

# **Re-Envisioning the American West: Babette Mangolte's *The Sky on Location*, James Benning's *North on Evers*, Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*, and Ellen Spiro's *Roam Sweet Home***

**Scott MacDonald**

In *Discoverers, Explorers, Settlers: The Diligent Writers of Early America*, Wayne Franklin defines three forms of narrative that developed during the first centuries of European expansion into North America, as a means of “domesticating the strangeness” of the vast new continent Europeans were in the process of “discovering,” exploring, and settling. In the “discovery narrative,” the writer stands in rapt wonder at the magnificent vista before him (the earliest writers were all, so far as we know, men), astonished at the immensity and the beauty of the reward God has provided at the end of his long ocean voyage. His prose is simple, overflowing with delight—sometimes merely a listing of the wonders he is faced with.<sup>1</sup> In the “exploratory narrative,” the explorer longs to harness New World nature, “to transform its details into human objects or artifacts.” Fittingly, the explorer’s narrative prose style is grammatically more complex than the prose of the discoverer: “The invention of true sentences, by which things are subordinated to human will, provides a concise model of colonialization.”<sup>2</sup> Finally, in the “settlement narrative,” the settler/writer is faced with the problem of adjusting the discoverer’s wonder at God’s ideal creation, in light of the difficult facts of life that settlement within the now-explored territory has revealed: “The feat of writing becomes . . . an attempt to recognize the shape of recalcitrant truths and to name them by their proper names.”<sup>3</sup>

Franklin's model developed from his analysis of sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth-century literary texts, but it is suggestive for twentieth-century cinematic texts as well—although the American terrain has changed dramatically. America is a terrain so thoroughly discovered, explored, and settled that we must struggle to find even the illusion of a distinctive, personal place for ourselves. If commercial media makers have tended to distract us from any concern with coming to terms with the specifics of our real geography—often by implicitly arguing that our “place” is simply to consume whatever modern commerce makes available (including whatever geographic locales film and television directors pretend are the locations for particular on-screen activities), many independent film and videomakers have attempted to use cinema as a means of revivifying our sense of place in all its complexity—that is, for evoking something of the original settlers' wonder at where we are, something of the original explorers' excitement in transforming the possible into the actual, and something of the original settlers' understanding of the practical failures of their surround—while at the same time recognizing the problematic moral/environmental/political implications of five centuries of European involvement in the Western Hemisphere.

I have chosen three films and one videotape—Babette Mangolte's *The Sky on Location* (1983), James Benning's *North on Evers* (1991), Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994), and Ellen Spiro's *Roam Sweet Home* (1996)—to stand for a considerable body of independent media that fruitfully engages the issue of place, and in particular, the American West as a paradigm of the American experience. The goal of the following discussion is to alert teachers and scholars to our most under-recognized and under-utilized cinematic resource: variously termed “avant-garde,” “experimental,” “alternative” . . . (the proliferation of terminology is itself a reflection of the extent and complexity of the field). My hope is that, in addition to providing a useful analysis of four accomplished moving-image works, my discussion demonstrates the relevance of these works to current thinking among art historians, Americanists, and students of American nature writing.

### **THE SKY ON LOCATION AS RE-DISCOVERY NARRATIVE**

By the time Babette Mangolte made *The Sky on Location*, she had spent a decade in New York City and had established herself as one of the foremost independent cinematographers working in America. Having come to New York in 1970 to see films by avant-garde filmmakers, Stan Brakhage and Michael Snow, she stayed because of the excitement of the New York art scene, and supported herself by working as a still photographer, specializing in the documentation of performance art and dance. Soon she was also doing cinematography for a series of landmark feminist films: Yvonne Rainer's *Lives of Performers* (1972) and *Film about a Woman Who . . .* (1974); Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), Anthony McCall, Claire Pajaczkowska, Andrew Tyndall, and Jane Weinstock's *Sigmund Freud's Dora*



**Figure 1:** Fog in the Tetons, from Babette Mangolte's *The Sky on Location* (1983).

(1979), and Sally Potter's *The Gold Diggers* (1983). By the mid-1970s, she was also making her own films, only one of which, *What Maisie Knew* (1975), an evocation of the Henry James novel, received any support from reviewers and audiences of independent cinema.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of *The Sky on Location*, the gap between accomplishment and recognition was particularly wide, probably because in 1983, Mangolte's decision to re-explore the American West could hardly have seemed less attuned to the American independent filmmaking scene, which seemed focused on gender, ethnic, and sexual cine-liberation. As was true for many of the early settlers, Mangolte's decision to go West involved an escape from the doctrinaire conventions of her moment. And it offered Mangolte a topic commensurate with her considerable gifts as a cinematographer.

During 1980-81 Mangolte travelled (with one assistant), making imagery, for a little over eleven weeks (there were five separate automobile trips), during all four seasons: "Altogether I drove close to 20,000 miles. I was always trying to make sure I would take a road that would lead me to something interesting, even

though I couldn't be sure: I was always taking the road for the first time."<sup>5</sup> In *The Sky on Location*, Mangolte's focus is on Western landscapes that show no obvious indication of human interference<sup>6</sup>—filmed with the kind of solemn respect evident in the paintings of Thomas Moran and in the photographs of William Henry Jackson and Ansel Adams. All Mangolte's carefully composed images are made with a 16mm camera mounted on a tripod, though there are frequent pans, some of them evocative of the panoramic paintings and photographs of the nineteenth century (and of still and moving panoramas), others expressive of Mangolte's own excitement at being within these remarkable landscapes.

