nification. And Demme is truly genial here. The screwball framework allows him to fill the screen with marginal figures radiating an antagonist halo, such as the countless black bit players who represent the measure of Charlie’s progress. Significantly, Charlie’s new course matches the most telling example of the film’s oblique radicalism. While looking for Audrey at her old address, he finds a new tenant who asks him: “Do you know what her rent was? I have the feeling the landlord is screwing me.” “Well, that would not surprise me,” replies Charlie, walking away from the building on whose walls we read the graffiti “speculators out.” Occasionally, *Something Wild* even becomes Felliniesque in its oblique critique of the status quo via a *mise en scène* filled with obese people and chatting folks in a *kitsch* paradise.

To summarize: *Something Wild* joyously subscribes to a schizophrenic mixture of acceptance and refusal, or, better, refusal within acceptance. If the sixties wildness advocated some great master plan which in many ways mirrored the bourgeois tele-ideology it purported to attack, Demme’s film proposes a post-modern wildness which is devoid of metaphysical legitimation but makes sense, however fragmentary and precarious: it is better to be a Downtown hipster than a Wall Street acolyte. And if, Ray’s case teaches, there is no outside to the system and we are all Jonases in the voracious belly of a whale, it is still possible to be wild enough to make the whale’s digestion difficult. At least, *Something Wild* suggests, you can have a lot of fun and cause the whale to have the hiccups.

—MAURIZIO VIANO

**NOTES**

1. The fact that Goldie Hawn in effect produced the film, for a big Hollywood studio (Warners), may have something to do with its political ambiguity. For a discussion of the film’s flawed script and of Demme’s reluctance to direct it, see Steve Vineberg’s review in *Film Quarterly*, Fall 1984, pp. 31-4.


4. More specifically, Audrey’s trajectory brings to mind Holly Golightly (Audrey Hepburn) in Blake Edwards’s *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. In addition to similar scenes, the intertextual parallel is justified by the fact that Holly thinks of herself as a “wild thing.”

5. J. Hoberman, op. cit.

6. Hayden Herrera, *Frida*, respectively pp. 289; 162-3. On page 163 we read: “She loved department stores, shops in Chinatown, and dime stores. ‘Frida went through dime stores like a tornado,' Lucienne recalls. ‘Suddenly she would stop and buy something immediately. She had an extraordinary eye for the genuine and the beautiful. She’d find cheap costume jewelry and she’d make it look fantastic.’” Beside defining Lulu/Audrey, this aspect of Frida Kahlo qualifies also one of Demme’s often praised virtues.

7. A director who has consistently used a character’s death to signify the terminal stage of a textual trajectory is Pasolini. *Accattone*, *Mamma Roma*, *La Ricotta* and *Porcile* all end with a death. In *Hawks and Sparrows*, the two protagonists kill and devour a crow representing Marxist ideology, a scene which Pasolini has explained as signifying incorporation.


11. The opening song by David Byrne (who sings with Celia Cruz) is entitled “Loco De Amor”: crazy from/for love. David Byrne’s own film, *True Stories*, reminds us of *Something Wild* in that it devotes a lot of attention to common people and portrays them with subtle irony.

12. When I saw *Something Wild* in New York, most people laughed and clapped at Charlie’s reply, thus activating the film’s political irony at its fullest. In Eugene, Oregon, where the problem of housing is considerably milder, Charlie’s comment went practically unnoticed. This is not to say that there is a proper reading and New Yorkers got it right; this anecdote testifies to the relevance of a sociology of the audience if we are to fabricate a reception theory for the cinema.

**AMERICAN DREAMS**

A film by James Benning. Filmmakers Cooperative, 175 Lexington Avenue, New York NY 10016.

After the completion of *11 X 14* in 1976, James Benning was heralded as a major new talent, and as the best evidence that the American Midwest was making a contribution to independent film-making. Here was a narrative film that was sensuous and beautiful to look at, sophisticated and witty in its use of self-reflexive composition and timing, and strongly reminiscent of some of the memorable dimensions of American realist painting and photography. Further, it experimented inventively with narrative. We see two of the main characters together in the first shot; but once they separate, they’re not seen together again, and in fact, they seem to be different people each time we do see them. A third main character is never seen with the other two. *11 X 14* creates much of the ambiance of more typical narrative films, while radically departing from the convention that all strands of a narrative will finally interweave and make sense in some particular way. All in all, Benning seemed a film-maker who might bridge the gap
between independent film artists and Hollywood movie-makers. *11 X 14* was reviewed widely, and Benning’s next feature was eagerly awaited.

