



## LAND AS PROTAGONIST – AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES BENNING

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*The following interview took place at the Duisburg Documentary Film Festival, Germany, on 4 November 2009, the day after the premiere of Ruhr.*

SP: Your films allow for numerous relations between nature, humans, machines and labour to develop. You have often said that landscape is a function of time. Would you also say that the subject is a function of landscape?

JB: My first film where I really directly tried to address that was *Landscape Suicide* [1986], where I thought that the subject really was a function of those events that happened in the landscape. It was a highly affluent community in California, where Bernadette lived and her family was poor, so there was this class isolation within that kind of social landscape where she felt very much outside of it. And then, in the second part of that film, Ed Gein living in the Wisconsin winter, there was a real physical separation due to landscape and climate: that he lived out on a farm and was by himself. So the events that happen to both Bernadette and Ed Gein are somewhat a function of where they lived. And in the case of Bernadette, it's more of a social landscape and a class difference landscape, which is also connected to the actual landscape, you know. Her house was in a little bit poorer neighbourhood and all run down and then she had these very affluent classmates, which was a big effect on her. And then Ed Gein, this physical landscape of being locked up in a cabin by yourself all winter long and isolated through the actual amount of snow and cold. So that film, it directly answers the question you asked, or tries to anyways, or at least poses that same question.

SP: Do you regard the phenomena, sites and landscapes of your films as protagonists as well as the people, because you listed them in the end credits of *The California Trilogy* as though they were subjects? If we are part of the landscape, is the land a subject too?

JB: Yes, I think, that's what I'm doing with the end credits. In *13 Lakes* [2004], I named the lakes, and in *Ruhr* [2009] I say what the seven shots are. In The California Trilogy, the credits document what's going on there, what small city it's near and then who owns the land. It's kind of a political reading of landscape itself through ownership, in other words, who makes the profit and who does the hard work. The hard work is in the image and who makes the profit shows up in the credits. Especially in The California Trilogy I am using the landscape as a protagonist. With each film I can talk about how it's a protagonist in a different way of course. But they all have a sense of themselves, almost as a personality. It also references our own need to always have narratives. Our minds always try to create narratives in anything, even in *13 Lakes*, your narrative might be 'what is he doing while he is filming'? Your mind always comes back to these narrative questions. So in another way, I give those titles to reference that kind of narrative. There is this little voice that creates language and narrative in your mind.

SP: Is that why you ask your students to drop their subjective narratives in favour of what they are looking at – so that they can see something that is not them? And is that why you usually use a static camera, because if there's too much camera movement, you can't see the movement of what's in front of the camera and that's the same with subjectivity: if you focus on it, you can't see anything else?

JB: Yeah. Most of the time, I can describe a shot as everything moving but the camera. You see everything that moves, because the camera doesn't, because it has a fixed gaze. I think the best examples of that are the airplanes landing in *Ruhr*. How the fixed gaze allows you to see that there's no movement. And the new digital media allows no movement at all. While film has a jiggle from the projection and from the registration of the film moving through the camera, you can't record the stillness like digital can. And that very much interested me, that when nothing moves, nothing moves. It looks like a projected slide, because there's no grain dancing. It's just there. And you really become aware of stillness. And then when one little leaf moves, it's perceptible. Because nothing's moving and then when something moves, it jumps off the screen. That would never register like that on film.

SP: Because there is always the movement of the image.

JB: Yeah, especially grain movement. So I became very aware of that and then when the airplanes come through and the whole image explodes with movement because the plane brings a weather system along with

it that was very exciting for me. And then for the weather system to pass and for the image to go back to being dead steady again, except for maybe now one branch keeps moving because it got set in motion, and it may stay in motion until the next plane happens or it may stop. So there are all these really subtle investigations that I can now do with these really steady frames, something I always wanted, and never was achieving.

SP: Would you say that in this shot in *Ruhr*, in which the planes make the leaves move, you are raising an ecological issue in that we can only perceive the impact of the plane after we cannot see it anymore? Is the stillness of digital video better for looking at land in an ecological way, because it can make these changes more apparent since only if the image itself is still, can we see the movement it depicts?

JB: I think that's implied. If it can look deeper and be more subtle, then it'll reveal things deeper and more subtly. Things that couldn't be revealed about the relationship of man to landscape now can be, and this shot is an example. You also have to film on a very still day to recognise that planes landing bring a weather system through, which I never knew before and was lucky enough to be there to observe this by myself in real time. I thought: this is amazing, I hope it's being caught on digital format. And then it revealed itself much clearer than film ever could. I can look longer now too, because sometimes it takes a much longer look before you see any change.

SP: The steam coming out of the coke-plant chimney in the one hour shot in *Ruhr* also always looks different.

JB: Yeah, it's a function of being lit by the setting sun. You have a change in the way that the water vapour is lit by the sun and the way the sky changes against during sunset too. So there are two things changing at the same time. I like that you are referencing one thing against another, but each one is changing. And that was really part of it, and then also that I was very aware of the process of making coke. Generally what happens is that they cook coal in those furnaces for twenty-five hours. It's called 'the push', where they push the coal out of the furnace and it fills a train car, and then that train car is driven on some tracks a little bit away and put underneath that quenching tower. And then for seventy seconds ten thousand gallons of water are dumped onto that super-heated coal that has become coke. It quenches that for seventy seconds and then that's what releases the water vapour up this tower which has a series of baffles. And this coke plant filters out the impurities out of the water vapours, so hopefully most of them

are gone when they enter the sky. Of course they are not all gone, but they are the best filtering system that we know of at this point. So that happens about every ten minutes, but sometimes they heat the coal a little longer for a different grade, and this can put the process behind, so when I filmed it, I started in the middle of the ten minutes, so you wait five minutes and then you get a spilling of the water vapour, and then you wait the actual ten minutes for the second one, and then the third one, they are doing a different grade, so you almost skip a session and you wait twenty minutes. So each time you are waiting a little longer. And then after that there are two more, I think there are eight or nine minutes, they are a little faster. So there is a certain anxiety of waiting and there's a twenty-minute stillness in that hour long shot, and during that time the sky changes a lot, so at that point I'm hoping you are paying attention to the pure light changes and you have this anticipation for something that happened that isn't happening. And then it finally happens and then it goes back on schedule and is rather reliable. But I like that, that this timing changes. And the same thing happened earlier with the airplanes landing, that the first plane lands quite quickly and then – I can't remember the order – if it's the second one you wait a while for, and then other ones are all within two or three minutes, so they are quite quick. There's kind of a process that is happening in these iterations, but then the schedule breaks down, so your perception of time changes. I like that consideration of time. Film is very much a perception of time and a marking of time through these different processes.

SP: In many of your films the shot length is predetermined by your decision before the filming that it is going to be the length of the film reel, or a train or a cigarette.

JB: In *RR* [2007], that's when I felt the most comfortable [with the shot length] although I think that I should have made the shots longer, now that the film is done. There should be more before and after each train, like the way that the train interrupts the landscape and then, when it goes, the landscape slowly reappears and re-establishes itself after it has this great interruption happen. It would have been nicer to have more time at least at the end of the shot. I actually thought, when I was filming, that I was giving myself much more time, but because I was shooting on film, and it was costing money, I would cut it off maybe a little too early. Now with high definition, I could run the camera for twenty minutes after and then choose the appropriate time. It would be much easier.

SP: There are a couple of shots in *RR* where the train stops in the middle of the shot and one gets anxious because it might take hours until the train moves again.

JB: Yeah, I wouldn't be that bold to wait two hours for the train to start up again, but sometimes it happens that they are delayed waiting for another train because they share a track and it's coming the opposite way. But I like those moments because they were all surprises for me too. So sometimes they would stop and I was just about ready to run out of film, so I was glad that they stopped, because if they would have kept going it wouldn't have recorded it all, but if they stopped, then I could say, 'Ok, I can cut'. My rules were: either you see the whole train or you see it until it stops.

SP: There are other shots in *RR* that problematise these principles, like when the train 'leaves' the image while still being in the image – it becomes invisible since it has driven into the vanishing point – but one can argue that it is still in the frame, it's just not visible in the image.