The first of Mangolte's journeys begins mid-summer (July 27, 1980) in the Togwotee Pass near Grand Teton National Park and moves through Yellowstone and up to Glacier National Park. A second begins in Silverton, Colorado, jumps to Wyoming's South Pass and moves west across Nevada to Death Valley. Next, we are in the Rio Grande Valley and circle up through Utah's Kodachrome Basin to Bryce Canyon, Monument Valley, Zion Canyon, then into Arizona to the Grand Canyon, Canyon de Chelly, and to the Hopi reservation. A brief moment in the Sonoran Desert is followed by a trip from Yosemite Valley, across the Sierra Nevadas to Mono Lake and into Nevada to Pyramid Lake, Carson Sink Pass, Humboldt Sink, and Dry Lake. Then the film returns to Utah—to Cedar Breaks and Zion; then, again, to Death Valley. Another journey begins in the San Juan Mountains in southern Colorado, moves north through Silverton along the Great Divide to the Great Divide Basin in Wyoming, to the Green River Flaming Gorge, back to South Pass and Fremont Lake. Next, we are back in the Tetons, moving north into Yellowstone. *The Sky on Location* jumps north and west to the Cascade Range, beginning at Mt. Hood and Mount St. Helens (after the eruption) then moving south to Crater Lake and the Klamath area and into the redwoods of Northern California. A final journey returns us to Kodachrome Basin, Bryce Canyon, Canyon de Chelly and the Painted Desert; and the film concludes in late spring with brief visits to Mono Lake, to the Sonoran and Mojave Deserts, and to Yosemite.

Mangolte explains at the beginning that she wanted to see what it was like to be in "unknown territory." While the locations through which she travels are hardly unknown (except insofar as her personal experience is concerned)—in many cases, they are the standard tourist destinations of the West—the seeming disorganization of the film's sequences is for most viewers "unknown territory," at least given the standard sensibility, common both to touring and to filmgoing, of knowing precisely which route and which stops will be "covered" in a particular, limited time. Well into *The Sky on Location*, during Mangolte's second visit to Death Valley, she provides a close-up of several bird and insect tracks, and a snake track, and wonders, "What happened here? We follow the tracks of the snake. Are they [the insects, bird, snakes] all gone? We look as the story progresses." The tiny mystery of these wanderings can be read as a metaphor for

Mangolte's unusual, even somewhat "mysterious" route. Indeed, even the one clear trajectory within Mangolte's travels—the seasonal cycle—is a fabrication. Though she travelled for only eleven weeks, *The Sky on Location* creates the sense that we are gradually moving through the seasons, from mid-summer, through fall and winter (temporal "unknown territories" for tourists who flood the popular Western sites during mid-summer), into spring.

The soundtrack of *The Sky on Location* contextualizes the film's visual imagery in a variety of ways. It includes a complex narration, the sounds of the areas where Mangolte filmed, and intermittent music. While Mangolte is the film's primary narrator (we hear her first and most often), she is not alone: two other voices—one female (Honora Ferguson), one male (Bruce Boston)—comment on the imagery, provide quotations and other forms of information about the West (the sources are often not indicated). Mangolte's narration feels intimate, almost diaristic, and its accent clearly defines her as French. The other voices, recorded after Mangolte's journeys were completed, seem comparatively detached from the imagery and from the feeling for the imagery that is evident in Mangolte's narration—in large measure because they were clearly recorded in a studio.<sup>7</sup> Generally, in fact, these studio voices are abrasive. As Mangolte has explained, "You [the viewer] struggle with the information addressing itself to your intellect at the same time that you are seduced by the visuals . . . the dynamism of the film lies in that disjunction between the studio aspect of the voices commenting after the fact (even when they actually speak very literally of what is in the frame) and the presence of the actual landscape itself."<sup>8</sup> All in all, the impact of Mangolte's dispersal of narrative identity is to force us to see these ideal landscapes through two separate, though related histories: the history of the West itself and the history of the representation of this region.

The narration includes references to the ancient civilizations of the West, to early European explorers and missionaries, to the emigrants trekking westward along the major trails, to the 1871 geological survey and the establishment of Yellowstone National Park, and to the early-twentieth-century tourist regime at the Old Faithful Inn, to the emptying of Mono Lake and of the surrounding water table during the development of modern Californian cities, and to Ronald Reagan's interest in dismantling land-protection laws. The second history, of the imaging of the West, is evident in the narrators' references to ancient petroglyphs; to Thomas Moran and William Henry Jackson (whose paintings and photographs of the Yellowstone region and the Grand Canyon were instrumental both in causing the U.S. Congress to protect these areas, and in helping the railroads to entice potential tourists to travel West),<sup>9</sup> to the films of John Ford (Mangolte: "Like most Europeans, the first images of the West I saw were in John Ford's movies."),<sup>10</sup> and to the naming of a region of Utah after a filmstock (Kodachrome). Another aspect of this second history—the history of scholarly responses to the depictions of the West—is suggested not only by the somewhat pedantic voices on the soundtrack, but also during Mangolte's closing credits: "The filmmaker

wishes to acknowledge her indebtedness to Barbara Novak's remarkable book, *Nature and Culture* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1980]. The history of painting Novak charts in her book, and in her other work, is frequently referred to during *The Sky on Location*.

While the visuals are arranged so as to suggest Mangolte's free-form wanderings within the seasonal cycle, the soundtrack is organized poetically. The comments of the narrators "move the viewer around" historically in a more-or-less random fashion analogous to Mangolte's free-form geographic wanderings; but as *The Sky on Location* evolves, Mangolte provides various echoes and other auditory structuring devices. At times, each narrator speaks separately of some place or issue; often, the three speakers collaborate on a particular issue; but in two instances, each of the three speakers successively makes the same statement (during the second visit to Yellowstone, each narrator says, "You see deer tracks everywhere"; and in southern Oregon near the end of the film, each narrator says, "Spring is here; there are signs of melting everywhere."). Mangolte tells us during her first visit to Mono Lake that she is looking "west again. And south. And east" (each direction is accompanied by a different shot), and later (during her second visit to the Tetons) that "we look at the world below, north, west, and west again, and south . . ." The similarity of the two passages is confirmed in the rhythms of the editing. The entire film is framed by a passage of music (except for excerpts from "Onward Christian Soldiers," "My Darling Clementine," Brahms' "German Requiem," and Strauss's "Last Song," the intermittent music was supplied by Ann Hankinson) and a pan of clouds in a blue sky that we see/hear with the brief opening and closing credits, though the exact same musical passage plays just before the narrators announce the arrival of spring, signalling the closing movement of the film.

Early in *The Sky on Location*, Mangolte is looking at a southwestern sky, at the pattern of clouds moving over the patterned land, and remarks, "You pride yourself in thinking you were maybe the only ones ever to see that . . . junction of two distinctive patterns sliding one on top of another." While she herself recognizes the naiveté of her conjecture, the image it creates provides a way of thinking about the structure of her film: the relatively freeform pattern of the soundtrack "slides" over the different freeform pattern of the imagery, allowing us to meditate on the relationships between being in a place and thinking about a place, between geography and history, between nature and culture.

