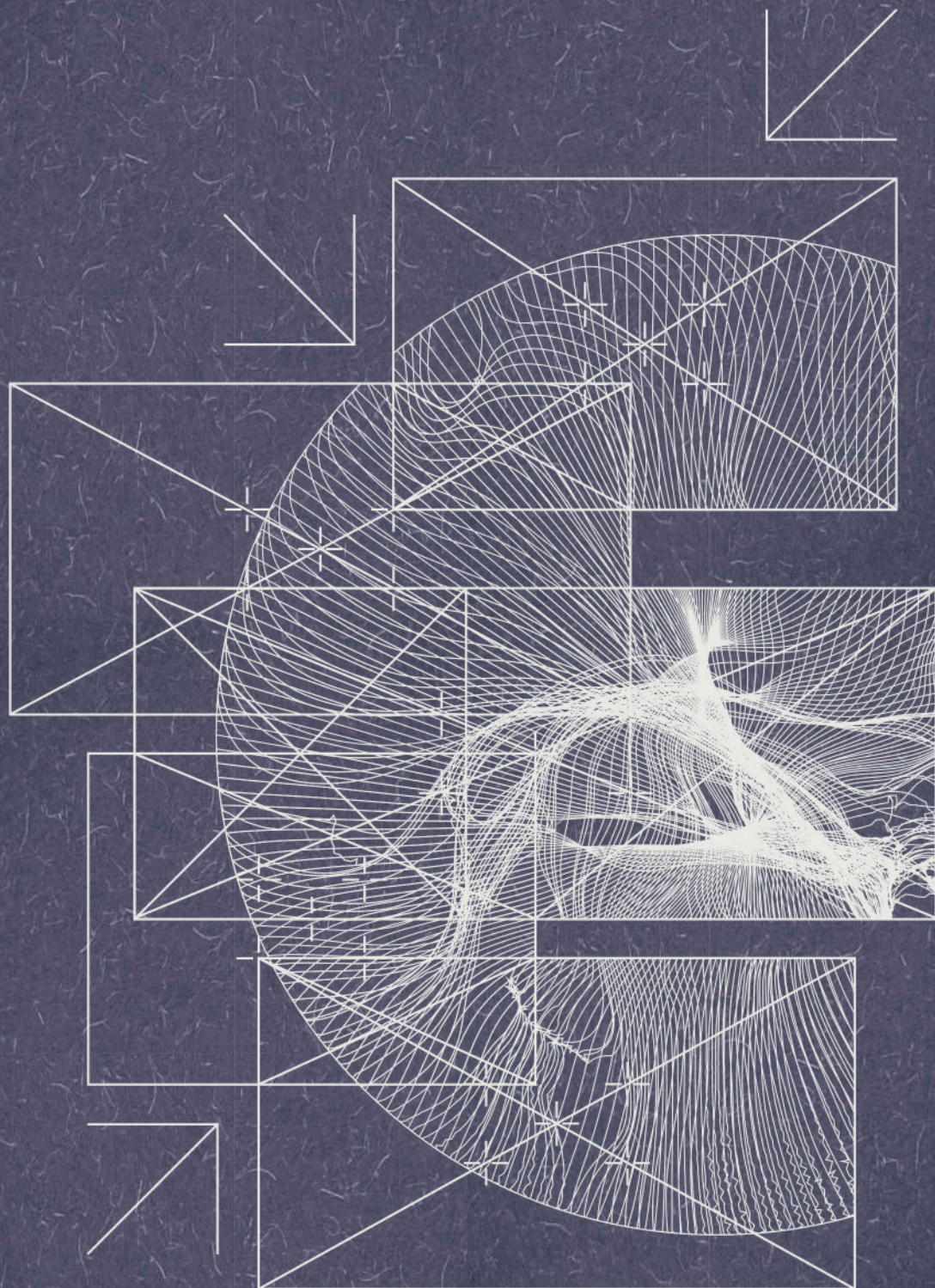


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WANDERING GAZES ON THE SCREEN: THE AMERICAN MATERIAL ENVIRONMENT IN JAMES BENNING'S FILMS

Péter Horányi

ABSTRACT

The experimental filmmaker James Benning has a unique way of approaching American life through a radical film language. My paper addresses the question of how American material culture and design appear in Benning's early work. A recurring feature is his preference for the depiction of landscapes, buildings, objects, and vehicles over human characters that support viewer identification in mainstream documentaries. In the first half of the paper, I present the main stylistic features of Benning's body of work within the context of structural film and documentary filmmaking. Then I provide a detailed analysis of three of his early films: 11 × 14 (1977), American Dreams: Lost and Found (1984) and Landscape Suicide (1986). I show how Benning was able to create a film language with structural experimentations, long takes, and wide shots that offers a perceptual experience that goes against mainstream narrative film and documentary traditions. Overall, the aim of this study is to present how Benning's art provides an epistemological insight into American design and material culture of the 1970s and 1980s.

#material environments #American Midwest #long takes #structural film #experimental documentary

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INTRODUCTION

This study is an analysis of American experimental filmmaker James Benning's films. I seek to answer the question of how the director uses experimental film language to depict the material environment of the American Midwest. This study will detail how his portrayal of American objects and media creates a highly unique experience for the viewer. I will argue that the director uses long takes and wide shots to create an unconventional filmic experience that requires active participation from the viewer, who can often renew their interpretation of the objects depicted in the films.

In the first two sections, I will present Benning's main motifs and stylistic features in the context of structural experimental cinema and documentary filmmaking. I will show how Benning's frequent use of long takes, wide shots, and structural ideas can both break the "dream screen" identification of mainstream cinema and create a type of perceptual experience that allows the viewer to observe the environment in lot more immersive details than they would in commercial cinema.

In the second half of the study, I will analyse three of Benning's films in detail: *11 × 14* (1977), *American Dreams: Lost and Found* (1984), and *Landscape Suicide* (1986). I will illustrate how he creates films with an emphasis on material environments instead of human stories. I have selected these three films because they are the most focused on the design and material environment of America. Benning's other films focus more on agricultural, natural, or urban landscapes. My aim is to show how Benning was able to reconfigure documentary filmmaking within experimental cinema by replacing human stories with a focus on the design of material and media objects.

JAMES BENNING'S STYLE AND RELATION TO STRUCTURAL FILM

James Benning is an American experimental filmmaker who has been making films since the 1970s. He is an extremely prolific artist, who has made over twenty-five feature-length films and several shorts. All his works have similarly distinct and recognisable forms. They are non-narrative, have no protagonists, typically depict everyday Amer-

ican spaces and environments, and are usually filmed in the Midwest. His style is very stripped down, using fixed camera positions and wide shots almost all the time. Benning's films can be considered both structural films and experimental documentaries, although in many ways they exceed these classifications, as we will see in what follows.

The films of James Benning have been often associated with the American "structural film" movement of the 1960s and 1970s—a term first coined by P. Adams Sitney (2002, 347). Structural film was an experimental film tradition where the main focus of filmic language was on a predetermined and often simplified structure and form. Instead of visual sensation that was typical of experimental filmmakers that preceded structuralists (such as Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, or Maya Deren), the primal impression of the structural was not visual content, but the shape of filmic language (Sitney 2002, 348). Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) is one of the best examples of this movement, as this film is a forty-five-minute zoom in on two windows over a period of a week. As the camera zooms in, we occasionally see human movement in the background, but the camera ignores the story element altogether, putting the structure of the film to the fore (Rees 1999, 73). This approach is even more obvious in Snow's *La région centrale* (1971), in which Snow used a camera for twenty-four hours on a robotic arm programmed so that it could not move the same way twice. As the content of the film is solely based on its form, the mountainous landscape remains completely subsidiary to the strange movements of the pre-programmed camera. Due to this, the point of the film is not its documentary value but its own form. Similarly radical structural films include Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity* (1970), which is a recording of a hallway with close-ups and wide shots jumping from one frame to another, and Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* (1966), which consists of a black and a white frame flickering for thirty minutes, creating a nauseating stroboscopic effect (Sitney 2002, 361).

Other structural films do not completely reject the visual content of the recorded images. Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* (1970) is structured around the twenty-four letters of the Latin alphabet with each shot composed of words that appear on street signs, photographed in Manhattan (Weiss 1985, 125–26). Although a rhythmic alphabetical pattern structures the film, it is made from documentary images taken from real life, creating a "city symphony" effect. Similarly, Ernie Gehr's *Side/Walk/Shuttle* (1992) uses extreme camera angles and irregular movements from an elevator moving up and down twenty-four floors to observe San Francisco from a strange and alien perspective (Sitney, 2002, 435–36). These structural films also rely on dominant shapes and their visual content is complementary.

What defines structural film is not a specific style—most recognised filmmakers such as Snow, Frampton, or Gehr all make stylistically

different films—but the reflexivity of these structural experimentations. As A.L. Rees explains, in these cases the viewer's identification with the screen is interrupted, because structural film rejects the cinema of pure vision. In structural film, form becomes the main focus-point, exposing the film apparatus itself (Rees 1999, 72). One of the simplest examples of this is Snow's *Back and Forth* (1969), a film that showcases the mechanics of the camera by making the frame go back and forth at increasing speed, revealing the particularities and limitations of the technique (MacDonald 2018, 17). Andy Warhol's experimental films of the 1960s were major precursors of the reflexivity of structural film and its rejection of dream screen identification (Sitney 2002, 349). His films like *Sleep* (1963) and *Empire* (1964) are extremely long, eventless, static films where the viewer watches a single image (a sleeping person and the Empire State Building) for several hours. When the viewer watches these lengthy and almost still images, they no longer primarily perceive the “visual story” of the film, but rather the film material itself (Sitney 2002, 350–52).

James Benning, who made his debut feature-length film *11 × 14* in 1977, also emphasises structural shapes that predetermine the pace and form of his films, and he was fascinated by the idea of using filmmaking as a means of exploring the film apparatus (MacDonald 2018, 17). His long takes which observe American environments rarely coincide with the filmed event, and follow a mathematical rhythm that is independent from the recorded material (Wahlberg 2008, 95). In his three-part topographical study called “The California Trilogy” containing *El Valley Centro* (1999), *Los* (2000) and *Sobogi* (2001) all three films are exactly eighty-seven minutes long, and have 105 shots, all of which are 150 seconds long, regardless of what happens in the scenes. In the 2000s, he radicalised this approach with even longer scenes and minimalist concepts, often turning from material environments to natural landscapes of America. *13 Lakes* (2004) consists of thirteen shots of lakes, each ten minutes long, and each separated by a black screen. *Ten Skies* (2004) is a series of ten-minute long stationary shots of the sky. For *Ruhr* (2009) he switched to digital technology from 16 mm which allowed him to extend his shots even further. Perhaps his most radical film, *Nightfall* (2012), contains a single ninety-three-minute recording of a forest and the sun going down. His love of symmetry and numbers reflects a sensitivity for structural shapes that dictate the pacing of his films.

James Benning's structuralism is however very different from Michael Snow's, Ernie Gehr's, or the films of Andy Warhol. The pacing of his films does insist on the reflexive predetermination of form, but they never make the content subsidiary to the outline. His typically long, eventless shots and irregular editing rhythms do produce an alienating effect compared to the experience audiences have of com-

¹ For more information on the type of historical and environmental issues that recur in Benning's films, see Lübecker and Rugo (2018).

mercial films, yet at the same time, Benning's experimental approach can provide a very immersive experience of the American environments. He combines predetermined structures with immersive and detailed recordings of American sceneries, where it is very important to watch the scenes with undivided attention in a cinema environment, not as installations (MacDonald 2007). This is a very different attitude to Warhol's approach, where it is pointless to watch the films in their entirety, and it is also different from the radicalism of Michael Snow, for whom the recorded scenery seems irrelevant to the film.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL VALUE OF BENNING'S FILMS: OBSERVING THE AMERICAN ENVIRONMENT WITH WIDE SHOTS AND LONG TAKES

Structural experimentation plays a role in Benning's filmography, however the documentary value of his works is also considerable. While watching Benning's films, we are exposed to a wealth of information on and historical and cultural references to America. We often hear radio broadcasts of political events or observe objects and details that specifically reference a given era of American history. Environmental concerns such as the relation between man and nature are also recurring motifs, while land use activities, forestry, agriculture, and industrial landscapes are some of the typical areas he recorded (Lübecker and Rugo 2018, 5). There is a lot to unfold in his shots both visually and sometimes audibly.¹

Documentary-like observations of everyday reality are an important part of Benning's films. In many ways, he follows the open voiced *direct cinema* documentary tradition as he observes everyday situations and environments without directly intervening or commenting on the events. Benning's camera brings us the moments mostly captured from reality through a direct observation mode (Nichols 2001, 109–15). However, his films abandon the conventional documentary modes of representation, such as narration and explanatory elements. The contrast with the documentary method is particularly striking in his use of sound, especially when the sound does not belong to the images, in effect alienating one from the other. His divergent use of sound does not provide additional information about the images as documentaries tend to, but rather contradicts the images, sometimes ironically or humorously, as is most apparent in *American Dreams: Lost and Found*. Furthermore, Benning sometimes creates scenes in which he re-enacts situations with actors, particularly in *Landscape Suicide*, which also goes against the grain of regular documentary filmmaking.

Although Benning's films are often categorised as "experimental documentaries," this is quite a broad term, and only refers to their lack of narrative yet inclusion of documentary elements. While regular doc-

umentaries rely on expository narration and a somewhat conventional structure to tell a story, the impact of experimental documentaries is achieved through a highly stylised, subjective, and reflexive form. (Renov 1993, 12–36). Experimental film has been intertwined with documentary making since the avant-garde movements of the 1920s and 1930s, which were often attracted to the fusion of the two traditions (MacDonald 2014, 8). However, James Benning does not use highly stylised or poetic film techniques that would make it easy to group him together with classic or contemporary experimental film movements.

In my opinion, James Benning is an experimental documentary maker because he uses an observational documentary technique that provides an almost exclusively perceptual experience into the realities of American material environments. His films create a special type of viewing experience for the audience that does not direct their attention like commercial films do. As every take is lengthy and composed of wide shots, Benning gives the viewer time to observe the details of the depicted imagery. The screen reveals more and more information as we take time to immerse ourselves in the content. Due to the wide and lengthy takes, the lack of narrative and protagonists, we can divide our attention between various parts of the screen and let our gaze wander. In this way we can notice a lot more details than we otherwise would in the environment. In Benning's films the viewer's ability to interpret his films often relies on such a wandering gaze.

To understand the importance of this approach better, in the following film analyses I will explain how Benning's long takes, wide shots, and the wandering gaze help the viewer to immerse in the design environment of 1980s America. I have chosen *11 × 14* (1977), *American Dreams: Lost and Found* (1984) and *Landscape Suicide* (1986) because these three films have many scenes where design and material objects are depicted.

A SELF-REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION OF AMERICAN DESIGN AND MATERIAL CULTURE: *11 × 14* (1977)

11 × 14 (the title refers to the 11:14 aspect ratio of the film) is James Benning's debut feature-length film separated into sixty-five takes, all of which depict urban or agricultural environments. The way the film begins by shifting the focus from people and human interaction to the surrounding objects epitomises the pacing and the general approach of the film perfectly. In the very first shot, we see a couple standing in the middle of the pavement, then suddenly a car approaches blocking their view while a train also passes by in the background. Our focus shifts from the hugging couple to the vehicle now in the middle of the frame, which the camera observes in detail. The next shots of the film also show people in their environment either going on their

² For more on experimental documentaries, see MacDonald (2014).

way or casually doing something in the background, which tricks the audience into thinking that a narrative of some sort is about to begin, but Benning always interrupts the development of a narrative and turns the camera's focus to the surrounding environment. In *11 x 14*, we see a constant stream of everyday objects, mostly cars, billboards, and buildings, with ordinary people going about their business. We automatically try to discern the stories of these observed people, but Benning turns our attention away to the environment, showing the design of the houses, the cars, and the furnishings in lengthy detail. In Benning's world, ordinary people are surrounded by huge inanimate objects (fig. 1).

FIGURE 1. In *11 x 14*, the focus of the camera is always on the environment not the people. The lengthy wide shot helps us to immerse in the details of the place. Source: Österreichisches Filmmuseum.



