

# *13 ways of looking at a lake*

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## 13 Ways of Looking at a Lake

Alison Butler

There is a strong affinity between landscape and contemplation, grounded in the very ambiguity of landscape as a term that signifies both a place *and* a view or representation of a place, and reinforced by the Romantic tradition that links certain landscapes to the experience of spiritual transcendence. Landscape is land shaped by or for a human gaze. In paintings and photographs viewers are invited to contemplate vistas in their own time; films, by virtue of their medium, incorporate this duration within themselves. Perhaps it is for this reason that the long take has become a staple in the formal repertoire of filmmakers concerned with the particularities of place, including Abbas Kiarostami, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Michaelangelo Frammartini, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Chantal Akerman and James Benning.

The landscape films of James Benning, especially those made since the mid-1990s, undertake a sustained exploration of the use of the long take – combined with the fixed frame – to depict “place over time” or “landscape as a function of time.”<sup>1</sup> In some of Benning's films, shot length is determined by the subject, such as the passing trains in *RR* (2007); others are structured by a predetermined shot length, which, over the body of his work has lengthened progressively – one minute in *One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977), two and a half minutes in *El Valley Centro* (1999), *Los* (2001) and *Sogobi* (2002), ten minutes in *13 Lakes* (2004) and *Ten Skies* (2004), rising after his conversion to digital to 98 minutes in *Nightfall* (2012) and 193 minutes in *BNSF* (2013). Benning's use of the static long take of predetermined length, especially in his

last decade of analogue filmmaking, could be described as a *dispositif* in the sense elaborated by Adrian Martin (drawing on Luc Moullet, Raymond Bellour and others): both a conceit and a machine, and above all, a conceptual disposition (Martin, 2011). What makes the notion of *dispositif* more suggestive than the ‘structural’ label normally applied to Benning’s method is the implied presence of a social apparatus that includes the cinema spectator’s experience as a form of subjectivisation. To this heterogeneous ensemble might be added the culture of landscape itself, as it manifests in the U.S.A., including the myth of the wilderness, National Parks and Indian Reservations, landscape painting and transcendental poetry, westerns and road movies. Landscape is itself a medium, as outlined here by W.J.T. Mitchell:

Landscape as a cultural medium thus has a double role with respect to something like ideology: it naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site. (Mitchell, 2002: 2).

A *dispositif* involving the long take and landscape will thus be concerned not only with attention or contemplation but also with position and location.

An interest in American landscapes can be traced back through Benning’s films to his earliest work, including documentaries about place, *Four Corners* (1998) and *Deseret* (1995), and personal road movies, *North on Evers* (1992) and *The United States of America* (with Bette Gordon, 1975). In all of these films Benning seems to be concerned, in some measure, with situating himself *as an American*. A telling early work, the two-minute film *A to B* (1976), shows a close-up view of a sheet of paper in

a manual typewriter, on which hands type a group of letters ('AAABCEE EFH IILMRTTUU') in ever-changing combinations, which, for a couple of seconds only resolve into the phrase 'AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL'. Born into patriotic times, Benning has become progressively more detached from mainstream American ideology while retaining a deep attachment to many aspects of American culture. A recent video, *Data Entry* (2014) reprises the image of hands typing incomprehensible combinations of letters, although in this instance the encoded text is from the journals of the libertarian eco-terrorist Theodore Kaczynski. Meanwhile, in the same year that this video was made, *13 Lakes* was added the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress, as part of the film heritage of the U.S.A.

*13 Lakes* is composed of 13 static ten-minute shots of lakes, separated by black leader and followed by white on black titles giving the names of the lakes. Benning's original plan was to film the 13 largest lakes in the USA, although this was revised to introduce more variety in the character of the lakes.<sup>2</sup> The national frame of reference implicit in this conception is not presented as a conscious choice, nor is it questioned (it would have been easy enough to cross the border and film in Mexico or Canada, but this appears not to have been considered). The lakes themselves, however, do not represent an idealized wilderness, the historic projection of manifest destiny – this much is clear from the intentional inclusion of two lakes created by human interventions in the landscape, the Salton Sea and Lake Powell (both resulting from the diversion of water from the Colorado River, the former accidentally, as a result of mismanaged irrigation, the latter intentionally, as a reservoir). On the other hand, the absence of any explicit ecological critique undercuts the notion that the film might be an environmental tract. The distribution of the lakes around the country suggests the

idea of a journey, but the order in which they appear in the film does not make sense as a single itinerary (and in fact the making of the film entailed many journeys, including some redundant trips and some repeat visits). If there is a road movie lurking in the interstices of *13 Lakes*, it is consigned to the brief intervals of black leader between shots, breaks that elide passages of space and time far greater than those contained in the film. Although fragments of larger stories are discernible in the film there is no systematic narrative organization in *13 Lakes*.

The major decisions taken by Benning are not narrative or thematic but formal and compositional: having chosen each lake for its individual qualities, he shot them all in the exact same way, with the feet of the tripod at the water's edge, and the camera aimed at the horizon so that it bisects the frame, creating a symmetrical composition that is half water and half sky. As he has explained:

It's kind of being democratic to the image in this film, that all the images are going to be the same. That was my initial problem that I set up for myself, to create these identical frames and then try to find something in them that would give you a uniqueness from each lake.<sup>3</sup>

The notion of a democratic disposition of images as equal but different implies a political rationale for the film's aesthetic choices – a politics of composition based on the balance of elements within the frame - but the organization of the image around the fixed axis of the horizon line also points emphatically to the implied viewpoint outside the frame. As Michael Newman puts it, in a discussion of the work of another landscape artist, Tacita Dean:

The horizon is that limit in relation to which we are situated, and against which things appear to us as the things that they are, at a certain distance. It has a

literal sense in the experience of perception, and a metaphorical sense in our practices of interpretation, connecting the two. (Newman, 2001: 25)

In Western artistic tradition, the horizon is inextricably linked with a singular point of view, often described in philosophical terms as that of the 'transcendental subject.'

The *dispositif* of *13 Lakes* thus combines an intentionally simplistic schema for representing the world 'democratically' with established conventions in Western art that are imbued with notions of mastery and propriety.

Benning has described the shots in his film as “found paintings” (Smith, 2005), indicating a degree of art historical consciousness in his engagement with landscape representation. While the meanings of water in American landscape art have changed radically over time, its compositional importance has been a constant. In nineteenth century painting, it features as both “a contemplative idea” and “a compositional device marrying sky and ground by bringing the balm of light down to the earth.” (Novak, 2007: 36). In the pictures taken by Ansel Adams in National Parks in the 1930s and 1940s, the magnitude of large bodies of water, along with their lucid and sensuous surfaces, makes them the perfect form to express the grandeur and purity of nature in the medium of photography. More recently, the photographer Richard Misrach, known for his large-scale colour pictures, has used compositional virtuosity in images of water to draw attention to the devastating pollution caused by the petrochemical industry along the Mississippi River. The shot composition in *13 Lakes* draws on these precursors if not always their values. The wide angle (10mm) lens used to take in the view adds distance and depth of field to the shot and brings the foreground sharply into focus. Combined with sound recorded at the water’s edge, this generates a strong sense of immediacy as well as distance. With added

movement, the film recreates the wonder of early cinema – the cinema screen resembles a tank half full of water.