The original "discoverers" of the New World saw its magnificence as God's reward for the arduous voyage they needed to endure to reach this continent. They were able to process the natural immensity (and the cultural potential implicit within it) by deploying a comparatively rudimentary version of their native language to describe it. That is, the size of their "discovery" tended to render them linguistic children, with some control of vocabulary, but limited ability with syntax.<sup>11</sup> For Mangolte, a contemporary, European re-discoverer of the New World, no grueling ocean voyage was necessary for her to experience American

Western landscapes. And yet, on one level, her “voyage” had its own difficulties: in order to see the West with the eyes of a (cinematic) child—that is, in one self-contained composition after another, shot from a camera mounted on a tripod, developing virtually no complex narrative sequence or syntax: the approach used by the Lumière Brothers at the dawn of cinema history—Mangolte needed to overcome the distractions of history, including nearly a century of film history that has conventionally been seen as teleologically in service of the development of complex storytelling.<sup>12</sup> Mangolte’s remarkable imagery does evoke the child-like awe of the New World that seems so clear in early discovery narratives and in the words and images of those first European Americans who explored the Far West. The paradox of *The Sky on Location* is Mangolte’s use of photography (an epitome of Western technological advance, surveillance, and control) and especially motion picture photography (the source of the West’s most visible industry, an industry virtually dedicated to the maintenance of European American heritage) to return us for a (cinematic) moment to a visual innocence—or, really, an illusion of innocence—quickly left behind by European American exploration and settlement.<sup>13</sup>

### NORTH ON EVERS AS RE-EXPLORATORY NARRATIVE

While *The Sky on Location* was Mangolte’s first attempt to explore landscape as the focus of a film, James Benning’s *North on Evers* is a distinguished addition to a series of films dealing with landscape and cityscape. Indeed, by the time he finished *North on Evers*, Benning’s reputation, which had been established by his distinctive depiction of Midwestern locales during the mid-1970s—especially in *8 1/2 x 11* (1974), *11 x 14* (1976), and *One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977)—had moved into eclipse. Benning’s 1970s films made their mark on audiences (and on other filmmakers) in large measure because they seemed to prove that, despite the seeming hegemonies of New York and San Francisco in the history of independent cinema, the “fly-over zone” of the Midwest was, in fact, making its own contribution. Benning’s move to New York City in 1981, and to California in 1988 (he has taught at the California Institute of the Arts since 1989), may have had the effect of compromising his influence as a regionalist, though, ironically, his recent films—and especially *American Dreams* (1984), *Landscape Suicide* (1986), *North on Evers* and *Deseret* (1996)—stand with the very best of his work, and with the most interesting (and academically useful) independent cinema of recent years.

While a number of Benning’s early films focus on very particular locales (*One Way Boogie Woogie*, for example, provides sixty one-minute shots of the industrial southside of Benning’s native Milwaukee—shots often infused with nostalgia for the romantic awe that factory landscapes could produce in those of us born during World War II), other films record journeys across considerable portions of the American landscape. For example, *The United States of America* (co-made with Bette Gordon in 1975) records a trip from the Brooklyn Bridge to



**Figure 2:** James Benning's motorcycle, from *North on Evers* (1991).

the Pacific Ocean near Los Angeles: Benning and Gordon mounted a camera in the back of their car and filmed at more-or-less regular intervals during their journey; the automobile windshield becomes a movie screen on which the filmmakers' wanderings are played out (the soundtrack—environmental sounds, music and commentary on the radio—was tape-recorded in the car). *North on Evers*, made twenty years later, records Benning's most geographically extensive journey—or, really, journeys—for a film.

Using an organization familiar from his *American Dreams*, Benning divides the viewer's attention between two different, but related experiences, each of which presents a journey across the United States. One of the two journeys is recorded visually (in synch-sound), the other is presented verbally—in a handwritten text that scrolls across the bottom of the film frame from right to left.<sup>14</sup> The production of *North on Evers* began in 1989, when Benning set off on a motorcycle trip from his home in Val Verde, California, and crossed the country along a southern route through Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, and through the South via Mississippi (Benning visits Fayette and Jackson, looking for the place where Medgar Evers—the "Evers" in his title—was murdered) and Nashville, to



Washington, D.C., and New York City, returning to California by a northern route through central New York, Chicago (where he documents the U.S. Steel works in Gary in a manner reminiscent of *One Way Boogie Woogie*), to Milwaukee, then across the upper Midwest to a motorcycle rally in Sturgis, South Dakota, to Yellowstone and the Tetons, to the Great Salt Lake, Hoover Dam, the Salton Sea, Death Valley, and back to Val Verde. During this first trip Benning recorded no imagery or sound, but on his return to California made notes on his experiences, which became the basis for the scrolling text.

As Benning explains in the text—midway through the film and his journey, just as he is arriving in New York City—“A year later I made the same trip again. I searched for the same people and places. I had a purpose. I looked both outside and in. I filmed landscapes and portraits. I recorded sound.”

While *North on Evers* shares a number of Western locales with *The Sky on Location* (the Grand Canyon, Monument Valley, Yellowstone, the Tetons, Death Valley, and the Mojave Desert), it is, as even a basic description suggests, a very different film. While Mangolte suppresses her personal history (even the personal history taking place during the production of her film) in the interest of focusing on the landscape itself within a general context of its social and aesthetic history, Benning is, from the beginning, frankly personal: his opening comments in the rolling text about Val Verde end, “I like living here, but I decided to leave for the summer. I had been feeling anxious and thought travel might help.” And as his journeys unfold, this personal motivation remains central: Benning’s route is determined not by the many rural and urban landmarks he records, but—even during his first trip—by the locations of friends and family members. And of course, during the second trip, he carefully revisits not only these same friends and family members, but, insofar as possible, those new acquaintances he met during the original trip. Even during what, by conventional movie standards, is probably the most dramatic event described in *North on Evers*, Benning’s personal experience is more fully his focus than the landscape itself.

On his way east, he mentions that he “met a Navajo woman at a rest stop on I-40. She asked me for a ride. In the morning we drove to the Grand Canyon. Two days later I dropped her off in Monument Valley.” Later, staying in Oshkosh, Wisconsin with friends, Benning fills in the story:

I was just about to put down my sleeping bag when a woman appeared. At first I thought she was Mexican, but she turned out to be Navajo. She asked me for a ride.

I told her I was on a motorcycle. She said she knew. I said I only had one seat. She said she could sit on my sleeping bag, that she had to get back to her child. I said I could give her a ride, but first I had to get some sleep. She said she’d wait. I got in my sleeping bag and she lay down on a blanket next to me. When I woke up she was still sleeping. I walked

to the other end of the rest stop. Two men in dark suits asked me if I had seen an Indian girl. For some reason I said no.

I waited for them to leave. They drove off in a yellow station wagon. When I got back she was gone. I found her standing in the doorway of a vacant shack. She said she was running from fear. We drove on back roads to the Grand Canyon. We climbed to the bottom and slept near the Colorado River. The next day we headed for Monument Valley. I was going sixty and she said to go faster. I accelerated to ninety. She yelled that last night when I was asleep, she thought about cutting my throat.

Later that day, I dropped her off in Monument Valley. She never told me her name. I watched her walk across the desert to a house trailer and disappear through a red door. She never looked back.

While Benning's approach is much more personal than Mangolte's, he too uses a more general social and aesthetic history of the places we see as a context for the imagery and the events he depicts and recalls; that is, as in *The Sky on Location*, Benning's travels are both geographic and historical—and in Benning's case, representative of a certain generation of Americans. Like Oliver Stone, Benning has never quite recovered from the sixties and from the knot of political events and aesthetic issues that came to dominate the decade: especially the struggle for racial equality, integration and political/economic power, and the small-scale and large-scale violence (including the Vietnam War) that was transforming the American social landscape in those years. *North on Evers* is full of obvious and subtle references to these events.

That Benning lives in a mixed-race town and that the very first textual information he provides is that Val Verde “was a Black resort town in the thirties, separate but equal. Lots of jazz musicians came here to party” confirms the theme of race implicit in the title, which is developed during the body of the film by the aforementioned incident with the Navajo woman, by Benning's attending an all-Black rodeo in Dallas on Juneteenth Day (the day when Texas slaves were freed), by his visit to the white-separatist, “Christian,” New Holy Land in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, by his visit to the all-Black Arkansas town, Cotton Plant, by his personal research into Medgar Evers in Mississippi, by his troubled meeting with an angry, Black drunk in a Black bar in Montgomery, by his visits to artist Mose T. and the Reverend Howard Finster, and by racist comments by Whites in Montgomery, by Klan members at the motorcycle rally in South Dakota, and (in a textual flashback to his youth) by his mother. As Benning crosses America, he is never far from the issue of race or from his lifelong consciousness of race as a central personal and political concern. If Benning has “travelled further” into the issue than many White Americans (and certainly further than most White filmmakers), he is under no illusions about the state of American race relations

or even about his own effectiveness in dealing with the issue as it confronts him in his personal life; in several instances he says nothing to racist comments by others. Race, which has always been the sociopolitical frontier for Americans, remains the personal frontier for Benning.<sup>15</sup>

Wayne Franklin distinguishes between the discovery narrative and the exploratory narrative both on the basis of what is noticed by discoverer or explorer—what is *there* versus what is *happening*—and on the basis of the organization used in communicating the different visions: “much as the explorer bequeathed his sense of timeless awe, and his innocent eye, to those who followed him” so the “pattern of narrative” is the “explorer’s central gift to national language”: “In exploratory texts . . . experience is filtered through the grid of initial design . . . . As the discoverer attempts to control the given world of American space by describing an ideal passage through it, the explorer tries to organize New World experience—whether actual or in prospect—by subordinating possibly corrosive events to the ideal pattern of plot.”<sup>16</sup> If we see *North on Evers* as a re-exploratory narrative in the sense that *The Sky on Location* is a re-discovery narrative, Franklin provides a way of distinguishing between the viewer’s experience of Mangolte’s film and the very different experience of Benning’s. While *The Sky on Location* asks only that we observe and meditate on characteristic Western spaces, *North on Evers* requires sustained activity on the part of viewers; while Mangolte asks us to consider one image and one idea at a time, Benning requires us to distinguish different times and spaces *and* to continually synthesize them within the overall design of his film.

My description of *North on Evers* makes clear that its fundamental organizing principle is Benning’s simultaneous presentation of two journeys across America, one presented in the rolling text, the second in the imagery and sound. And while this unusual structure requires an unusual kind and amount of activity on the part of viewers (or, really, viewers/readers), a general description of the film tends to oversimplify the experience Benning has created, in several different senses. The most obvious—or at least, the *first* obvious—oversimplification involves the viewer’s difficulty in comprehending Benning’s two-fold presentation. Of course, at any given moment during *North on Evers*, the viewer must choose between the text and the other imagery; we cannot read and scan the frame simultaneously. But, whichever choice we make at any given moment, we are continually tempted by the other alternative. No matter how compelling the imagery, the rolling text draws the eye (as filmmaker Hollis Frampton, one of Benning’s mentors, once remarked at a public lecture, “Once we can read, we can’t *not* read”); and no matter how compelling a particular textual story is, the movements within Benning’s compositions, and his editing, interrupt the ease of our comprehension of the text.

As if this were not enough, Benning includes other forms of distraction as well. At times the scene behind the rolling text is dark enough or complex enough that words, phrases, even whole sentences are rendered invisible, and viewers must imagine what they missed on the basis of what preceded and succeeded it.

Further, in filming *North on Evers*, Benning consistently used a hand-held camera (for the first time in his career), resulting in visuals that are often jittery and—especially for viewers accustomed only to conventional film and television—disconcerting.

