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Violent Landscapes: James Benning's *Landscape Suicide* (1986)

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ABSTRACT

While serial killings, murders, and other violent deaths are traumatic incidents for the communities in which they occur, they also attract a great deal of media attention and form the basis for numerous cinematic adaptations in US-American cinema and beyond. Many of these movies employ a sensationalist approach and focus on the social environments of the killings: the perpetrator's upbringing, triggering experiences, or a generally troubled personality. There are only a limited number of cinematic treatments of violent killings that focus on the natural environment or the landscapes where these incidents occurred.

This article is concerned with filmmakers using (cinematic) landscapes as a mode of cultural expression for violence and trauma. It seeks to show that James Benning's *Landscape Suicide* (1986) calls for a different understanding of landscape that goes beyond a mere setting for narrative, as it gives landscape active agency in its mediation of two seemingly unconnected murder cases. The film compares and juxtaposes the murder of Kirsten Costas by Bernadette Protti in a suburb of San Francisco in 1984 with the killings of Ed Gein in Plainfield, Wisconsin, in the 1950s. In doing so, the film presents viewers with two distinct functions of landscape in mediating violence and trauma: as a spatialization of time and as socio-political surroundings. Analyzing these aspects of the film helps us to better understand the link between landscape, violence, and trauma in cinematic treatments of violent incidents and also sheds light on the broader connection between landscape and trauma culture.

KEYWORDS

Trauma film, eco-trauma, trauma studies, witnessing, serial killers, Ed Gein

Murders and other violent killings are highly traumatic events for the communities in which they occur. Neighbors, friends, and acquaintances can quickly change from beloved community members to ostracized monsters in public perception. In response, many communities try to repress these collective memories, which is also related to questions of guilt in failing to prevent the killings. What had driven these murderers to commit their horrendous crimes? Could all this have been mitigated and avoided? What role did the community as such play in the killings? At the same time, murders, particularly serial killings, are prominent topics in news media. Mark Seltzer bases our culture's sensationalism related to these events on what he labels "wound culture." Central to this culture is "the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound" (1). This fascination with wounds and violence results in large-scale attention to such horrendous killings. Networks from all around the country report on these acts and identify all kinds of causes for such murders in an attempt to profit from our collective sensationalism. As a result, as Philip Simpson argues, many (serial) killers have become "immortal (and profitable) cultural icons" (2). Consequently, serial killers have also made their way onto the screen.

Violent (serial) killings and their perpetrators are a prominent topic in contemporary US-American cinema. Serial killers appear across various film genres, from horror to documentary film. For Brian Jarvis, this trend is driven by economic factors, as "[t]he commodification of violence is inseparable from the violence of commodification" (328). Based on our collective fascination with violence, movies about violent killings usually mediate the genesis and unfolding of these killings as well as the collective trauma that followed. Notably, though, most cinematic treatments focus rather on the sensationalist shock and horror of the incident than on the background thereof. If they do, they usually present the killers' psychological state or social environments: a look into their troubled childhood, a traumatic experience that would shape their future lives, or the development of an inherently evil person into a killer. These treatments fail to address the often complex ties between perpetrators' actions and their social and natural environments. There are remarkably few cinematic treatments of violent killings that focus on the natural environments or landscapes in which these incidents occur. This is notable not only because the majority of cinematic adaptations fail to acknowledge landscape's impact on human behavior, a subject's alienation, and its moral trans- and deformation but also because landscape has always been "a medium of cultural expression" (Mitchell 14). In this cultural understanding, landscape entails a significant semiotic function, so much so that we can use it as "a way of seeing the external world" (Cosgrove 46). How do filmmakers use (cinematic) landscapes to express violence? Which insights into violent incidents

and the communities where they occurred can be gained by using landscape as a visual and interpretative anchor?

This article is concerned with the cinematic representation of the link between violence, trauma, and landscape. In particular, I focus on film's potential to mediate trauma by analyzing the landscape surrounding violent incidents. James Benning's experimental documentary film *Landscape Suicide* (1986) sets out to revisit the story of two murder cases in different parts of the United States. The resulting film comprises countless landscape shots, each of which traces the natural and social environment surrounding the killings. I will argue that *Landscape Suicide* promotes an understanding of landscape that goes beyond a mere setting for narrative. In doing so, it presents viewers with two distinct functions of landscape in mediating violence and trauma: as a spatialization of time and as socio-political surroundings. In his attempt to present an alternative to the sensationalism found in both the media's and Hollywood's approach to and depiction of violent killings, Benning's film slowly reveals the landscape's impact on the killers. Landscape becomes a space for provocation and hesitation, processing and interpretation, as well as remembrance and reflection. Analyzing these aspects of the film helps us to better understand the link between landscape and violence and the ramifications thereof in Benning's film, and also sheds light on the connection between landscape and trauma culture in general.

In *Landscape Suicide*, Benning introduces a link between landscape and trauma that allows us to expand on and complicate existing research on cinematic landscapes and the trauma that they mediate. In recent years, different ecological crises have led scholars to reevaluate the traumatic potential of cinematic landscapes. While landscapes were long considered narrative background in trauma cinema, these theories present them as the source of trauma. Of particular note are Anil Narine's edited collection on *Eco-Trauma Cinema* (2015) and E. Ann Kaplan's *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* (2016). Both books examine cinematic depictions of trauma that arise from (changing) landscapes. With *Landscape Suicide*, Benning proposes a sort of middle ground to these positions. Between a mere background to the narrative and a traumatizing agent, Benning looks at landscape as a witness to the violence. The notion of "witnessing" is central to trauma studies and trauma film studies alike. In trauma film, however, "witnessing" is closely connected to the audience of a film (see, e.g., Kaplan 204; Caruth 56). In contrast, Benning presents landscape as an active witness. With this, the film promotes a sense of what Michael Richardson calls "nonhuman witnessing" and gives landscapes agency in the otherwise anthropocentric process of witnessing (3–5). Benning's understanding of landscape thus transcends the dichotomy between human and non-human spaces. He suggests that, while the traumatic incidents are still caused by human actors,

audiences can better understand their actions by engaging with the landscape wherein they occurred. An analysis of *Landscape Suicide* thus allows us to expand on the connection between landscape, violence, and trauma.

James Benning, Filmmaker Extraordinaire

> Last summer, my daughter,[1] who was twelve at the time, and I took a train from Milwaukee to New York. We changed trains in Chicago and my daughter bought a *Rolling Stone* magazine. Somewhere in the middle of Indiana, she ripped six or seven pages out of the magazine and handed them to me and said she didn't wanna read this kind of article. It only scared her. (*Landscape Suicide* 00:06:55–07:20)

In the mid-1980s, James Benning was working on a script on the experience of violence, which would have featured the stories of convicted serial killer Ed Gein, Charles Evers (the brother of the assassinated civil rights activist Medgar Evers), and of a World War II ambulance driver. It was at that time that Sadie Benning stumbled upon a story about a murder case involving high school students in California. Benning realized that Sadie was as affected by this encounter with violence and death as he was when he learned of the case of Ed Gein as a teenager in 1957 (MacDonald, "James Benning" 244). Their subsequent conversation sparked the idea to make a film that compares and juxtaposes two murder cases from two different places in two different decades: the murder of Kirsten Costas by Bernadette Protti in a suburb of San Francisco in 1984 and the case of Ed Gein in Plainfield, Wisconsin, in the 1950s. Protti, who allegedly suffered from a long history of bullying and an inability to fit in, lured her classmate to a fake party and ended up stabbing and killing her. Whether or not the crime was carefully planned and committed in cold blood or happened in the heat of the moment remains subject to speculation. Gein had made the headlines for killing at least two women, Mary Hogan and Bernice Worden,[2] exhuming, mutilating, and disemboweling the corpses of several others, and for turning the bones, skin, etc. of his victims into pieces of furniture. While the film compares the two cases and the landscapes they occurred in, its central aspect of interest is the communal response to death. This focus on death informs much of Benning's opus in the 1980s.

During this time, Benning made several movies that addressed issues of crime, violence, and death. He often mentions 1979 as a turning point, when he woke up in bed and found a close friend dead next to him. This traumatic experience significantly influenced him and his filmmaking, and "death has cast a subtle shadow on his films" after the incident (Reynaud 79). His subsequent films in the 1980s – *Him and Me* (1982), *American Dreams* (1984), *Landscape Suicide* (1986), and *Used*

[1] Sadie Benning has since identified as non-binary.
[2] Gein confessed to killing them in 1957 but was suspected to have killed several other people (Gollmar 81–88).