The film begins (at Jackson Lake, as we subsequently learn) with a scenic view that meets all conventional expectations (shot at a location popular with professional and amateur painters). It shows the dawn light coming up from behind a mountain range, which, emerging from silhouetted darkness into daylight, casts glowing reflections in the rippling water below. Although the geographical horizon runs across the middle of the frame, the mountains break the horizontal symmetry and soften the composition. Initially austere beautiful, as the view floods with gorgeous colour it becomes almost overwhelmingly so. In marked contrast, the second shot (Moosehead Lake) is of a pewter grey lake under a dull sky. The clouds and their reflections shift around a little, and a scattering of raindrops pockmarks the surface of the water. The early placement of this, one of the least pictorially interesting shots in the film, clearly communicates the suggestion that landscape need not be dramatic or conventionally beautiful to deserve our attention. Amongst the other shots, the twelfth (Crater Lake) is the most vividly picturesque, with a limpid reflection of the sky and the wooded slopes around the lake making for almost perfect symmetry. Reflections in landscape art are suggestive of a propensity for nature to form images of itself, which Mitchell argues “certifies the reality of our own images” (Mitchell, 2002: 15), but can equally be seen as evidence of illusionistic play within reality itself, as seems to be the case in this instance.

This illusionistic play is also evident in the film’s engagement with perspective. The lakes are presented directly without obstruction to the view or objects positioned to

lead the eye into illusionistic space (and where objects such as boats move in the frame, they do so laterally). In most shots perspective is established through the cumulative effects of multiple small cues, such as waves on the water or birds in the air, which gives it a tenuous hold on the image. Brian O'Doherty has argued that 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century landscape paintings in which “atmosphere and color eat away at the perspective” are poised on the cusp of abstraction:

Landscape is the progenitor of a translucent mist that puts perspective and tone/color in opposition, because implicit in each are opposite interpretations of the wall they hang on. Pictures begin to appear that put pressure on the frame. [...] What is left is an ambiguous surface partly framed from the inside by the horizon. Such pictures (by Courbet, Caspar David Friedrich, Whistler and hosts of little masters) are posed between infinite depth and flatness and tend to read as pattern (O'Doherty, 1986: 19).

While the optics of the camera inscribe perspective into the film (any film), Benning's compositions play with readings of depth and flatness, figuration and abstraction. In the tenth shot (Lake Iliamna), depth cues and flat pattern are placed in direct competition, as blowing snow draws perspectival lines over the icy waters, while the sky, mountains and lake appear as striated bands of grey, broken by a startling seam of turquoise, almost like a colour field painting. In the eighth shot (Lake Ponchartrain), perspectival play is medium-specific: the causeway (the world's second longest bridge over water) is lined up along the horizon, gradually diminishing in size towards the vanishing point, and the cars driving along it seem to appear from – and disappear into – the grain of the film. At the practical limits of the medium of 16mm, the film gestures towards possibilities other than realistic representation.



These effects unfold across the shot's duration, and one way of understanding the series of lake compositions is as variations on the theme of change in time. All the shots include the movement and sound of the water, and many show subtle alterations in the light or weather conditions. A number of the shots seem to depict an event of some kind, but also to question what might count as an event. In the third shot (Salton Sea), jet skis race back and forth across the screen, making white foam trails that run parallel to the horizon and a rippling wake that runs up to the front of the frame. In the fourth shot (Lake Superior), a huge freighter comes into port, and passes slowly off screen, moving in close parallel to the harbour walls, which are aligned with the horizon; in the foreground, icy brown water heaves as the ship passes. The long take enables us to see the ship's effects on its surroundings, as the water registers its movement far away and long after it has passed. (The lake also affects ships, as Benning has explained: this freighter is apparently identical to the SS Edmund Fitzgerald, which sank with all hands in a storm in the winter of 1975.) While it is tempting to read the film anthropocentrically in the light of these human passages through the landscape, other shots point to the relative unimportance of humans in the overall ecology; the swooping birds that seem to dance with their reflections in the ninth shot (Great Salt Lake) are no less interesting than humans in the landscape; in the eleventh shot (Lake Powell), a pleasure boat crossing the water in the distance appears less significant than the shadow which gradually covers the lake, completely transforming its appearance. The distinctively coloured Utah sandstone evokes a geological timescale against which human activities barely register at all.

The organization of shots seems designed to keep surprising the viewer, establishing expectations with regard to the nature of events, and then undercutting them. An event

might be a human activity or a natural process, the movement of objects or a change in the light, a visible occurrence or an audible one; in the fifth shot (Lake Winnebago) the most significant variable is birdsong, and in the sixth (Lake Okeechobee) it is the noise made an off-screen train, measuring its length in sound as it passes by. There are also non-events, as in the case of a distant thunderstorm in the seventh shot (Lower Red Lake), which seems as if it might approach, but remains on the horizon (patience, in this instance, is not rewarded). In the final shot (Lake Oneida) a sombre sky above a dark lake implies that it is late in the day, but the light barely changes in ten minutes, and the waves suggest ceaseless movement rather than conclusion: the lack of a clearly delineated ‘event’ in this shot seems intentionally to signal the film’s limitations in relation to the scale, both temporal and spatial, of its subject. The *dispositif* of the static camera and the ten-minute take isolates relatively small slices of space and time, but also acknowledges a world outside its frame and duration, off-screen space and time.

The question of what can be seen in landscape images is a vexed one. For Henry David Thoreau, the beauty of a lake was precisely *ahistorical*:

Nothing so fair, so pure, and at the same time so large, as a lake, perchance, lies on the surface of the earth. Sky water. It needs no fence. Nations come and go without defiling it. (Novak 2007: 36)

This way of seeing landscape, in painting and photography, has been under vigorous criticism from art historians and cultural geographers since the 1970s. Rebecca Solnit talks about “the huge problem of landscape imagination in America” which under “the sinister auspices of the environmental movement – John Muir, Ansel Adams,” envisions a natural world without human inhabitants, erasing the history of its native

population (Gaudio *et al*, 2008: 98). Contemporary artists have responded to this problem by making images which include industrial structures, environmental devastation and military installations (Richard Misrach and Trevor Paglen, for instance) and by making work based on the experience of inhabitation – human and animal - rather than landscape vision (some of the National Film Board of Canada’s interactive documentaries). There persists, through all this work, a tension between visible beauty and legible history, the problem of seeing past surface appearances. In some of his films, Benning addresses this by using voice-over in counterpoint to the images; in *Deseret* (1995) a male voice reads articles about Utah from the *New York Times* in chronological order over landscape shots timed to the length of the journalists’ sentences; in *Stemple Pass* (2012), Benning himself reads from the writings of Theodore Kaczynski, over bucolic images of a cabin in the woods (the filmmaker’s replica of the terrorist’s Montana home). In *13 Lakes*, however, the soundtrack includes only field recordings taken at each of the locations, and although Benning is inventive in constructing sound-image relationships, even the most telling of these can do no more than point beyond the film to the site’s specific history and ecology. The gunshots that are heard on the soundtrack of the shot of Crater Lake are a case in point: as the lake is a sacred site for the Klamath tribe, target practice is sacrilegious (not to mention the other, more violent possibilities evoked by gunshots in cinema), but its enclosure in a National Park takes it out of the tribe’s control. By including the sound of the shots in the film, Benning indicates the contested history of the land, but does not give information about this in the film.

If the duration of the long take is insufficient to reveal the natural and historical complexity of the lakes, then it may have another purpose. Its function is not to reveal

the essence of the place depicted, but to disclose the looking relations between viewer and view. With relatively little change in each of the shots, the viewer's relationship to the film is likely to shift over their duration. As each new shot requires us to reorient ourselves, we are drawn into the represented space, an invisible guest on the shore of the lake. But as the time unreels our identification with the camera begins to come undone. Both the slowness of the film and its playful search for new ways to mark the passage of time direct the spectator's attention to its maker, forcefully reminding us of our absence from the world of the film. Our attention is drawn to the fact that we are not looking directly at landscape, but that it is being shown to us, and that it has been selected and framed by Benning. The viewer's absorption thus pivots on the figure of the author, who commutes an authentic experience of landscape into a contemplative film experience. If our attention wanders from the screen, we are distanced further, and find ourselves back in the cinema, shifting in our seats as fleeting thoughts of our own momentarily displace the images in front of us. This tension between presence and absence explains the film's melancholy lyricism, the loss of presence implicit in film spectatorship echoing the loss of presence implicit in looking at landscape. With its traveller's point of view, the film evokes feelings of longing, not belonging. But this just reinforces what Jean-Luc Nancy says about all landscapes being the space of strangeness: "It is not so much the imitative representation of a given location as the presentation of a given absence of presence." (Nancy, 2005: 59).