The perceptual activity required of Benning's viewers instigates our awareness of the film's complex narrative, which asks of us other forms of activity. Assuming we do follow Benning's journeys in both text and image, we are inevitably thrust into the continuing evolution of the relationship between text and image. This relationship has at least two distinct levels. First, the specific temporal relationship between what we're reading and what we're seeing is continually changing. At the beginning of *North on Evers*, Benning's text moves the reader from Val Verde through Boron, California, to the Grand Canyon and Monument Valley, and through New Mexico into west Texas, while the visuals are still documenting the Borax factory in Boron. The visuals remain consistently behind the text throughout much of the first half of the film—though as Benning rides north to Washington, D.C., the text and visuals converge, until we see the Vietnam Memorial *before* we read Benning's text about it. During his trip from Washington to New York, the text and imagery are roughly parallel, though at the end of the New York visit, the text again moves ahead of the visuals, and in general remains ahead of the visuals by various amounts of time during Benning's trip west. Text and image converge once again as Benning reaches the Great Salt Lake and searches for the remains of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970). From the moment when we look down at the water of the Great Salt Lake and read, "I suppose in a way my trip ended there at the end of the spiral," until Benning is back in Val Verde, the imagery precedes the text.

That the text precedes the other imagery through so much of *North on Evers* is, of course, a reminder that the journey that was the basis for the text preceded the journey during which Benning recorded imagery and sound. It also creates a temporal gap that develops an unusual form of suspense: as we read about people and places, we cannot help but wonder how they will look, and subsequently, as we see various places and people, we cannot help but make as many of the relevant identifications as possible.

Second, once we've engaged both the textual and the visual imagery, we become aware of changes that have occurred during the year's gap between the two journeys. When Benning first arrives in San Antonio (that is, during the rolling-text journey), he is excited to see an old friend, his wife, and their child, only to learn "that his wife had moved out. He was very upset." A few minutes later when we see the father and daughter, we not only make the relevant identification, we realize we are seeing them a year after the break-up, and perhaps we can read a year's worth of adjustment on their faces. When he visits old friends in central New York (film and videomaker, John Knecht, and artist, Lynn Schwarzer), he tells us, "My friends live in the country on a small road. Cattle graze in the nearby fields. I was happy to see them again. They were

expecting their first child soon." Moments later when Benning presents a portrait of these friends, we see them with the child.<sup>17</sup>

The exploratory narratives Franklin analyzes have as their goal the exploitation of what for the discoverer is the awesome potential of the New World terrain. Benning's re-exploratory narrative (re-exploratory on several levels: in the imagery we generally re-see what we've already read about, just as Benning was re-visiting people and places on his second journey, and the two journeys together review Benning's psychic return to the places and people of his past and of the past of his generation) represents a modern version of this exploitation. The practical function of the original explorers' grueling travels west—first, across the Atlantic, and then, across the continent—was to open routes that could be used for the transportation of agricultural and industrial products back east; the exploitation of the New was a means to the reconfirmation of the wealth and power of the Old. The remarkable long-term success of these ventures is evident throughout *North on Evers* in the many images of industrial production (most obviously in Boron, near New York, and in Gary, Indiana) and of the generation of power itself (the film is full of images of power lines and near the end, we see Hoover Dam, shining "brightly in the afternoon sun").

Indeed, the industrial exploitation of North America has been so massive that, as is clear in Benning's imagery, we have entered a period of industrial decline. Generally, the factories we see seem in a state of decay (the first person Benning meets in his travels, a worker who has recently been laid off at the mine in Boron, tells Benning that Boron is a one-horse town and the horse is wounded) and even the technological wonder of Hoover Dam, which in 1932 "symbolized hope for the future" now seems to Benning, "one of the last technologies to be trusted": it may shine in the sun, but it's the *afternoon* sun. If the original explorers' journey West, then back East, symbolized hope and the coming industrial might of the new nation, Benning's journeys East, then back West, reflect not only his personal anxieties (halfway through his circular journey, Benning tells us that his drifting is perhaps "a desperate attempt to outdistance my anxiety or deny the murmur of advancing age") but also, a more general American anxiety about the future, now that our best industrial days seem behind us.

But *North on Evers* is not simply a tale of despair and of the entropy symbolized by Smithsonian's *Spiral Jetty*.<sup>18</sup> Even if Benning tells us that, in some sense, his journey around America finishes at the end of Smithsonian's spiral (an end that seems confirmed by subsequent visits to the abandoned Bombay Beach Site on the Salton Sea and to Death Valley), his journey did *not* end there but in his return home. Indeed, the journey chronicled in Benning's text catalyzed the *second* journey, documented in the imagery. Together these two journeys became the raw material for Benning's newest film, and one of his most compelling—that Benning frequently tours with his films (such touring is a tradition among American avant-garde filmmakers), has continued to extend the film's original journeys.

Benning's nostalgic look at America from a level of industrial development

beyond the fantasies of the original discoverers and explorers is itself a new, creative form of exploitation, not so much of the natural resources of the nation, but of the history this exploitation has produced. The last person Benning describes to us on his travels is a woman in the bar of a motel in central Utah: “She was well into her seventies. She wore tight red pants and black high heels. She looked as if she had been fused together at the waist with a twenty year old.” She asks Benning to dance; he stays at the bar until closing. This woman—half-old, half-young—is the muse of *North on Evers*. She energizes Benning and counters the film’s motifs of industrial decay and continued social compromise (e.g., the struggles of Native Americans, of African Americans, of women) with two equally pervasive motifs: the energy of young people and of artists bent on transforming frustration, anxiety, and limitation into art.

*North on Evers* is full of children, and in virtually every instance—and regardless of the struggles these children are dealing with—Benning is struck with the child’s energy and by his own feeling of connection with this energy. In Albuquerque, when Benning leaves the New Age chapel where his old friend is a member, the friend’s daughter follows him out: “We talked for an hour. I felt closer to this young runaway than to her father.” In San Antonio, he is struck by his friends’ four-year-old daughter: “I like kids that age. They want to learn so bad.” This theme of the energy of the young culminates when Benning visits his own daughter, Sadie, who is “seventeen and full of life”: “We drove in the rain. I said I was glad we weren’t on my motorcycle. I told her that rain really hurts. She rolled the window down and stuck her head out and said it felt just like getting a tattoo.” That a substantial portion of Benning’s audience will know that by age sixteen, Sadie Benning was an accomplished video artist (indeed, by the time of *North on Evers* her reputation had eclipsed her father’s) adds a poignant power to Benning’s faith in the young—a faith that frames the film. *North on Evers* opens as a Val Verde school bus picks up children and closes when the bus leaves them off at the end of the day.