Benning's mode of observation is highly unconventional. In one scene we see the kitchen of an average American family, with one member of the couple smoking a cigarette at the table while the wife does the dishes and a shadowy figure gets dressed in the background. Traditional documentary film would focus on human action, but in Benning's film the characters slowly walk out of the frame and the camera then pans slowly through the empty and uneventful kitchen (fig. 2). We might expect that once the characters have left the sequence would end, so this extended shot in the kitchen interrupts our immersion in the scene and makes us realise that we are perceiving something different than we expected. Benning's pacing is not determined by the action of the human figures. Without narrative information, the audience begins to focus on the visual information of the environment instead. In another scene, we see a lesbian couple lying naked in bed for several minutes. In the background, a Bob Dylan song plays from vinyl. This scene does not reveal much about the characters either, however

it does give the audience a lot of time to examine the material environment surrounding them. Again, this change of focus created by the extended shot shifts the viewer's attention from human stories to objects.



FIGURE 2. *American kitchen in 11 × 14.*
Source: Österreichisches Filmmuseum.

This change of attention occurs in many scenes in *11 × 14*. There are several scenes where it seems as if something is happening because people are doing something, but Benning's camera never focuses on such an event, but rather on the material world around the people. From this perspective, one of the most expressive scenes is of a human silhouette sitting on a train, surrounded by the landscape that flies by through the surrounding windows. By continually alienating the viewer with this shift of focus, the viewer begins to look at the material world from a new perspective, one with a heightened attention to objects and an observation of details that would not be considered important in a traditional documentary.

A very important recurring motif in the film is modern vehicles, since people are constantly on the move. Benning's images depict an accelerated modern civilisation, rich in external stimuli, constantly besieged by information overload. Benning often uses multi-layered compositions to convey the complexity of the world and the different visual stimuli that simultaneously affect people. Billboards are a very important part of the focus of the film (fig. 3). In the film, we see a lot of long takes of alcohol or cigarette ads, and Coca-Cola billboards and neon signs positioned so that they are visible from the highway by passing cars. Benning's long takes make us look at these billboards for much longer than the people driving on the highway. In other words, the film provides a perspective on these ads that contradicts their design principle. An advertisement is designed to be noticed by a pas-

ser-by for a fleeting moment, burned into their memory in an instant. However, by showing these advertisements for an extended period of time, Benning's long takes shift the focus from people to objects, and we are able to examine the billboards in much more detail than they were designed to be. With this change in the object of perception (from narrative element to visual component) it is possible for the viewer to examine the image more closely. The human figures in 11×14 seem to be unconsciously passing by in this depicted world, and the camera creates a focus in which we are consciously aware of the surrounding material world and its intense effects. Benning thus combines a documentary vision with an experimental form to create a cinematic experience that allows us to view the material world with a critical eye.

The wandering gaze of the spectator also changes our interpretation of some of the designed objects in 11×14 . As Dagmar Steffen says, the interpretation of a designed object varies considerably depending on the context in which it is placed (2013, 59). I believe Benning's usage of long takes alters the context in which objects were meant to be viewed, introducing a type of perception that is very different from how we look at these objects in everyday life. As a consequence of our recurring, long-term exposure to advertising products we notice how they are but facades for consumerism. When we see Coca-Cola and cigarette billboards in 11×14 , their underlying ideology come to the fore, while the narrative information of the advertisement is secondary. Thus, the extended shots not only promote contemplation but actually offer an epistemological insight into what these images actually are. We can see that Benning uses a documentary filmmaking method where he draws attention to social issues through observation not narration.

FIGURE 3. Billboard in 11×14 . Source: Österreichisches Filmmuseum.



HOW DOCUMENTING BECOMES A SENSATIONAL EXPERIENCE: *AMERICAN DREAMS: LOST AND FOUND* (1984)

Benning's film *American Dreams: Lost and Found* (the title refers to the novel written by Studs Terkel of the same name from 1980) was made between *11 × 14* and *Landscape Suicide* and stands out from the director's films because it contains no moving images at all. The "pre-determined and simplified" structure that Sitney attributes to structural films in general is very noticeable here (Sitney 2002, 347). The film, like a museum wall, displays American baseball memorabilia from 1954 to 1976, accompanied by radio broadcasts and handwritten diary entries by Arthur Bremmer, the man who tried to assassinate US presidential candidate George Wallace in 1972 (fig. 4). *American Dreams* perfectly showcases the unique cinematic language that Benning uses to transform information into a perceptual experience in his films.



FIGURE 4. One of the many Baseball cards we observe in detail in *American Dreams: Lost and Found*. Source: Österreichisches Filmmuseum.

Like *11 × 14*, *American Dreams* also focuses on the sensory effects of the material objects. There is so much text in *American Dreams*, it is impossible to absorb all the information projected onto the screen. The film does not provide a narrative about the historical or cultural context of these materials, instead it focuses on the design of their visual appearance. When watching the film, we stop reading all the material after a while and the graphic design rises above the content, thereby beginning the shift away from information to sensory experience. This is how design comes to the fore while the "narrative elements" of the object recede. Similarly, as in *11 × 14*, we start to observe the design of the images: how the cards looked in the eighties,

what style they were edited in. *American Dreams* does not use mainstream narrative methods to explain details of eighties object culture, but rather brings the atmosphere of the era to life through an array of various artefacts. The objects “speak for themselves,” reflecting a period whose style showcased an obsession with materialism. Therefore, the documentary value of the film is still considerable, only it is without a directed attention, as Benning lets us observe these objects with a wandering gaze.

What Dagmar Steffen says about the interpretation of a designed object varying depending on the context in which it is placed, is also relevant here (Steffen 2013, 59). When we see such memorabilia in a structural film context, their recurring characteristics come to the fore. We start to notice their patterns and visual messages which many times seem to revolve around masculinity and consumerism. We can see that Benning uses a structural shape to help us notice these details. Furthermore, the images in the film are accompanied by loosely related audio recordings, such as political commentaries, news reports, and other radio broadcasts from around the time the film was made. Benning does not want to provide general information about the objects and the time period, but to give an eclectic associative experience of the atmosphere of the era. We do not see these objects in their regular environment and the lack of an explicitly related audio track enhances this effect.

DECONSTRUCTION OF THE CRIME DOCUMENTARY: *LANDSCAPE SUICIDE* (1986)

Landscape Suicide continues the experimental nature of the previous films, but what is new here is that Benning was influenced by investigative documentaries and the film even has a semi-cohesive narrative throughout. *Landscape Suicide* recounts two murders that happened thirty years apart: The first part of the film is based on the murder of Kirsten Coasts, who was stabbed by her high-school friend Bernadette Protti in Northern California in early 1894. The second half is based on the homicides committed by Ed Gein in Wisconsin in 1957. What is unique about the film is that it is an experimental film embedded in the framework of an investigative documentary. Its primary focus is not on uncovering the story but on mapping the environment and the material world in which the incidents took place.

Benning employs actors to re-enact the defendants' confessional testimonies. This approach is surprisingly reminiscent of educational documentaries, but Benning also presents these scenes in a way that does not make them seem like a traditional talking head interview. At one point in Bernadette Prutti's interview, the actor playing the girl gets up and walks off the set while the camera keeps rolling and pans

the wall behind the girl until she returns. This scene is similar in approach to the kitchen scene in *11 × 14* where the departure of the human characters from the scene results a change of attention for the viewer. The film often provides long extended shots of the buildings, roads, and neighbourhoods that were somehow related to the murders, such as the sheriff's department where Prutti was held as a suspect, but it does not provide much context about these environments. Therefore, what the viewer obtains from these scenes is not so much the circumstances of the incidents but rather the look and design of the environments that surrounded these events.



FIGURE 5. Scene from *Landscape Suicide*.
Source: Österreichisches Filmmuseum.

