



16mm Frame Enlargement from *El Valley Centro*

El Valley Centro

James Benning

Released 2000

by Caroline Koebel

The 16mm film was presented by the Austin Cinematheque in its native format on April 6, 2012.

Comprised of 35 two and a half minute shots, James Benning's 16mm experimental documentary *El Valley Centro* (2000) presents a curious taxonomy of California's Great Central Valley. In the process it frames a tug-of-war between the land and the uses humans find for it: natural wonders—and their demise into wasteland, agribusiness and corporate cattle ranching, tract housing and anti-drug billboards ("where meth goes violence follows"), water, nuke and wind energy. This is a place where some people are and others are not, but the geography imaged here is the singular vision of one visitor to the region.

Benning takes from his travels what nobody has to give...only what he in turn can share as his reflection on the land. In his quest—equipped with Bolex camera and Nagra recorder—to order the world he comes upon (such as "an oil well fire with flames high into the sky"¹), Benning argues that sheer contemplation of place (or more specifically, understanding of self in relation to non-self, in terms of how we perceive ourselves within and apart from our surroundings) is a spiritual, political and also ethical act. The knowledge gained from such observation must either be willfully denied or acted upon. The film, in its 35 scenes, conveys not so much how a given geographic (and sociopolitical) zone can be dissected for evaluative purposes but rather how the land buckles against imposed standards and rebukes monotony with a wilderness of difference. Benning's remark about *El Valley Centro*, "landscape is a function of time,"² underscores that place is relative and that meaning is not static.

Patience (and/or incredible good fortune) is key to the filmmaker's presence in the environs. A landscape of wetlands, featuring competing asymmetry and balance as curves contrast with the horizon line, is an alluring composition—the sense of being able to step into the frame and keep moving into the distance dramatic. The scene appears to be the way it is and seems like it will remain the same—the viewer sensing nothing lacking —when waterfowl rise from the water's surface en masse. The snow geese fly toward the camera, leave the

frame and eventually re-enter and return to the same spot on screen they were before.

The camera's perfect stillness here and everywhere allows for the deliverance of such magic. The proximity of Benning's oeuvre to still photography and early cinema and the wonders of an inventor such as Méliès is manifest here in his radical departure from such convention. Likewise, he is worlds apart (and millions of dollars away) from entertainment cinema: no explosives, i.e., ignite the flight of the snow geese nor are they the effect of CGI.

The rare shot is more theatrical, introducing the possibility of being staged for the camera. The film's 14th scene features cowgirls practicing for a rodeo: one pins, and on cue releases a goat so that the other approaching on horseback can rope and subdue it. The action repeats, and an intricate rhythm is established. It is here that I'm cognizant of the mutual admiration between Benning and Sharon Lockhart, i.e., in *Goshogaoka* (1998) her stationery camera on the mesmerizing movement of the girls basketball team choreographed based on their training drills.

In a few scenes Spanish figures prominently on the soundtrack, and there is no mistaking that the field workers and grape pickers of American agribusiness are migrant laborers from Mexico. Perhaps if more followed Benning's lead and observed where food comes from in the first place, then a decade after *El Valley Centro* the scapegoating of "illegals"—in the face of the "Great Recession"—for the country's economic woes would be seen more widely for the ruse it is.

The feeling of existing smack-dab in the center of the landscape itself is most provocative in the dust storm of the 19th shot. How Benning is able to keep still with tumbleweed endlessly whirling by diagonally across the screen from bottom left to top right is the question. The haptic thrill here is testament to the powers of experimental/personal film to convey intense states of being on virtually no budget (the one funding source credited, interestingly and coincidentally, is the Austin Film Society). I want Benning's tumbleweed to be a shared cultural referent.

If what defines being human is the struggle to make sense of the world, then the possibility of calm reflection and firsthand experience proffered by *El Valley Centro* is all the more beckoning in our post pre-social media consciousness. If in the connected universe we're all everywhere together all the time at once, what's the point of solitude—a state that arguably can subsequently but not simultaneously be shared with others?

Caroline Koebel is a filmmaker and writer in Austin.

1. Benning is quoted in the Austin Cinematheque event publicity: <http://www.utexas.edu/know/events/20120406/e20390>

2. Also from the Austin Cinematheque event publicity: <http://www.utexas.edu/know/events/20120406/e20390>

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