JB: Yes, again I probably would have liked to hold these a little bit longer too, where they just would have become a point rather than still recognisable as a shape. Sometimes they did get down to a point.

SP: There's a shot in *El Valley Centro* [1999] in the Renaissance perspective where an airplane sprays pesticides, and flies over the camera, that is, your head, and by implication over the audience, indicating that the filmmaker and the viewer are not separated from what they are looking at.

JB: Almost all of *El Valley Centro*, I watch what's going on, set up the camera and then record it. They're not acting for the camera, they are just doing their work, like ploughing the field or picking cotton or hoeing rows of weeds, but when I tried to do a crop duster, I was just in their way, because they don't want to spray me with insecticide because it's rather dangerous. And my idea was to set up the camera and then run to my car and hide in it, but as soon as I set up the camera, they would fly by and shake their fist at me, because they wouldn't spray if I was there. And I immediately realised, well I'm disrupting their work and that this wasn't right, and they don't want to put me at danger, so I did that once and realised that this is impossible and then I hired a plane. So that shot is choreographed and we used water rather than insecticide. I shot it two times. The first time I did it with coloured water and he didn't fly where I told him to. And then the second time he did exactly what I wanted and flew right at me. But then we were

out of the coloured water, so we used regular water. I had this kind of bright green yellow water before, that's very [pauses]

SP: [fills in] painterly

JB: Yeah, it's very painterly. Sometimes they use these very weird coloured chemicals and they are very beautiful when they flow across the landscape.

SP: What is so exceptional about your films is that aesthetics, nature, economics and also politics are not separated; like in *Ruhr*, when what could merely be an aesthetic trope – such as the Romantic *Rückenfigur* (the back of a person in a painting) – becomes political when it is the backs of Muslims praying in a mosque and it is the movements of the protagonists that change the aesthetics of the image over time.

JB: I am of course very interested in developing my own aesthetics and my own way of looking, but I am also very aware that sometimes aesthetics can perceive what is going on in a less political way than it should be perceived. And I think perhaps duration is what helps bring the political back into the shot. First, the act of filming in that way is somewhat political just by taking a film variable and extending it through a place that most people don't live, so they are a bit uncomfortable with the duration. But they are also then forced to have new readings of what they're looking at. So at first it might be a totally aesthetic experience, but hopefully through duration that breaks down and there are hints in the image that become political or social. You see that all the men are wearing jeans and some of them are designer jeans, so this is kind of weird. But noticing that they are all jeans; that this seems to be a function of the working class and that these are all immigrants, and immigrants many times remain in the working class, or many of them do. So in a way that shot is aesthetically beautiful in the way they move and it's in unison in that, and then at the end of the shot, they depart in some of state of pray[er], but they don't do it in unison now, so it becomes an individual commitment to the religion whereas before it was as a group commitment. And I like the kind of social and political implications of that – that we see that those that stay in for a pray on their own are very moved by their own religion. They are very dedicated to it in a sense. And when I watch it in a group I have less feeling that way. People go to the church every Sunday in the Christian religion. You just fulfil that event. And that's what it seems to begin with, but then at the end it's very moving for me to see them praying individually, with great intensity, much more than I've seen in any other religion. I guess I haven't been in a church, well, really

ever, except to look at the architecture. So I grew up without religion, so I have a bit of a bias against it, but when I see something like this, it confronts my own prejudice that I have against organised religion. I see that there perhaps is a great benefit; having such a commitment is something holy. And maybe that's kind of a hole in my own life, you know. I don't have that kind of ceremony or commitment to something I just can't understand. I was never raised with that, so at this point I am too pragmatic and I need a mathematical solution.

SP: Your later films seem to have become more spiritual through looking at land.

JB: Yeah, well, landscape makes you realise how small you are. I think, just the understanding of how small you are is really a part of being spiritual, you know – that there is a kind of giving in to the whole and that the individual is so small. I think that's religious with a small 'r' anyways.

SP: This is interesting because you are regarded as a structural filmmaker and structure as an essential pattern that is not changing, but in your films structure opens up something new that is even spiritual.