The contemplative gaze can be traced back to the earliest films, according to Charles Musser, who finds evidence for this phenomenon in the marketing of Edison films such as *Patterson Falls* (1896), *American Falls from Above*, *American Side* (1896)

and *Waterfall in the Catskills* (1897). The prominence of water and landscape as themes in these films leads Musser, via Michael Fried's theorization of absorption, to Diderot's thoughts on the contemplation of nature and natural scenes in painting.

Glossing Diderot's account of the viewer's reverie, Fried writes:

In that state of mind and body a wholly passive receptivity becomes a vehicle of an apprehension of the fundamental beneficence of the natural world; the subject's awareness of the passage of time, and, on occasion, of his very surroundings may be abolished; and he comes to experience a pure and intense sensation of the sweetness and as it were the self-sufficiency of his own existence. (Musser, 2006: 162)

Noting that exhibition practices of the time included showing films on screens enclosed in ornate picture frames, Musser concludes: "Such films evoked (when they did not actually quote) a long and rich genre of American painting and mobilized a new medium for a similar spectatorial response" (Musser, 2006: 163). This mode of spectatorship is premised on the same sense of immediacy as the Cinema of Attractions: the so-called 'train effect', whereby a realistic spectacle provokes a visceral response, but instead of piling on more shocks and attractions, it allows the spectator to settle into calm contemplation. The contradictions in this mode of spectatorship resemble those in the experience of watching *13 Lakes*: impressions of immediacy and estrangement, proximity and distance, are combined, in a work simultaneously 'framed' as an art object and a view of the real world. The spectator experiences, successively, I would suggest, rather than simultaneously, a feeling of absorption in the image and a strong sense of themselves (the "self-sufficiency" described by Fried/Diderot). From Musser's account it would seem that these contradictions are all already there in contemplative spectatorship in 1896, but by

extending the length of the take to ten minutes and creating a *dispositif* which reproduces this gaze as a series of repetitions with differences, Benning develops its potential and opens it to examination.

There is something performative in this staging of the act of looking, indicative of a less obvious context for *13 Lakes*: as well as invoking traditional forms of landscape representation, it is informed by contemporary conceptual art practices. The film recalls a conceptual photographic project, *Seascapes*, by Hiroshi Sugimoto, a series of large-format photographs of seas all over the world, taken by the artist on his travels since 1980 and numbering more than 200. Sugimoto invariably places the horizon line in the centre of the frame, assigning equal space to water and sky. The resulting pictures are an exercise in sameness and difference. In a Lacanian reading of these photographs, Parveen Adams writes:

The sea exists as though at the moment before it is seen, before representation, and at the same time, the gaze in its spread-out function, the gaze as that which allows the sea to be sea. Sugimoto catches the moment of the birth of subject and object. Subject and object are poised at the edge of the narrative that will both divide and link them. (Adams, 2006: 98).

Sugimoto himself describes the photographs as enactments of our separation from the world by language: “with the *Seascapes*, I was thinking about the most ancient of human impressions. The time when man first named the world around him...” (Adams, 2006: 97). This act of naming, in *13 Lakes*, is carried out literally at the end of the film, but deferred until then in order to give primacy to perception. Both projects stage the separation of subject and object, viewer and view, as a moment of (compulsive) repetition, but the durational dimension of *13 Lakes* enables the film to

show this moment as a process, in continuous tension with an opposing desire for connection.