When *One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977) appeared, many of us who had hoped for a film which would extend Benning’s narrative experiments were disappointed. (Looking back now, I think I had hoped for a film similar to *Stranger Than Paradise*; like Jim Jarmusch’s recent film, *11 X 14* had experimented with long takes and a stationary camera.) *One Way Boogie Woogie* presents sixty discrete single-shot one-minute units, held together by Benning’s formal concerns with composition and off-screen space and by his sense of place. Narrative isn’t a factor, except in a minimal way within some of the individual units. *One Way Boogie Woogie* made clear that Benning’s interest in the more “arty” dimensions of *11 X 14* was at least as strong, and probably stronger, than his concern with narrativity. The title, in fact, was an allusion to Piet Mondrian’s paintings, “Victory Boogie Woogie” and “Broadway Boogie Woogie.” Since narrativity was fast becoming the primary focus of a substantial segment of independent film-making, and of academic writing about film, the move from *11 X 14* to *One Way Boogie Woogie* seemed retrogressive—or at least not progressive—even though the second feature was, on its own terms, of considerable interest.

Benning’s third feature, *Grand Opera* (1978), combines an extended meditation on the history of the mathematical concept of pi and a variety of formalist autobiographical set pieces (at one point Benning provides a 360° pan of every place he ever lived) with allusions to other American independent film-makers: Hollis Frampton, George Landow (Owen Land), Yvonne Rainer, Michael Snow, and Stan Brakhage (whose comment, “I’m not against sound films, though I rather think of it as grand opera,” provides the title). *Grand Opera* can be understood as a requiem for what P. Adams Sitney called “structural” film-making: as if to signal the end of that movement, the film concludes with an image of a building—a structure—being demolished. For many viewers, *Grand Opera*, like *One Way Boogie Woogie*, lacked the energy of *11 X 14* and earlier films, and worse, it seemed full of pointless, self-indulgent in-jokes. Though some established institutions remained supportive (*October* ran a complete image by image, text by text documentation of *Grand Opera* in its Spring 1980 issue), the talk was that Benning’s work was failing to fulfill its early promise, and this talk continued, though with less fervent interest, when *Him and Me* appeared in 1982, and when Benning’s fifth long film, *American Dreams*, was completed in 1984.

While I understand the reaction to Benning’s career, I find the generally lukewarm (and sometimes hostile) response to *American Dreams* not only unwarranted, but ironic. As far as I’m concerned, it’s Benning’s best film since *11 X 14*, and implicitly a very interesting filmic analysis of the psychological/social sources of structural film-making. And to top things off, it’s reasonably accessible to audiences. *American Dreams* is Benning’s fullest elaboration of his interest in the uses of printed text in film, an interest clearly evident in *82 X 11*, *11 X 14*, and *Grand Opera*, and in the work of a number of the film-makers *Grand Opera* claims an allegiance to: Hollis Frampton (*Surface Tension*, *Poetic Justice*, *Zorns Lemma*), for example, and Yvonne Rainer (*Film About a Woman Who . . .*). Through 57 of the film’s 58 minutes, the viewer is presented with two distinct kinds of text, and often three, simultaneously.

As the film begins, a handwritten text is moving continually from right to left through the bottom sector of the frame. This text moves slowly enough to be clearly understood, but quickly enough so that in order to pay attention to another part of the frame, one must either rush through a segment of this text or miss some portion of it. The second kind of textual material is a function of the film’s painstaking, item-by-item, front-and-rear presentation of Benning’s extensive collection of Hank Aaron memorabilia: baseball cards, buttons, soft drink container tops, and the like. Nearly all these items, and the baseball cards most obviously, provide textual information to supplement the usual photographic (or other) reproduction of Aaron. In fact, for anyone interested in baseball, Aaron’s statistics are so remarkable that they’re fascinating to follow year by year. The third kind of text used in *American Dreams* is superimposed information. As the sound track alternates between brief excerpts from notable speeches which occurred during the years Benning was growing
up and brief passages from popular songs of the era, superimposed texts regularly identify the speech-maker, the occasion and the date, and the names of the songs and singers. Other superimposed numbers regularly provide us with the grand total of home runs Aaron had hit by the end of each year; and periodically, “variation,” “proof,” and other terms flash on and off to indicate some unusual dimension of an item of the Aaron memorabilia.

Because *American Dreams* provides multiple sources of information at once, viewers must continually determine the nature of their own relationships with the film. Judging from my conversations with people after screenings, I’d guess that the central issue, particularly for first-time viewers, is how completely they feel they must read the handwritten text at the bottom of the frame. Since this text is clearly developing an interesting narrative, careful attention to it is difficult to resist. In fact, one viewer of my acquaintance became so absorbed in following the incessant right to left movement that when she stood up at the end of the film, she lost her balance. Most first-time viewers seem to regard the bottom text as primary; they read as much of it as possible, and regularly scan the rest of the frame to maintain a sense of what’s happening on other levels of the film. At times, however, audience response seems focused on the handwritten text almost exclusively. This is most evident during several passages early in the film dealing with the narrator’s sexual experiences. In one case, the viewer is a voyeur of both what the narrator describes and of the narrator’s own voyeurism: “Jamaica, New York City I didn’t sleep. A beautiful naked lady across a parking lot in the next motel out by her window (floor to ceiling) smoking cigarettes and I had to watch her. Her table room light was on & a thin vail of curtain allowed me to watch as she passionately kissed a man who wore cloths . . . .” The fact that we’re reading this in handwriting and the writer’s failure to correct his spelling add to the feeling of voyeuristic intimacy generated in many viewers by the content of what we assume is a diary (a diary written—as we learn later—on the assumption that it will be discovered: “This will be one of the most closely read pages since the scrolls in those caves”). The inclusion of these sexual passages early in the film titillates viewers (this viewer, at least) enough so that the bottom text continues to lure them through the remainder of the film.

No specific information about the diary-writer is included until the conclusion of *American Dreams*, and while some people may recognize the diary immediately, most viewers I’ve seen the film with do not. In fact, much of the drama of this level of the film evaporates for those who do make the identification. For those who don’t, one of the film’s primary dramatic elements is the question of the diarist’s identity: is he Benning himself or someone else? The diary is very frank, but many viewers probably expect more than normal frankness from an independent film-maker, especially one who would make a film as unconventional as *American Dreams*. Even when the diarist begins to talk about his guns and his fantasies about killing Nixon, one doesn’t completely turn away from this view. Except for its frankness, the diary seems rather “normal”; millions of American men would probably be able to identify with it: what man hasn’t fantasized about killing a head of state, hasn’t peeped through a window hoping to see lovers? It’s only as we realize that this “normal” American male seems increasingly obsessed with killing Nixon and seems to be positioning himself so as to really do it, that we understand there’s more here than we expected. When the diarist finally changes his target and closes in on George Wallace, the Alabama governor who became a symbol of racism and segregation during the sixties, we realize that we’ve been reading the diary of Arthur Bremer, the man who shot Wallace in Laurel, Maryland—as one of the last oral quotations in the film reminds us—on May 15, 1972. Of course, once we realize we’ve been reading Bremer’s diary, we can hardly fail to consider what has come to be “normal” for a male in American society. Benning’s own confrontation of this troubling question, his recognition of his own complicity in Bremer’s way of thinking, seems implicit in his decision to personally handwrite the diary.

That *American Dreams* is a film for multiple viewings is obvious the moment one discovers the diarist’s identity. In isolation, Aaron’s quest of Ruth’s homerun record (combined with the remarkable breadth of his skills as a player) seems natural and heroic—particularly since Aaron’s major-league career came to represent the absurdity of the segregation which had
gripped major league baseball for so long. Aaron's pursuit of 715 home runs came to seem symbolic of the black pursuit of full recognition by the majority society. This is evident all through American Dreams in Benning's references to landmark moments in the struggle of blacks—including, obviously, his use of the diary of Wallace's assailant. As wonderful as Aaron's accomplishments were, however, their meaning is altered by the Bremer text. Benning's juxtaposition of the two careers brings out their parallels, and while we recognize that Aaron's dream may be positive and Bremer's negative—that they represent the polar opposites of American dreaming—nevertheless, Aaron's compulsive need to beat Ruth (Aaron was a shoe-in for the Hall of Fame even without this) comes to seem nearly as problematic as Bremer's dogged quest for fame and significance. Both men seem involved in the same set of American assumptions about how men demonstrate their worth.

The complex implications of the Aaron/Bremer juxtaposition are dramatized by Benning's contextualizing them within the network of suggestiveness developed by his choices and juxtapositions of the excerpts from songs and speeches, all of which function as instances of successful and/or failed American dreams, and continually remind us of the frequency with which one American's dream turns out to be another's nightmare. The Aaron/Bremer parallel is further confirmed and extended by Benning's implicit recognition of his own double-edged involvement in the same pattern.

On one hand, the film reveals Benning as a thoroughly compulsive collector and exhibitor of Aaron memorabilia: both sides of every item are presented, even if nothing at all is on one side, and emphatic flashing texts identify minor quirks in particular items. Secondly, Benning's choice of a continuous, relentlessly regular minimal structure for American Dreams not only reflects his own personal commitment (compulsiveness?) as a film artist, it suggests a way of thinking about the development of the male-dominated structural cinema which occurred during the years of Aaron's and Bremer's final achievements, a cinema Benning has struggled to be a significant part of. The structural approach has produced many stunning films, but these days one cannot help but wonder whether the single-minded formal control so characteristic of these films reenacts—in a most sophisticated way—the same American macho patterns evident in the lives of Aaron and Bremer. Of course, just as Aaron's surpassing Ruth's record may well have strengthened the position of blacks in American life, the accomplishments of formal film opened new territory for feminist film-makers concerned with confronting Western consumer culture's imaging of women and men, territory explored in such diverse films as Rainer's Film About a Woman Who . . ., Chantal Akerman's Jeanne Dielman . . ., Anthony McCall/Andrew Tyndall's Argument and Diana Barrie's My Version of the Fall. But whatever we finally decide about the impact and value of structural film-making, I'd rate American Dreams a considerable achievement and one of our most revealing comments on the nature of this kind of achievement.

Since 1984, Benning has made a computer installation piece, Pascal's Lemma (1985), and two films: O Panama (1985, 28 minutes, co-made with Burt Barr, whose short story was the basis for the collaborative film) and Landscape Suicide (1986, 95 minutes). The most interesting of the three is Landscape Suicide, a formal reflection on the relationship of the violent acts of two well-known murderers and the physical/social environments in which these acts took place. The murderers are Ed Gein, the rural Wisconsin grave-robber and apparently psychopathic killer of at least two women, who was the prototype for Norman Bates in Psycho and for the mad butchers of The Texas Chain Saw Massacre; and Bernadette Protti, whose murder of a junior high school classmate
stunned a posh suburb of San Francisco. The film is presented not as an accusation against the two locales, but as a meditation on the two murderers, on the similarities which underlie their obvious differences, and on the degree to which the particulars of their shocking acts seem somehow fitting as extreme manifestations of the particular environments in which these crimes occurred.

While I find Landscape Suicide somewhat less gripping and suggestive than American Dreams, it is an impressive film. Particularly memorable is the experience of seeing these tragic locations in Benning’s formally elegant, slightly surreal compositions, and Rhonda Bell’s characterization of Pratti. Also, the film is reasonably accessible for a long formal work. I had the experience of showing Landscape Suicide to a large group of Criminal Justice majors at Utica College—people with no interest in experimental film; a number of them were fascinated.

Benning’s exploration of composition and off-screen space and his interest in experimenting with narrativity continue, but more and more, his recent films use the procedures typical of his earlier work to consider less film-reflexive, more humanly compelling (or at least more sensational) subjects.

—SCOTT MacDONALD

NOTES

1. 8½ X 11, an earlier Benning film (1974), developed a similar narrative experiment. Here, two narrative strands—one involving two women travelling, the other centering on a hitchhiking farm laborer—develop without intersecting until the film’s final shot, when the women’s car is seen passing over a bridge under which the farm worker bathes in a stream. The characters never meet, but at one moment they are in the same space at the same time—a device reminiscent of John Dos Passos’s novels. Sections of 8½ X 11 were used in 11 X 14.


3. Him and Me is a good deal like Grand Opera, especially in its use of material from Benning’s personal life, deflected in various narrative and formal ways. The central event of the film is the death of a man—but we don’t realize this until the conclusion of the film, at which point we must reinterpret all the events we’ve seen previously. The man who is found dead in the female protagonist’s bed is based on—is perhaps an exorcism of—Benning’s waking up in bed with a woman who had died during the night.

4. For a hostile review, see J. Hoberman’s comments in the March 14, 1984 Village Voice; the Summer, 1984 issue of Afterimage includes Marita Sturken’s lukewarm review.

STAMMHEIM


In this re-creation of the draining, two-year confrontation between the leaders of the Baader-Meinhof group and the West German judiciary, Reinhard Hauff has fashioned a powerful study of the individual, the law, and the modern state. Stammheim, named after the top-security prison located in a suburb outside Stuttgart in which the famed trial took place, demonstrates in almost textbook fashion the vast brutality of the state and, perhaps more importantly, its complete inability to permit alternative viewpoints to flourish. The entire superstructure of capitalist society—business interests, the professions, the media, the judiciary—are shown to be complicitous in the tenacious defense of that society against all real or potential assailants.

The film begins with explanatory, nonjudgmental titles which attempt to establish a tone of objectivity. Right from the beginning the viewer knows that Stammheim will be neither leftist hagiography nor rightist apologetics. Appropriately, the initial focus is on the real actors in this drama—the real Baader, Meinhof, and the others—in the form of a short documentary video tape of their capture. This is followed by a brief reading, in a flat, newsreel kind of voice, of their various biographical sketches, accompanied by mug shots of the real participants. It is only then, after the “real” has somehow been stated and established, that Hauff rolls the credits for the film, and in so doing, provides...