JB: Yeah, that's an interesting take and it's something I hope that happens, you know – that it's a container that allows a freedom and it's a container that allows each participant to bring their own self to the film. When you look out, you are looking in, and you can re-evaluate those prejudices that you're judging this against, because maybe they were misperceived and maybe this new experience can help you re-evaluate the old experience, which would change the way you experience this. So it's kind of a give and take with the present and the past. I think it's really an equation for growth to be able to judge your values, rather than have your values judge what you are looking at.

SP: Yes, a lot of filmmaking is about re-creating an idea that existed beforehand, even in documentary. There are not many films that actually *look*.

JB: *Home Improvements* [1985] by one of my favourite artists of all time, Robert Frank, has a kind of honesty about it. I actually have a quote of him in my pocket, which I was going to use last night. This is from *Home Improvements*: 'We are always on the outside trying to look inside, trying to say something that is true. But maybe nothing is true, except what's out there and what's out there is constantly changing'. It's a definition of what I feel I'm doing too, that I'm always trying to find something that's true, but maybe nothing's true, but what's out there.

What you look at is true, but what you look at is always changing. So I very much believe the same quote. When I saw it years ago, it very much woke up something inside me that helped me understand the way I'm working.

SP: Even in one shot?

JB: Yeah, yeah. When he's doing this – it's up in Nova Scotia – he has the camera and is looking into the mirror and then he says, 'And what's out there' (and pans outside and his house is right on the ocean, and there are waves and there is the fog rolling in), 'And what's out there is the truth, but what's out there is constantly changing', and literally it is. The weather is constantly blowing foam and bright sunshine and all different things. So he is referring to the landscape as the truth that is constantly changing. But it is rather a metaphor for ourselves changing our own perception of things as we gain more experience.

SP: How do you think nature relates to structure? Would you say that we are part of nature?

JB: Well, nature is very defined by structure. I mean the Spiral Jetty refers to that – that the salt crystals that grow on the jetty actually grow as spiral growths. There are spirals in many things, seashells and the way trees grow, you have these kind of Fibonacci series in the way they break down and repeat themselves, so there's kind of a mathematical structure to almost all of nature that has a kind of beautifully defined system, but it's not dogmatic. It's there. It all works. And when we enter that system, we always kind of make a break in it. Humans have become too smart to fit it. We don't have to fit in, we can change things. The problem isn't that we'll destroy the earth, but that we'll destroy the ecosystem that supports us. The earth will go on after this system collapses. But it's because we don't fit into those beautiful structures that are part of nature and we defy them.

SP: In *North on Evers* [1991], *Four Corners* [1997] and *Utopia* [1998] life histories are told over images that do not directly show what the narration refers to. In *Four Corners* the image lags behind what we have been told, and in *Utopia* the whole soundtrack of Richard Dindo's film *Ernesto Che Guevara, The Bolivian Diary* [1994] is heard over images of the desert from Death Valley to the Mexican borderlands instead of Bolivia. Rather than looking outside onto a corresponding landscape, these films generate new, mental landscapes and geographical trajectories.

JB: In making *North on Evers* I was interested in creating a text that you would read first and then the images would occur later, so that you



would have a text–image relationship where the text you read would create a movie in your mind and then you can compare the actual movie you are watching to what the text evokes. And then when I made *Four Corners*, I kind of continued that idea by writing four different histories and then people read the histories over a painting, and then after that history is read, you see thirteen shots that illustrate that history, sometimes literally. But it's removed from the actual readings and the literalness of those images. It isn't like it's illustrating it immediately, but you have to reorder the images you see in context with the text you just heard, which is kind of similar to the way *North on Evers* worked. I always can't believe when people cut literal images to text to illustrate it, you know, they say: 'Oh, the bunny ran away' and then they have to show you what a bunny is. And so with *Utopia* I felt, well, by using Richard Dindo's text, which uses Che Guevara's diary I could literally cut images to that film, but the literalness is wrong because it's not the right place, so I could take a revolution that happened or tried to happen in the late sixties and import that into southern California where it's deserved and then illustrate it with images to tie what's happening in southern California to his revolutionary text or diary. One of the reasons I wanted to do this is because in this earlier diary, the motorcycle diary, when Che went around South America he talked about how he was politicised by seeing U.S. agriculture and fruit growers in South America exploiting their land and their people's labour in such a way that he became very anti-imperialistic. So I thought that this film was kind of a reverse imperialism to bring the revolution to where it belonged. And the same kind of thing was happening in the Imperial Valley where now people from South America and Mexico were imported into being used as cheap labour in America, so it's a kind of opposite way. So I would oppositely bring the revolution so that place [southern California]. So if Che is talking about coming to a small village and crossing a railroad track, I might cut to a railroad track as that set, which is the kind of literalness that generally would bother me, but since this isn't the right railroad track, there is a kind of discrepancy to be negotiated, that's much more interesting than if it was the right railroad track. Why are we considering a railroad track in southern California rather than being in Bolivia? I thought by stealing the soundtrack of Richard Dindo, that this was kind of the final text–image act I could do for a while, that was kind of the ultimate thing to end with – a stolen text that would liberate kind of my ideas about revolution and southern California. That really propelled me into wanting to stop using text for a while and now I haven't really used text for over ten years. Maybe I'll do it again, I don't know.