In other scenes, the film moves away from storytelling altogether, and in these episodes, experimentation with cinematic language comes to the fore. In the very first scene, we see a shot of a man playing tennis for such an extended period of time that it completely loses its narrative value and we are no longer watching a story of a man playing tennis, but the shape of his movement, the design of the tennis racket, and the sound of the racket hitting the ball. Once again, the images are stripped of their narrative and become solely visual experiences. In *Landscape Suicide* there is an emphasis on the way we see people in their everyday material environment. In one scene, a young woman makes a long phone call while lying on her bed, but music playing from a vinyl record prevents us from making out what she is saying (fig. 5). The viewer is thus drawn not to the topic of the telephone conversation itself, but to the materials found around the girl, the design of the record player, the books on her bed, the shape of her dress, and the design of the curtains, with such a level of detail that a conventional narrative documentary would not

be able to achieve. In another scene we see an elderly lady dancing in her living room. This episode is in the neighbourhood where one of the murders took place and only incidentally related to the murder investigation. The scene, as always, is filmed in a wide shot, so the focus is not primarily on the dancing, but on the material world around the lady: the lamp, the curtains on the armchair and the radio playing the music (fig. 6). As in *11 × 14*, in *Landscape Suicide* we get to observe many locations with long extended shots, where the ordinary person would otherwise pass quickly or not pay much attention: streets, highways, gas stations, liminal spaces that are momentarily experienced by someone passing through. As a viewer, we are often waiting to see how the film will further develop the story, endow us with a sense of readiness and we look more deeply at the scenes to see if they reveal something relevant to the case. Benning directs the gaze of the audience to the atmosphere, vehicles, clothing, and house decorations of the material culture of the time.

FIGURE 6. *Observing the design environment in Landscape Suicide.*
Source: Österreichisches Filmmuseum.



CONCLUSION

My analysis of the three films has led me to the conclusion that the unconventional documentary style, the long takes, and the structural shape of Benning's films has three loosely connected basic effects on the viewer. 1: Due to the long takes, the viewer notices more details in the design and material objects than they would in a film where their attention is absorbed in the development of a narrative. 2: The long takes do not necessary provide the viewer with knowledge, but they do establish a general atmosphere and mood of an environment. 3: The structural experimentations alert the viewer to

the film apparatus and this contributes to a watching experience very different than with a regular documentary. All this results in a more self-aware and critical viewing experience. These films do not merely observe reality in detail but provide a view that goes beyond the intended meaning of the observed objects. Benning uses this structural technique to stimulate social criticism.

I have shown that Benning's films are in many ways at odds with traditional documentary filmmaking, but nevertheless paint a vivid picture of American reality. Through my analysis of *11 × 14*, I have shown that with long takes, the viewer begins to observe in depth the design of objects not designed to be viewed for long periods of time, such as billboards that are located next to a highway. Through my analysis of *American Dreams: Lost and Found*, I discussed how Benning presents various objects (in this case, diary entries and baseball memorabilia) by focusing on their design and style rather than their informational value. The peculiarity of Benning's documentary method is that he is much more concerned with the mood and sensory experience of the design of objects than the information associated with them. Lastly, through my analysis of *Landscape Suicide*, I pointed out that by deconstructing the investigative documentary genre, he creates a film where the audience does not focus on solving the case but on a sensory exploration of its material environment. The focus is not on the investigation, but on the mood and atmosphere of the environment in which the incidents took place.

Finally, the way Benning shows the American environment in these films is unique. The long shots affect the viewer's perceptual experience in such a way that each landscape, house, billboard, or vehicle filmed is endowed with specific qualities. When we spend minutes looking at ordinary homes, ordinary cars, or even ordinary American furniture in *Landscape Suicide* or *11 × 14*, each filmed object begins to transcend the ordinary and starts to have personal characteristics, every object becomes particular, a personal, unique, and self-identical thing. Benning presents a very intimate, personal, and museum-like perspective on these American worlds.

Overall, my aim with this article was to show a documentary method that does not seek to explore reality through clear storytelling and educational content, but rather to offer a new perceptual experience on it which does not direct our attention as commercial films do. Benning uses long takes to let our gazes wander across the screen notice details we otherwise would not. There are very few documentaries that so decisively play with time.³ Benning's films are stripped down, devoid of any external narrative elements, yet they engage with one of the most fundamental sensations that we can perceive: the passage of time.

³ For documentaries with similar attitudes towards time, see Peter Hutton's films, such as *At Sea* (2007) and *Three Landscapes* (2013), Viktor Kosakovskiy's *Aquarela* (2018) and Gunda (2020) or Daniel Zimmermann's *Walden* (2018).

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