Innocence (1989) – address the aforementioned issues in one way or another. Benning later called the making of these films a process of coming to terms with "discovering death so close to me" (qtd. in Macdonald, "James Benning" 242). While Benning has often stated that one recurring idea may permeate several films (see, e.g., MacDonald, "Exploring the New West" 9; Zuvela), each of the films mentioned above presents us with a unique take on violence. In *Landscape Suicide*, his idea was not to focus on the violence itself but to investigate how perpetrators view their involvement in violent crimes and how this view changes over time (MacDonald, "James Benning" 244). Contrary to cinematic trends in the mediation of violent killings, *Landscape Suicide* is a very anti-sensationalist portrayal of the two murder cases.

The case of Ed Gein gave way to various sensationalist cinematic responses. The incidents of murder, grave robbing, corpse mutilation, and (alleged) cannibalism[3] were the inspiration for horror classics such as *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), and *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) (see, e.g., MacDonald, "James Benning" 223; de Bruyn 167; MacDonald, "Testing your Patience" 429).[4] Apart from these horror classics, Gein continues to be a prominent topic of documentary films and television series on serial killers. Most recently, Canadian filmmaker James Buddy Day explores Gein in his documentary miniseries *Psycho: The Lost Tapes of Ed Gein* (2023). Benning's film could not be more different from these films and television series. Gein's crimes (and to a similar degree his upbringing) take a central position in both the horror films and in most documentary films and series. *Landscape Suicide* refuses the sensationalist undertones that are usually associated with Gein. This rejection is what Nikolaj Lübecker calls the film's central "provocation" (61). Benning's approach to violence goes against common trends in addressing violent incidents in contemporary cinema. These trends vary from genre to genre, but both fiction and documentary films on violent incidents often feature a sense of sensationalism. While *Landscape Suicide* is a film about violence, it lacks any depiction thereof; shock and horror are entirely missing.

Instead, Benning examines the links between people and their surrounding environments, socio-political circumstances, and ultimately also the culture of remembrance and forgetting in the communities where the murders happened. Just as Benning rejects the sensationalism introduced by news coverage and the popular horror films mentioned above, he also goes beyond a simple geo-deterministic (i.e., something happened because of the landscape) treatment of the murder cases. Instead, he

[3] When the police searched Gein's home after the murder of Bernice Worden, they found a human heart next to his stove, but Gein never confessed to cannibalism (Gollmar 24, 41).
[4] The case of Bernadette Protti sparked less cinematic interest. Two television films address the issue: *A Friend to Die For* (William A. Graham, 1994) and its remake, *Death of a Cheerleader* (Paul Shapiro, 2019).

links landscapes to bigger societal questions on economic inequality and rural isolation in the United States. For Lübecker, the film even invites broader reflections on the country as a whole and how its history, the violence it suffers from, and the natural environment are connected (56). Benning connects the violence of the two murder cases to an understanding of landscape and the natural world that awards each a form of agency.

In *Landscape Suicide* and his other films, Benning perpetuates a concept of landscape that refuses a dichotomy between a human and a non-human world. The landscape he depicts is not one that resists human presence but where humans and landscape need to be understood as one entity. In *Landscape Suicide*, Benning argues that the two killers and their actions are closely connected to their surrounding landscapes. The murders can only be fully understood by looking outward. To some extent, this implies an anthropocentric understanding of landscape in Benning's film. After all, Benning is in search of an answer to these murder cases and does not examine any violence inflicted on nonhuman spaces and ecosystems. However, landscape is more than a background and rather serves as a quiet witness to the crimes. Benning presents landscape much like a separate character that reveals subtle details of the murder cases to attentive viewers.

Benning's distinct understanding of landscape is in part inspired by Robert Frank's short film *Home Improvements* (1985). Addressing the function of landscape in his later movie *Deseret* (1995), Benning remarked that "[o]ut in the middle of a Western landscape, where nobody's around, there seems to be some answer, a feeling of getting back to something that's much more real than what we generally experience" (qtd. in MacDonald, "Exploring the New West" 5). He continues by stating that

> I think Robert Frank expresses it really well in his video, *Home Improvements* [1985], when he points the camera out his window in Nova Scotia, and says, "The answer's out there, but every time I look out, it's different; it's always changing." I think maybe that's what it is: a search for an answer *out there*, where every moment is different from the moment before. (5, original emphasis)

Similar to Frank, who assessed that we are "always looking outside trying to look inside. Trying to tell something that's true. But maybe nothing is really true, except what's out there. And what's out there is always different" (*Home Improvements* 00:25:08–40), Benning is also in search for a truth that only becomes visible "out there" (qtd. in Panse 66). While Frank presents landscape as a dynamic medium ("what's out there is always different"), Benning considers our individual perception of landscape and the environment as constantly changing over time (Panse 67). Frank's unique understanding of landscape thus greatly influenced Benning's approach to the two murder cases: An answer was out there, somewhere in their

environments. For Benning, this answer can only be found by approaching the image differently. To do so, he employs cinematography that strongly builds on duration.

In *Landscape Suicide*, Benning's cinematography and overall approach to filmmaking mirror his philosophical understanding of landscape. His practice of filmmaking is based on manipulating images to "make things more real than reality" (qtd. in Bértolo and Nascimento Duarte 203). In doing so, Benning explores the boundaries of John Grierson's ideal of documentaries as "a creative treatment of actuality" (13). Instead of actuality, *Landscape Suicide* offers visual and audio distortions and detachments. Benning's understanding of filmmaking strongly impacts his narrative style. By repeating shots, presenting them without clear narrative progression, disconnecting sound and image, and an overall unclear temporal structure, Benning breaks with several representational conventions of traditional documentary filmmaking (Wolfe 145; Nichols). Benning's use of various disconnects is crucial for the film, as they occur not only between sound and image and image and reality but also between memory and incident.

The Spatialization of Time

In *Landscape Suicide*, as in most of Benning's work, landscape is a critical marker of temporality and duration. In a somewhat humorous remark, Benning once stated that he is interested in both the spatialization of time and the temporalization of space (qtd. in Zuvela). Landscape can thus only be understood in connection to time and vice versa. Duration is a key element in Benning's work. After working on his California Trilogy,[5] he realized "that place can only be understood over time; that is, that place is a function of time" (Benning qtd. in MacDonald, "Testing your Patience" 430). Elements of this are already traceable in *Landscape Suicide*. On his way to Orinda, the San Francisco suburb where Bernadette Protti murdered Kirsten Costas, Benning presents audiences with an uninterrupted 20-second static shot. While 20 seconds is not particularly long compared to other shots both in *Landscape Suicide* and in Benning's other works, what makes this shot stand out is that it is entirely static and seemingly unrelated to the overall narrative. It carries no clear meaning; its sole purpose seems to be to allow viewers to make out the wind rustling through the trees and the passing cars in the background that they could otherwise not perceive.

Duration can have many effects on viewers. Engaging with the same image over a long period of time can almost serve as a form of irritation. For first-time viewers, as Danni Zuvela assesses, the effect of these static long takes is an experience "of radical, almost unnerving stillness." Such a sense of stillness can then give way to a reflection on the film. In this instance, it is mainly a reflection on the relationship

[5] This trilogy includes *El Valley Centro* (1999), *Los* (2000), and *Sogobi* (2001).

between time and place. While the camera in this shot is static, the scene is still highly dynamic. The viewer's inability to place the shot in a narrative continuity renders the landscape in the scene almost provocative. Again, however, duration is vital, as "the formal elegance of the compositions somehow becomes surreal over time, as we look *into*, instead of *at*, the place" (Zuvela, original emphasis). The duration of the shots strongly influences the audience's act of seeing. Only through duration is it possible to look *into* a place and see beyond what is initially visible.

Benning's filmmaking strongly draws on a spatialization of time and the effect that duration can have on audiences. In his films, time becomes a complex concept with many different aspects that can each be manipulated. Each temporal change impacts the perception of the image. Benning states that

> I have an interest in exploring space-time relationships through film. There's real time, and there's how we perceive time. Time affects the way we perceive place. . . . In my films, I'm very aware of *recording place over time*, and the way that makes you understand place. Once you've been watching something for a while, you become aware of it differently. I could show you a photograph of the place, but that doesn't convince you, it's not the same as seeing it *in time*. . . .
>
> My films ask you to look *around* the frame, and *at* the frame, and have a different experience to the one you're probably used to from TV or Hollywood. If we see things being signposted all the time…we become lazy, we become dominated by the filmmaker instead of having room to move. (qtd. in Zuvela, original emphasis)

This different way of looking at an image – looking *into* an image *over time* – is crucial for understanding *Landscape Suicide*. While Benning asks us to think of these murder cases in relation to space, he also explores their connection to time in its strictest sense. Through his long, uninterrupted takes, he introduces us to certain feelings and experiences of space. In a two-minute scene, Benning drives through Orinda and gives the audience a first look at the city.

The time he dedicates to this exploration is crucial, as viewers can get a sense of place. Benning shows us an Orinda that is, first and foremost, a very affluent community: large houses, a lot of green, and gardens that are tended to. The longer the scene continues, the more we get the idea of a wealthy suburb. On closer inspection, by looking *into* the place instead of *at* it, we see that some cars are less fancy than others, some houses are smaller than the others on the street, and some gardens are not as lusciously green as others. The supporting audio features a preacher talking about sin. The audio not only serves as a kind of foreshadowing but also seems to illustrate how every deviation from the (affluent) norm could become subject to gossip in this community. Another notable element is the rain. Rain takes on a very calm, almost repressive quality in this shot. The grey sky somewhat clashes with the green yards. It gives viewers the impression that something remains hidden and repressed.

With this long, uninterrupted take of Orinda, Benning introduces ideas that are crucial for uncovering the connection between place and violence. Duration and time make viewers increasingly aware of the socio-economic disparities and a fear of gossiping that might have driven Bernadette Protti to commit the crime. The same goes for the repression of memory. Benning's first look at Orinda presents it as a rainy US-American suburb. In the film, the long take gives the rain a certain gravitas, a unique repressive quality. Awareness of temporality and duration is crucial for uncovering what connects this place to the violence that occurred there. Landscape, duration, and temporality are also key components of *Landscape Suicide*'s political subtext.

The Politics of Space

Benning's usage of the long shot is both a stylistic choice and a means of reintroducing a political meaning to the image. In an interview with Silke Panse, Benning ponders on the importance of duration for the political in his films, stating that, while his films might initially be an "aesthetic experience" for his audiences, "through duration that breaks down [,] there are hints in the image that become political or social" (65). Throughout *Landscape Suicide*, Benning carefully combines duration, landscape shots, and the story of these murders to reflect on the socio-political circumstances of the crimes. Benning's films all share political subtexts that are closely connected to his understanding of landscape.

Even though Benning ultimately chose art over political campaigning, his films are far from apolitical. Especially in his later films, he addresses highly ecocritical topics and focuses on humans' often unsustainable treatment of the natural world. The political message of his earlier films is less obvious, but it is nonetheless there. While he initially wanted to make films without a political message, "politics kept creeping in" (Benning qtd. in Bértolo and Nascimento Duarte 198) and he ultimately decided to embrace this tendency in his filmmaking. One important aspect of his turn to politics in his films is the aforementioned aesthetic engagement with duration and the long take. For Benning, the viewing experience is closely tied to the political aspect of his films. He believes that a different aesthetic treatment of an issue might enable audiences to engage with this issue politically as well (MacDonald, "James Benning" 231). Benning does not necessarily intend the political undertones of his films to change the beliefs held by the audience (231). Nonetheless, his films and their political messages confront viewers with their preconceived political ideas (Bértolo and Nascimento Duarte 198). This complex understanding of filmmaking and politics also informs Benning's treatment of landscape.

Landscape Suicide links Benning's political filmmaking to his understanding of the connection between humans and landscape. Similar to how landscape is a function

of time in Benning's films, the human subject is a function of landscape. *Landscape Suicide* was the first film where he tried to address this link between landscape and people (Panse 60). For Benning, there is a clear relationship between the murder cases and the social and physical environments they occurred in. Benning wanted to compare "the isolation produced by the Middle Wisconsin winter, an isolation so severe that it can almost lead to madness, to the alienation felt in the pristine landscape of affluent California that caused that kid to become a killer" (qtd. in Reynaud 78). His overall conclusion is that both forms of isolation and alienation "are somewhat a function of where [the killers] lived" (qtd. in Panse 60). Viewing the crimes committed by these perpetrators in relation to the communities they grew up in invites a comparison with the writings of Judith Butler, who asserts that

> we need to situate individual responsibility in light of its collective conditions [since] individuals are formed, and we would be making a mistake if we reduced their actions to purely self-generated acts of will or symptoms of individual pathology or "evil." (15)

While the two killers might not have been conditioned to commit their crimes, they were influenced and impacted by their social and physical environments in many ways. This assumption turns the environment and the landscape into highly political spaces. Already in its opening shot, *Landscape Suicide* introduces us to a political reading of landscape and of the two cases.

The film opens with an almost four-minute sequence of a tennis player. The man in view repeatedly serves a tennis ball in what initially appears to be a single looped shot. We only realize later in the sequence that the balls to the right become fewer and fewer. Ultimately, the film gives us a reverse angle shot that reveals the other side of the tennis court, where all the balls that had been served lie scattered around. Scholars and critics have argued that the scene introduces viewers to "the obsessive and competitive nature of the Orinda environment" (de Bruyn 162), hints at "the pressure to succeed at work or at play for Bernadette" (Reynaud 77), and "prompts us to think about the isolation of modern man in the wealthy Californian suburbs" (Lübecker 58). In this sense, the opening scene introduces the film's general link between environment and action but also presents the complexity of this relationship where cause and effect are not necessarily visible. The scene further lends itself to a discussion in the context of trauma cinema.

The temporal complexity, the repetitive action, and the affective provocation of the scene mirror the trauma that these killings induced. In his elaborations on the temporal quality of trauma, Robert Stolorow states that "[i]n the region of trauma, all duration or stretching-along collapses, past becomes present and future loses all meaning other than endless repetition" (55). Benning's scene helps us visualize this understanding of trauma long before Stolorow wrote these lines. The scene on the

tennis court serves as a reminder of the endless repetition of trauma. With its unique narrative focus, it also features levels of "disturbance and fragmentation of [both] narrative and stylistic regimes," which Janet Walker considers crucial for trauma cinema (19). In this sense, *Landscape Suicide* joins the ranks of other trauma films in that it is also "especially appropriate to figuring the visual, aural and non-linear phenomena of trauma – to performing it" and thereby manages to articulate the "paralysis, repetition, circularity" of trauma (Kaplan 204–05). The trauma of this scene is, however, not only related to the murders that would follow but also to an inability to conform to a neoliberal society's norms and expectations. The temporal ambiguity thus situates the trauma across the past, present, and future. In addition to this form of concealed politics, the film offers political undertones beyond such a socio-economic critique.

Landscape Suicide shows us another form of political landscape closely related to a US-American understanding of community, connection, and the natural world. After all, the film addresses violence in different parts of the United States (see also Lübecker 55), which introduces a national dimension to the relationship between violence and the environment. This national dimension becomes obvious only by looking *into* instead of *at* a frame. As part of his exploration of Orinda County, Benning shows viewers shots of highways, a railroad, and power lines, all of which hint at the imposition of human power and politics onto landscape. In reference to his earlier short film *I-94* (1974), on which he collaborated with feminist filmmaker Bette Gordon, Benning states that "we were aware of superhighways and railroad tracks as American public symbols. We chose extremely loaded images, not knowing everything about how they might be read" (qtd. in MacDonald, "James Benning" 226). Notably, he depicts the same symbolic spaces in *Landscape Suicide*. The power lines in the film seem, for MacDonald, "like a metaphor for power of all kinds" ("James Benning" 245), which certainly has to do with our cultural understanding of the human impact on landscape. This metaphorical quality of landscape is similar to W. J. T. Mitchell's assertion that landscape does not "merely signify and symbolize power relations; it is an instrument of cultural power, [which] naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable" (1–2). Politics in its different figurations permeate all landscapes in *Landscape Suicide*, but they become most apparent in Benning's stylistic choices when depicting Orinda and Plainfield.

Benning presents us with two clashing renditions of the United States: Orinda, a wealthy, affluent San Francisco suburb, and Plainfield, an almost run-down part of the Midwest. The portrayal of these spaces showcases the economic distances and disparities within the country. Orinda and Plainfield are as different as can be; the

only thing that ultimately links them is the violence they witnessed. Apart from the narration in the film, subtle details in certain shots hint at the economic affluence of Orinda. In Orinda, the used car dealer sells Porsches and Cadillacs. Everything makes it look like a very well-off community, so much so that "even the prison looks like a condominium," as MacDonald remarks ("James Benning" 245). While "Orinda County feels brand new" (Benning qtd. in MacDonald, "James Benning" 245), Plainfield feels the opposite. Everything looks run-down and old, and buildings look dilapidated and deserted. On the process of filming in Wisconsin in 1985, Benning noted that he "wanted what I shot to look like 1957, and there was no trouble doing that. If you bring in some old cars, it looks like 1957, 1940, 1930" (245–46). While Orinda feels very rich, Plainfield looks old, deserted, and derelict, which adds to the feeling of separation between the two. The closing scene further points to significant economic differences between the two places.

