

13 Lakes

By Scott MacDonald

Over the past half-century, Milwaukee native James Benning has become American cinema's preeminent landscape artist. Beginning in the 1970s with films like "11 x 14" (1975) and "One Way Boogie Woogie" (1976), Benning demonstrated a sensitivity to Midwestern landscape that evoked canonical American painters and photographers. In 1980 he moved to New York, then in 1987 to California to teach filmmaking and mathematics at California Institute of the Arts—and his range as a cine-explorer of American landscape and cityscape expanded with each move. While much of American commercial (and independent) media during the past several decades has been characterized by an increasing acceleration and density of action, along with a formal tendency toward image and sound overload, Benning's tendency has been to stretch his audiences' patience and offer them opportunities to refine their perceptual capacity.

Benning has always been committed to the long-duration shot. "One Way Boogie Woogie" is a 60-minute film composed of 60 one-minute shots; "11 x 14" includes three 10-minute shots; and each film in Benning's California Trilogy ("El Valley Centro," 1999; "Los," 2000; "SOGOBI," 2001) is composed of thirty-five 2 ½ minute shots. Benning's interest in moving the audience toward patience and more careful attention reached a culmination in 2004 with the diptych "Ten Skies" and "13 Lakes," which are composed, respectively, of ten and thirteen 10-minute shots. "13 Lakes" is the longest of Benning's celluloid films—after 2007, the move to digital video has allowed him to produce extended-duration images far beyond the capability of 16mm celluloid film: for example, the 2013 digital work, "BNSF" (the reference is to the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad) is a three-hour-and-twenty-minute single shot! "13 Lakes," however, remains Benning's most geographically expansive film and an epitome of his commitment to a meditative and ruminative cinema.

Each of the thirteen shots in "13 Lakes" is composed so that the surface of the lake bisects the film frame, and each image is separated from the one that follows by several seconds of darkness. In order, we see Jackson Lake, Wyoming; Moosehead Lake, Maine; the Salton Sea in southern California; Lake



This frame enlargement depicts a speed boat breaking the natural serenity of a lake in the western U.S. Courtesy James Benning.

Superior in northern Minnesota; Lake Winnebago in Wisconsin; Lake Okeechobee, Florida; Lower Red Lake, Minnesota; Lake Pontchartrain, Louisiana; the Great Salt Lake, Utah; Lake Iliamna in Alaska; Lake Powell, Arizona/Utah; Crater Lake, Oregon; and Oneida Lake, New York. The choice and order of this particular set of lakes has to do with the considerable differences between them. The move from Jackson Lake to Moosehead Lake to the Salton Sea at the beginning of the film, for example, jumps the viewer from one geographic region to another, from one kind of terrain to another, and from one kind of lake to another: Jackson Lake and Moosehead Lake were created by geological forces; the Salton Sea was man-made accidentally by a faulty irrigation system and subsequently by irrigation run-off from the Imperial Valley in Southern California.

Benning's choice of lakes also relates to his personal history. His Milwaukee origins are evident in the fact that three of the thirteen lakes are in the upper Midwest; his choice of Oneida Lake in New York State has something to do with his frequent visits with close friends in the Central New York area; and for years he has been regularly drawn to both the Salton Sea and to the Great Salt Lake. Indeed, the Great Salt Lake, especially Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" (1970), is an important location in his "North on Evers" (1991) and "Deseret" (1995), as well as in "13 Lakes"; and "Spiral Jetty" is the subject of Benning's "casting a glance" (2007). But the most important principle at work in the choice and arrangement of the lakes is the creation of a complex and subtle variety in the kinds of perceptual experiences Benning can provide with these different locales.

This variety is evident in the sometimes obvious, sometimes very subtle visual experiences of the lakes. Benning likes to work at the very edges of perceptual awareness, and sometimes a visual development is so subtle that we wonder if we're really seeing it: the tiny lights of a moving car, far, far across the water in the Lake Winnebago shot, for instance. While other canonical filmmakers committed to representing American place—Peter Hutton and Nathaniel Dorsky are examples—have been devoted to the idea of cinema as a visual art, and therefore to silent cinema, Benning has always privileged sound. Each of the lakes in "13 Lakes" is different both in its visual characteristics and in the soundscape within which we observe it. Sometimes the sound is in the foreground of our attention, as it is in the shot of the Salton Sea, where two water scooters race, over and over, past the camera. In other instances, it is the subtle textures of sound that we come to notice.

Off-screen space is frequently as important in Benning's depiction of the thirteen lakes as the carefully composed imagery within his successive framings. The peaceful and gorgeous Lake Okeechobee shot is interrupted midway through by the sound of a train that we never see, which passes close enough to the lake to subtly affect the surface of the water—an allusion presumably to the train that passes by Walden Pond in Thoreau's "Walden" (a Benning favorite and subject of several Benning videos). In the Crater Lake shot, which serves as a visual climax to "13 Lakes," off-screen gunshots cause the stunning image to have mysterious, potentially problematic implications.

The varied perceptual experiences in "13 Lakes" formally echo each other, while also revealing some-

times obvious and sometimes very subtle distinctions. During the opening moments of some shots, viewers may find themselves wondering how this shot is a useful addition to what has been experienced so far—only to realize, slowly but surely, that this new dynamic of image and sound adds considerably to what has gone before. As the depictions of the lakes accumulate, Benning develops a new form of cinematic suspense: as we grow more and more aware of the lake we're looking at and of the panoply of lakes we've already seen, we cannot not wonder how the next lake will differ from the one in front of us and what it will add to the ever-more-complex panorama provided by the film.

Ultimately, Benning's films are cine-therapy and a form of perceptual retraining for jaded modern cineastes. Watching "13 Lakes" in particular offers an opportunity for a kind of "cine-yoga," a stretching of our ability to see and hear with awareness and subtlety. For those who can meet Benning halfway, the experience can be exhilarating in its capacity to expand our awareness of motion picture imagery and sound—and of the beauty and the perceptual and conceptual complexity of American Place.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Scott MacDonald has written on independent cinema since the 1970s; his most recent book is American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn. In 1999 he was named a Film Preservation Honoree by Anthology Film Archives and in 2011 the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences named him an Academy Scholar. He teaches film history at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY.