way. They make the economies usually involved in viewing film and landscape more noticeable than usual. Benning counts on this, and obviously reckons with it by releasing his films to the cinema (and only to the cinema). Unlike the museum, for instance, the cinema makes it more difficult to escape the images, and each one is viewed in its entirety. His images require an investment of time, as well as attention to the passage of time. Time dominates each perspective of the landscape, which is always entropically (in Robert Smithson's sense of the word) conceived.²⁴

Benning's films might attempt to expose how one's own image of landscape, as well as the collective image of it, is determined by parameters of perception. Instead, they challenge

perception itself, revealing a knowledge of how to demonstrate that perception is constructed by conditional frameworks—assuming, of course, that one understands how to see landscape as a medium, that is, as a space in which time is transported. Even at the moment of filming on location, Benning's images of California become archival recordings in a series; they are not immortalized prospects of a singular landscape that regards itself as a sort of permanent present. Each of the images is already a reconstruction of a previous appropriation, not the representation of a present that is unique to the moment of its recording.²⁵

What he attempts to capture in an image is an impression of landscape that is acquired in an encounter with the place itself and from a particular angle.²⁶ No impression ever arrives and remains all by itself. It is the medium that first provides a historicity for the mediated, serialized impressions. The 'today' of the nineteenth century clearly continues to inform James Benning's images with a certain perspective, and between these two 'todays' are photographs, films, and texts that are archived, told and retold, shown and shown again. Between the 'yesterday' of Benning's images and the 'today' of each presentation and projection in other places, there are new and more recently

seen images, images that have transformed the Californian landscape into a projection surface that remains and will continue to remain a medium called 'California'—one that continues to appear as a single, permanent image despite its factual usage, exploitation, and alteration over the course of time. This medium called 'California' manifests as a permanent projection, a surface for self-renewing claims and views.²⁷ Even Benning's images are part of a catalogue of a California in pictures, which remains the place for the fulfillment of what one thinks one sees in its so-called natural land-

25) The way that various times intersect in film is paradoxical, since the presence maintained in all of the medium's temporality is already past the moment it has been seen; the present always has to be addressed as an event that is already over at the moment it becomes present. It is this experience that first makes it possible to have the essential experience of differentiating between seeing and showing, which in turn makes it possible to recognize the difference between the place where something has been shot (the place of seeing) and the place where it is shown (the place of showing)—the liminal space where the world presents itself to the audience in the present mode.

26) In this respect, it is significant that Benning adds to the uncommented images a soundtrack recorded where the images were filmed. Yet he does not frequently use tracks that have been simultaneously recorded along with the images on screen; instead, he uses remixed tracks with obviously intensified acoustics. Benning's images do not attempt to sell authenticity in their documentation of an individual impression of a place.

scapes, its urban spaces, and its post-urban settlements: the presence of the future as a day-to-day, new, unfulfilled promise, while, in the meanwhile, time passes by untouched. California always seems to be reproducing representations of itself—a landscape consisting of light

27) It might be tempting to assign each of the moving pictures in the trilogy to an image from the extensive archives of California's photographic history, such as the harbor views from Henry A. Hussey's *Bone Yard* (1926), or the many natural monuments photographed by those such as Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, the previously mentioned Eadweard Muybridge, and Carleton E. Watkins, or Dorothea Lange's straight photography, which can be regarded as models for Benning's moving still lifes of landscapes (as documented in, for example, Richard Rodriguez/Sandra Phillips et al [eds.], *Crossing the Frontier. Photographs of the Developing West, 1849 to the Present* [San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996]). Benning's images, however, are extraordinarily filmic, as they reproduce and document the passage of time in the image (the landscape), which is (repeatedly) seen every time the film is projected. This is what makes them significantly different from the photographs; as recordings of moments, photographs depict passages of time, but cannot create an experience of temporality and finality that goes beyond a single moment, while at the same time reflecting their reproduction or their impossibility.

28) Stephanie Barron/Sheri Bernstein/Ilene Susan Fort (eds.), *Reading California: Art, Image, and Identity 1900–2000* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2000).

29) For an account of contemporary photographic images documenting the effects of global trade under new technological conditions, see: Thomas Seelig/Urs Stahel/Martin Jaeggi (eds.), *Trade. Waren, Wege und Werte im Welthandel heute* (Zürich: Scalo, 2001).

and sound—in images, writing, and sound, sustaining an enormous economy by producing reproductions of itself.²⁸ Images of landscape represent a land as something that is coming, but has yet to arrive in other places, including the utopias that have already passed on. These images are in permanent circulation around the world, filled with meanings that are interpreted very differently in different places.