Benning links Plainfield to all sorts of violence. One form of violence comes up in a longer scene of a hunter carefully disemboweling a deer. This scene has several different meanings. First, it hints at Ed Gein's inability to cope with the sight of blood, as he had claimed during the interrogation. This is why, as he noted, he never hunted deer. Second, it illustrates what remains in the dark: Gein's treatment of the corpses at his home. Like the hunter in this scene, Gein had also disemboweled his 'prey.' Last, while the opening shot introduces pressure to succeed in a highly affluent community for Bernadette, the closing shot, according to Reynaud, hints at "a repulsion/fascination for blood produced by a frontier culture" for Gein (77). The painstaking detail in this shot clashes with the repetitiveness of the opening shot. This contrast provides the necessary framework for reading the film along socio-political lines.

Several scenes in *Landscape Suicide* illustrate Benning's attempt to present the subject as a function of its environment. Time and duration allow viewers to reflect on what they see and look *into* a place instead of *at* it. We can only discover the socio-political forces at play by looking into Orinda and Plainfield. In this context, landscape also takes on a third function in the film. While the stories told in the film seemingly culminate in the murders and the interrogations, Plainfield and Orinda forever remain the locations of these crimes. How do communities deal with such a lingering trauma? Upon visiting Orinda, Benning remarks that "things became more real" (00:37:50–54). This reading of the environment of a murder is not the case in Plainfield. There, Benning states that he "couldn't get a sense of the murder. But the feeling of a collective guilt still lingers" (00:58:25–33). This "collective guilt" gives way to another function of landscape in the film, as a space for remembrance, repression, and forgetting.

Landscape Suicide mediates the primary communal response to the murders, i.e., repression. Whereas both cases garnered a lot of community and media attention, the central response to each respective case was a sense of repression. Benning once more links this notion to landscape. The film presents us with emptied landscapes and shots of the communities; the crime scenes are deserted and seemingly forgotten. Benning shows us a landscape that has eventually reconquered the narrative. While the two killings were notably different, repression was crucial for both the killers and the communities wherein the crimes occurred. Derek Russell Davis defines repression as "a defence mechanism that ensures that what is unacceptable to the conscious mind, and would if recalled arouse anxiety, is prevented from entering into it" (803). While Davis refers to a psychological, unconscious form of repression, the communities opted for more active forms thereof. In the aftermath of the murder case, the Costas family left the community where Kirsten was killed and moved to Hawaii. Likewise, after having spent seven years in prison, Bernadette Protti changed her name and moved out of California. After Ed Gein had been committed to a hospital, his farmhouse came up for auction, but it burnt down under mysterious circumstances before it could be sold (Gollmar 80). Eventually, it seems the residents of Plainfield had imposed a communal sense of amnesia onto the landscape and their community (see also de Bruyn 166). With this, the community of Plainfield might not only have tried to forget Gein's horrendous crimes but also its own involvement in them. After all, Gein had been a trusted and valued neighbor within the community. In both cases, landscape is the only remaining witness, the only spatial reminder of the crimes and what the communities were trying to forget.

In this article, I traced the connection between violence, landscape, and trauma in James Benning's *Landscape Suicide*. In my analysis of the film, I found that landscape is a very productive medium to both express the power dynamics behind the film's violence and serve as a spatial witness to and reminder of the communities' collective trauma. Benning organizes the shots in *Landscape Suicide* in a non-linear way that supports neither dramatic development nor narrative closure. As no meaning can be derived from the narrative progression, the film forces viewers to engage with landscape differently, to look *into* instead of just *at* a space. This immersive attempt at filmmaking has enabled him to make a film that addresses events that were exploited by the news media without engaging in this sensationalism himself. In the movie, landscape becomes a constant reminder of crime, fear, and guilt. The ties between landscape, violence, and trauma in *Landscape Suicide* suggest that we need a new approach to trauma culture as a whole, one where landscape is more than background but not the source of trauma itself. *Landscape Suicide* presents landscape as a witness to both the build-up and the unfolding of the crimes. In many ways, the

film attempts to create a possible testimony of landscape and it allows viewers to immerse themselves in this testimony.

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