SP: Maybe also the tracing of the movements of peoples in these text-image films has shifted to following natural matter like water in the form of lakes, clouds or steam and the influence of economics on nature?

JB: Yeah, farming in the Central Valley each year grosses more money than all the gold that was ever found in California. So there is this irony of everybody going to California to find gold and they kept crossing the Central Valley and this is the real goldmine, you know, through this artificial farming system that's been developed there. Of course it won't last forever. Irrigation farming over time will ruin all land.

SP: Can you elaborate on the difference in the relationships between humans and nature in the three films of the California Trilogy? You said that nature is a different kind of protagonist in each film.

JB: The trilogy started as just one film, *El Valley Centro*. Because I had just made *Utopia*, I was interested in this corporate farming that would use illegal labour, very cheap labour, and use irrigation systems that were both built by the federal government and the states. So they were receiving the cheapest water in the world and perhaps also very cheap labour. I approached it in a very political way in the sense of who does the work and who makes the profit. I thought that would just surface in the images. And I think it does. I only used thirty-five images and then I put the credits at the end to reinforce what the images already say in case you were locked into it in too much of an aesthetic way and didn't see these politics that occur in the images. *LOS* [2000] then is the urban companion to go from rural to urban and the connection there seemed to be that Los Angeles was built on that water system; that they stole water from the Owens Valley and nearly completely destroyed Mono Lake and there was a fight between the farmers that they were losing their water rights to the city. But then I also realised that it would be difficult to do a complete portrait of Los Angeles with just thirty-five shots. So, when I made *LOS* – it's of course a cityscape – I thought, well, I can express my feelings of Los Angeles, which are kind of love-hate, and then because of that I wanted to show certain systems at work like a recycling plant and a car being torn apart and a community garden. And then, I thought then I need a freeing to going back into landscape and made *Sogobi* [2001], which I would start as that you wouldn't have any reference to humans and then slowly they'd be reintroduced and as we get to the end of the film you would become very aware of the kind of encroachment of human behaviour on the landscape. And then the three films are tied together by water always running through all three films. The last shot of the first film, *El Valley Centro*, is water being

pumped over a mountain to another place to irrigate and then the first shot of *LOS* is water coming down the spillway that was built by Mulholland to bring water to Los Angeles. That's the very first spillway. When that was opened five thousand people stood alongside there with a cup and Mulholland said, 'there it is, take it', and they all dipped in and took a drink of water. It's this kind of ceremonial gesture that water was now here and life would thrive in California, which is pretty much true. And then the last shot of *LOS* is the beach at Malibu – which is rather serene – and then the first shot of *Sogobi* is the violent surf at Big Sur where it's very wild looking, and then the last shot of *Sogobi* is the same as the first shot of *El Valley Centro*. In *El Valley Centro* you saw the water going down and then in the last shot you see the spillway sticking out of the water and the lake has dropped, and so you see the apparatus that causes this kind of surreal hole in the water. So, there is this connection of water flowing through all three films and then at the end the water is lowered. It doesn't have the abundance that the first film starts with as a kind of a metaphor for how important water is now and how much it's going to be in the future.

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