5. From the Inside to the Outside

English language dictionaries first began including the following entry in the 1960s: *container*, derived from the Latin word *continere*, meaning *to hold in* and *to hold together*. The word describes a vessel standardized for the process of speedy and simple global trade.²⁹ It also spells nothing less than the end of the dichotomy between land and sea: "The key technical innovation (...) is the containerization of cargo movement: an innovation pioneered initially by the United States shipping companies in the latter half of the 1950s, evolving into the world standard for general cargo by the end of the 1960s. By reducing loading and unloading time and greatly increasing the volume of cargo in global movement, containerization links peripheries to centers in a novel fashion, making it possible for industries formerly rooted to a center to

become restless and nomadic in their search for cheaper labor. Factories become mobile, ship-like, as ships become increasingly indistinguishable from trucks and trains, and seaways lose their difference with highways. (...) This historical change reverses the 'classical' relationship between the fixity of the land and the fluidity of the sea."³⁰

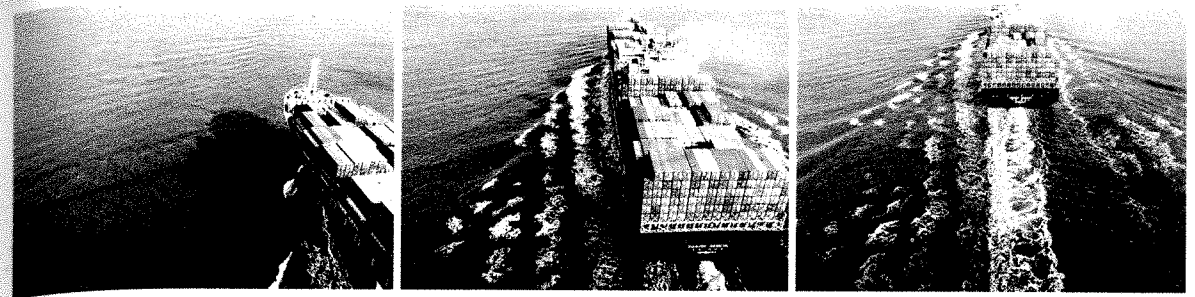
It is the container, an apt neologism, which "made shipping cheap, and by doing so changed the shape of world economy."³¹ In addition, it caused a re-evaluation of the fundamental difference (also previously crucial to a concept of landscape) between land and sea, between stasis and motion, forcing the concept of nature and its metaphorical relationship to change. Through the introduction of a new type of transportation, of all things—a functional, standardized container to transport and store goods, simply intended make the exchange of commodities more efficient—a crucial perspective used in an age-old debate of aesthetic concepts is brought into question: the notion that land and sea must be considered as separate from one another, or that they have to be taken as opposing figures in the visual world (and beyond). This notion must be looked upon with new uncertainty, thanks to a large container moving through space, whose contents are

firmly enclosed and accompanied by shipping papers; a container that must first be opened up and its contents unloaded, so that its contents can be seen with one's own eyes, so that one can decide if one knows what to do with its contents.

When, in this one single image from Benning's trilogy, bridge and ship encounter each other for a brief moment, an encounter of two symbols representing the rapid passage of time also takes place. A first, fleeting look assumes that the stability of the bridge and the

30) Allan Sekula, "Dismal Science: Part 1," in: *Fish Story* (Düsseldorf: Richter, 1995) p. 49.

31) Marc Levison, *The Box. How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 2. In his comprehensive history of container trade that started in 1956 and changed the way trade was carried on around the world, Levison describes the effects of this utilitarian object: "As the container made international transportation cheaper and more dependable, it lowered that barrier [of high transportation costs], decimating manufacturing employment in North American, Western Europe, and Japan, by making it much easier for manufacturers to go overseas in search of low-cost inputs. The labor-intensive assembly will be done in a low-wage country—but there are many low-wage countries." (p. 268) This development left its mark in the landscape: "Container shipping, it is clear, has helped some cities and countries become part of the new global supply chains, while leaving others to the side. It has assisted the rapid economic growth of Korea while offering precious little to Paraguay." (p. 271) Inscribed in the landscape, these histories—of individuals, of cities and harbors—continue to wait for their narrator.



motion of the ship are precise opposites, turning one into an outdated (because immobile) structure and the other into a contemporary mode of transportation. Yet this kind of juxtaposition does not attain the desired certainty of perception, given the fact that film is the medium of its conveyance. Bridge and ship no longer represent standstill and motion, and hence can no longer be regarded as opposing symbols, just as the landscape itself has long lost its symbolic unity. Both bridge and ship are means of transportation, objects to be observed in a time when impressions are acquired and processed, when it no longer seems possible to perceive the landscape itself, except in relation to the ways it is portrayed: as fragmented and constrained by time.

A landscape depicted on film and hence consisting of a series of moving images—as an excerpt from a larger section of the landscape—can be regarded as a consequence of the conditions of transportation and norms of control. Just as the things in the image are *mise en scène*, the framework of the image is motivated by

motifs that are not visible in the image and do not cite other images and texts, motifs that must be ascribed to *container drivers*—whether they are called Marx, Muir, or Benning—when one unpacks their narratives and retells them in one's own words. They could be narratives about manual labor and the laborious task of finding space and time for reading one's own life stories in a world, one might add rather nostalgically, of readers and viewers—and container drivers³²—left without their own time to perceive the ever-changing landscape.

Translated by Allison Plath-Moseley

32) Recommended listening: The Fall, "Container Drivers," released on the album *Grotesques (After the Gramme)* in 1980. This essay, as it appears in a shortened version, is dedicated to Merlene and Richard Samuelian in Fresno/California. Thanks to Fredric Jameson for insightful comments.

James Benning

Edited by
Barbara Pichler and Claudia Slanar

James Benning

"After completing *North an Even* 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 requests, but very workable." *James Benning*

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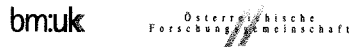
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