Contemporary land artists have attempted to engage with the experience of being in a place by considering the process of making work, and not just its end product or documentation, as the work. For example, Richard Long's *A Line Made By Walking* (1967) consists not just of the photograph Long made of a straight line of well-trodden grass, but also of the bodily action which made it, and its ephemeral trace in an English field. In this spirit, we might count the innumerable journeys and extensive research and preparation that went into *13 Lakes* as a kind of conceptual practice of land interpretation, of which the film is only one outcome, albeit the most tangible. The most performative aspect of the film, however, is its projection and the demands that this makes on an audience. Around the time that it was made, Benning started to refer to his films as "installations for cinema", a formulation quite close to the notion of a *dispositif*, but one that imposes its discipline on the audience rather than the artist. For the cumulative effect of the film to be achieved, the audience is required to abide by the unwritten cinematic contract, staying in their seats until the end of the screening. Some refuse: at the Tribeca Film Festival screening of *13 Lakes* in 2005 around half the audience walked out before the end, to which Benning responded, "those are the people who like movies." (Gottlieb, 2006). Ironically, it may be those with the greatest interest in the world outside the cinema who remain, "hypnotized by a distance" (Barthes, 1986: 349).

The landscape traditions that Benning engages with in *13 Lakes* are intricately involved with the historical redefinition of human subjectivity and with the

relationship of the modern subject to the surrounding world. As Alan Wallach explains:

The Western landscape tradition centers on a subject-object relation that can be described in terms of antithetical or opposed pairs – ‘me-it’, self and other, viewer and viewed, spectator and spectacle. In this tradition, the subject dominates imaginatively an expanse of actual or represented landscape, seascape, or cityscape. (Wallach, 2008: 317)

Landscape perception is dependent on the separation of subject from object. The currency of the image of the figure in a landscape as a representation of the self can be confirmed by an internet image search on the term ‘solitude’: the result includes scores – maybe hundreds – of images of a lone figure in a serene landscape, often with water (the descendants of Caspar David Friedrich’s wanderer). Although the figure is literally absent in *13 Lakes*, it is embodied in the looking relations of the long take, which over time, develop our awareness of the filmmaker’s role in guiding our contemplative gaze. Critical reception of the film has tended to emphasize its appeal to an ethically refined sensibility, as Scott MacDonald does when he describes “a cinematic experience that models patience and mindfulness – qualities of consciousness crucial for a deep appreciation of and ongoing commitment to the natural environment” (MacDonald: 19). I have argued for a slightly different reading, based on a repeated reenactment of the subject’s separation from the world, a search for a relationship of self and world that can no longer be found, once a particular national imaginary of landscape (‘America the Beautiful’) has been discredited. Like Matthew Arnold, confronting the “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of faith on Dover Beach, Benning confronts a landscape drained of patriotic significance. In one of his ‘Theses on Landscape’, Mitchell asserts that landscape is “an exhausted



medium, no longer viable as a mode of artistic expression”, adding provocatively: “Like life, landscape is boring; we must not say so” (Mitchell, 2002: 5). While the *longueur* of some of its shots might seem to confirm Mitchell’s view, *13 Lakes* offers a forceful counter-argument to it, in the existential persistence of a subject-object pairing defined only in part by a rigid *dispositif*, and characterized, more importantly, by the specific details and unpredictable events of each encounter between a human subject and a lake.

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<sup>1</sup> Benning has used this phrase on many occasions and it has become a stock descriptor in writing about his work. See, for example, the Austrian Film Museum screening notes for *casting a glance* (2007): [https://www.filmmuseum.at/kinoprogramm/produktion?veranstaltungen\\_id=2277](https://www.filmmuseum.at/kinoprogramm/produktion?veranstaltungen_id=2277)

<sup>2</sup> The production information cited here comes from a Q&A held at the Egyptian Theater in Los Angeles, on 7<sup>th</sup> October 2007, which is viewable on the Los Angeles Film Forum youtube channel, online at <https://www.youtube.com/user/LAFilmforum/videos> [Accessed 8th October 2016]. This is supplemented by personal correspondence with James Benning in the Spring of 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Los Angeles Film Forum James Benning *13 Lakes* Q&A, online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=offsnpJ7Gwo> (Accessed 8th October 2016).