The motif of art-making confirms the motif of youthful energy. Again and again, Benning visits creative people who have found ways of transforming deprivation into productivity: the eighty-two-year old widower in San Antonio who used to make sewer pipes, but now makes objects out of cement that look like they are made from trees, for example, and Mose T, the Black folk artist from Alabama whose work is widely known (Benning buys a painting for his daughter—“She likes him too”—which we see in her room a year later). In other instances, the people Benning records have made valuable contributions to American independent film and video: director Richard Linklater (*Slacker*, 1991); filmmaker Bette Gordon (*Variety*, 1983); actor Willem Dafoe (*Platoon*, 1986; *The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1988), and video artist, Les Leveque.

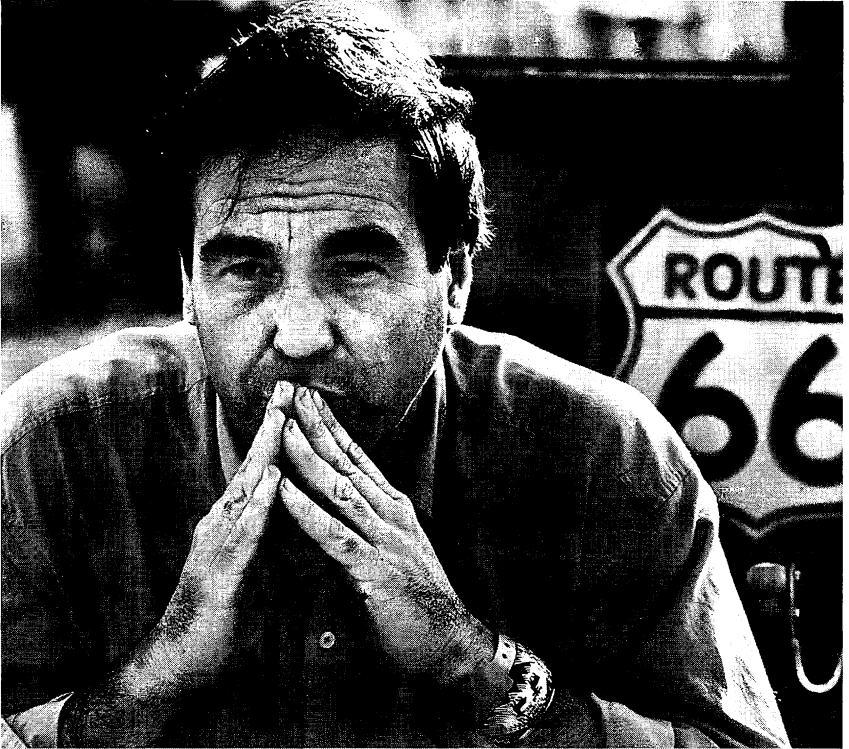
The most obvious instance of this process of transforming loss into creative work is *North on Evers* itself, which—as has been true throughout his career—Benning found a way to complete on a budget that could hardly fund a single scene

of a film from industrial Hollywood (Benning estimates that *North on Evers* cost \$20,000, including the \$5,000 he spent for three months of travel). *North on Evers* is still another independent, narrative film that reveals the constricted thinking of the popular cinema and demonstrates that even after a productive century of Hollywood filmmaking, a single cinematic explorer, working alone, can find a new way of surveying the American history that the original discoverers and explorers made possible, including the film history that America's most influential western industry has produced. When from time to time during *North on Evers*, Benning's leftward moving text is superimposed over an image of a leftward moving plane or freight train, the unusual optical effect conflates two related industrial developments, reminding us of Hollis Frampton's argument that "Cinema is the Last Machine."<sup>19</sup> If this Machine—the American industrial Machine, including the Machine of commercial cinema—is nearing the end of its lifespan, *North on Evers* makes clear that for some filmmakers and some audiences cinema remains full of energy—especially in those instances when the maker and the audience are able to exploit decay itself and transform limitation into possibility. Indeed, Benning's exploration of America, and of the West in particular, has continued in *Deseret*, his rumination on the history and geography of Utah, and in *Four Corners* (1997) which focuses on the Four Corners area as a nexus of cultural histories.

### **NATURAL BORN KILLERS AS RE-SETTLEMENT NARRATIVE (#1)**

Wayne Franklin's chapter on settlement narratives begins with an excerpt from a 1713 report by Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, the founder of Detroit, to Pontchartrain, the newly appointed governor of the Louisiana colony, in which he describes a supposed New World Paradise:

I have also seen a garden on Dauphine Island which had been described to me as a bit of terrestrial paradise. It is true that there are a dozen fig-trees that are very fine and that produce black figs. I saw there three pear-trees of wild stock, three apple-trees of the same sort, a little plum-tree about three feet in height that had seven poor plums on it, about thirty feet of grape-vines with nine clusters of grapes in all, some of rotten or dry grapes and the rest somewhat ripe, about forty feet of French melons, a few pumpkins: that is the "terrestrial paradise" of Mr. Artaguette and of several others, the "Pomona" of Mr. De Remonville and the "Fortunate Isles" of Mr. De Madeville and of Mr. Phillippe; their memoranda and their relations are pure fables. They have spoken about what they have not seen at all and they have too readily believed what was told them.<sup>20</sup>



**Figure 3:** Oliver Stone on the set of *Natural Born Killers* (1994).

Cadillac's realistic reassessment of the Dauphine Island garden—his measure of New World myth against what he knows from experience—is the quintessential settler's stance, one that can transform the discoverer's and explorer's wonder and hope into bitterness.<sup>21</sup> It provides a useful context for Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*, which can function here as an instance of a "re-settlement narrative."

That Oliver Stone, one of the most successful commercial filmmakers of the 1980s and 1990s, has had a very different kind of career than Mangolte or Benning is obvious—though, in Stone's case, popular assumptions about who he is as a director have blinded even some of his admirers to what he accomplished in *Natural Born Killers*. In many ways, *Natural Born Killers* is formally and historically closer to independent, experimental narratives like *The Sky on Location* and *North on Evers*, than it is to the films that established Stone's reputation. Jane Hamsher, one of the film's producers, sees it as "the biggest experimental film . . . ever made . . . because we could put all these resources into experimenting."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, all three films, and all three filmmakers, were nour-



ished by the same vibrant cinema culture of the 1960s and early 1970s. If most young filmmakers with a desire for Hollywood success begin with experiments and evolve in more cinematically conventional directions, Stone seems to have decided, at least by 1994, to use the freedom and economic leverage his commercial success had brought him, to sustain his interest in evolving in the opposite direction, that is, in making highly experimental narratives that challenge the very viewers his more conventional features have attracted.

Like Mangolte and Benning—and like the long history of film and literary narrative, and of painting—Stone uses the American West as a symbol of American ideals, and in particular, of freedom of movement and of action. We first meet the protagonists of *Natural Born Killers*, Mickey (Woody Harrelson) and Mallory (Juliette Lewis), as they are rampaging across the Southwest celebrating their freedom from their pasts (we learn in flashbacks that both were brutalized as children) and their passion for each other—by killing men and women virtually at random. Like Mangolte and Benning, Stone locates his action (at least during the first half of the film, until Mickey and Mallory are apprehended) within an identifiable Western geography: the first image in the film is of Shiprock, in the Northwest corner of New Mexico, and the following action takes Mickey and Mallory along U.S. Route 666 between Cortez, Colorado and Gallup, New Mexico, and (for their self-performed wedding ceremony) to the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge near Taos, New Mexico. Once captured they are held in a prison (supposedly out West, the prison scenes were actually filmed at the Federal prison at Joliet, Illinois).<sup>23</sup>

While Mangolte is at pains to present visual imagery that does not reveal the economic exploitation that has transformed nearly all of the West, and while Benning reveals a West that (like him) is poised between pristine beauty and industrial decay, for Stone the idealized West has become little more than a figment of his delusional protagonists' imaginations. Whatever hopes and dreams earlier generations of explorers brought West with them have been destroyed by the social institutions that came West along the routes established by their journeys—in particular, three institutions that seem crucial in contemporary American society: the nuclear family, the criminal justice system, and the mass media. For Stone, the failures of these institutions are closely related. Even if Mickey does see himself as a “natural born killer” in the sense that he—like other animals—is a predator, Stone portrays the extent and thoughtlessness of his and Mallory's violence as a product of the sexism and violence endemic to the real American family.

Mallory's home life is dramatized at some length: her physically repulsive father (Rodney Dangerfield) brutalizes her mother (Edie McClurg) and has raped Mallory, with her mother's knowledge, since childhood. Judging from the flashbacks Stone provides, Mickey's home life is as grotesque as Mallory's. His mother seems to have had sexual relationships with both Mickey's father and his grandfather, and as a child, Mickey witnesses his father's suicide. The internal-

ized damage of the institution of the family is clearly the background for Mickey and Mallory's violence toward others; this familial violence is reconfirmed by the equally corrupt criminal justice system set up to punish them: the investigator Jack Scagnetti (Tom Sizemore), who captures the pair, is violent toward women in exactly the way Mallory's father is, and like Mallory's father, the warden at Batongaville Prison (Tommy Lee Jones) is infuriated by any resistance to his self-serving plans. The mass media exploits the on-going failures of family and law enforcement for its own purposes, just as the family and the law enforcement system exploit both the mass media and those entrusted to their care (Scagnetti is marketing a book; the warden has brought media coverage into the prison; Mallory's father is usually found in front of the TV).

Born a century after the twilight of the American frontier, and coming of age in the 1960s, Stone has always explored the collision between American ideals developed during the century of American expansion across the continent and the practical fall-out that has resulted from a mis-application of these ideals to the complexities of life in the modern world: the Vietnam War, most obviously. In *Natural Born Killers*, Stone again stands with one foot in the present and one in the past, but if more traditional literary and cinematic narratives have tended to contrast the corrupt complexity of modern city life with the simpler, freer, purer lives of American frontier heroes (or in some recent instances, have contrasted the corruption of European America with the "innocence" of indigenous tribal life), Stone is well-aware that such conflicts are nostalgic fantasies, and that he must deal not with conflict itself, but with the endless representations of American conflicts that flood our movie and television screens. That is, at least in *Natural Born Killers*, the "Good Guys" are *representations* of American history and contemporary life that are honest about social realities and respectful of the pain they cause; the "Bad Guys" are *representations* whose *only* function is exploitation, representations that reveal no respect either for ideals or for the pain of those sacrificed to them.

Like so many American artists, writers, and filmmakers concerned about where the on-going commercial development of the New World is taking us, Stone does turn to the past for guidelines in understanding the confusions of the present. In *Natural Born Killers*, however, this past is the *media* past he became aware of as a Vietnam veteran while he was studying for his MFA at New York University from 1969 to 1971. Or, to put it more precisely, *Natural Born Killers* is Stone's reflection on two, related aspects of modern media history. The more obvious of these is the two-decade lap dissolve from the movie screen to the television set as the nation's primary source of narrative entertainment and visual information—a development that culminated in the late 1960s by nearly destroying the film industry altogether. On one level, *Natural Born Killers* is a rough, contemptuous satire of commercial television.

Stone's satire of TV has two dimensions. During the first half of *Natural Born Killers*, the focus of his attack is the family sitcom, which he burlesques during two sequences: Mickey and Mallory's flashback to Mallory's home life



**Figure 4:** Mickey (Woody Harrelson) and Mallory (Juliette Lewis), the protagonists of *Natural Born Killers*.

and Mickey's return to Mallory after his escape from prison to free Mallory from her parents. By presenting a highly exaggerated version of a sitcom (modelled specifically, I assume, on *All in the Family*, but implicitly referencing many instances of the form), Stone seems to suggest that the conventional TV sitcom's happy placidity is a means of repressing the ugliness of so much of the real family life of the time in order to maintain and develop product marketing. During the second half of the film, Stone uses the Wayne Gayle character (Robert Downey, Jr.) to satirize the talk show and TV news in general. Gayle's show is modelled on *Geraldo* (Gayle's interview with Mickey is based on Geraldo's interview with Charles Manson) but again, references many other shows. It represents the new commercial television, where problems and pain are not repressed, but revealed and transformed into entertainment.

Near the end of their violent cross-country spree, Mickey and Mallory are invited into a Native American dwelling by its owner, a shaman who sees words on Mickey's and Mallory's chests: first, "demon"; then, "too much TV." For

Stone, both the rampage Mickey and Mallory have caused and the institutional sicknesses of American society that have made this rampage seem a logical response to their acculturation (at least to its two perpetrators) are confirmed by the one-two punch of TV's repression/exploitation of human agony, and of the degree to which the experience of watching TV has replaced constructive, public activity.

Stone's own response to the victory of commercial TV over the hearts and minds of most Americans is defiantly cinematic. From Stone's point of view, cinema—with all its own compromises and limitations—was, and remains, a healthier medium than television (and healthier, ironically, at least to some degree, *because* of television's onslaught). Both narratively and formally, *Natural Born Killers* sings the comparative diversity and democracy of the older medium by alluding to the explosion of alternative cinematic practices during the 1960s: the older medium's multi-front "last stand" against the pervasiveness of TV and its homogenization and infantilization of American life.

Perhaps the earliest of these cinematic responses to TV to affect Stone was the arrival in the United States of "foreign film" in general, and the French New Wave in particular. Both in its basic plot, and in the freedom of Stone's style, *Natural Born Killers* echoes Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1959), a Stone favorite, and Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player* (1960).<sup>24</sup> Stone's focus on visceral violence also suggests films from the American New Wave of the 1960s: Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969; a clip from *The Wild Bunch* is included in the film), and George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), big-budget commercial films in which outlaw buddies die, upholding an innocent acceptance of honest violence in the face of gradual social decadence. Probably Stone's most obvious commercial reference is to Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), which, like *Natural Born Killers*, divides into two halves: an earlier section focusing on young people on a violent rampage, and a later section focusing on violence toward the individual at the hands of the criminal justice system. Indeed, Stone's use of Joliet prison, with its panopticon design (see note 23) may be an allusion to Kubrick's use of a prison with a panopticon design in *A Clockwork Orange*. That *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Wild Bunch*, and *A Clockwork Orange* frightened the audiences of their time with what seemed extreme levels of violence makes them of particular relevance for Stone's film, which caused considerable consternation—especially for TV movie reviewers—because of the "excessive" violence of its protagonists (whose final victim is TV announcer Gayle) and Stone's seeming approval of it.

Stone's film also evokes the small budget, independent narrative features that were proliferating during the late 1960s: Roger Corman's films, and *Easy Rider* (directed by Dennis Hopper, 1969); and the films of Paul Morrissey (*Trash*, 1970, for example) and especially John Waters, whose trash melodramas of the time (*Mondo Trasho*, 1969; *Multiple Maniacs*, 1970; *Pink Flamingos*, 1972; and

*Female Trouble*, 1974) seem the obvious source for Stone's disgusting sitcom of Mallory's home life, and especially for the character of Mallory's father. Also, Waters' recognition that serial murderers inevitably become media heroes in a society devoted to the spectacle of brutality and agony—the central idea of *Female Trouble*, in particular—is closely related to Stone's stance toward television in *Natural Born Killers*.

Still another set of references (perhaps “echoes” is a better term here) is to what was called “Underground Film” in the 1960s and before and since has more frequently been termed “avant-garde” or “experimental” film. What makes *Natural Born Killers* distinctive and easy to watch is neither its plot, which is one of the clichés of American film—albeit a still-fertile cliché, as *Natural Born Killers*, *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and *True Romance* (1993) make clear—nor its over-the-top acting (though both Harrelson and Lewis are memorable), but the remarkable visual experience of the film, which seems an evocation of a range of avant-garde filmmakers who arrived on the scene, or at least came to prominence, during the 1960s.

Perhaps the most obvious visual gesture in *Natural Born Killers* is Stone's continual shifting between color and black and white, both throughout the film and within individual sequences. Of course, the shift from black and white to color has a long history in American film, as a means of distinguishing “reality” from “fantasy,” and the past from the present. But Stone's relentless intercutting from black and white to color has no particular relationship to narrative event; it has more to do with exploring the options film provides. There are many kinds of color and of black and white within *Natural Born Killers* (the result of different filmstocks and different kinds of lighting), each of which recontextualizes the others. The precedent for Stone's energetic exploration of color and black and white is the history of such exploration in avant-garde film: Stan Brakhage's *Dog Star Man* (1962-1964) and Andy Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* (1966), for example, and Bruce Baillie's *Quixote* (1965) and *Castro Street* (1966), Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), Paul Sharits' *Piece Mandala/End War* (1966), Robert Nelson's *Bleu Shut* (1970), and Yvonne Rainer's *Kristina Talking Pictures* (1976).

Another of Stone's strategies that is closely related to avant-garde filmmaking is his recycling of material from earlier films of all kinds into his own work. Indeed, “recycled cinema” (or “found footage film”) has been a central avant-garde strategy in the United States since Joseph Cornell developed his version of the approach in the 1940s and Bruce Conner popularized it during the 1960s (in *A Movie*, 1959; *Cosmic Ray*, 1962; and *Report*, in various versions 1963-1967). Not only does Stone combine material from a wide range of films in a manner reminiscent of Conner, but also, in some instances he uses—that is, re-uses—shots from educational films, a typical Bruce Conner gesture. (This connection with Conner is particularly clear in *Burn*, the Nine Inch Nails music video in which imagery from *Natural Born Killers* is edited into a complex montage; this

video is included in the Director's Cut video of Stone's film—see note 22.)

*Natural Born Killers* is also evocative, at particular moments, of a wide range of other avant-garde filmmakers. Particular compositions and uses of color, for example, are reminiscent of Kenneth Anger (especially his *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, 1954; and *Scorpio Rising*, 1963). The motif of using the windows in the motel rooms where Mickey and Mallory stay, as frames for motion picture imagery that implicitly externalize the characters' psychic goings-on is reminiscent of Richard Myers' use of the same procedure in such films as *Akran* (1969) and *37-73* (1974). And in several instances, Stone uses an image where the viewer looks down a cone of smoke—an image familiar to anyone who has experienced Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* (1973).

Regardless of what particular borrowings, thefts, evocations, homages one can trace in *Natural Born Killers*, however, the point is that the stunning visual phantasmagoria of Stone's film sings the remarkable range of options available to the filmmaker by the early 1970s.<sup>25</sup> It is precisely this remarkable cultural resource that, from Stone's point of view, commercial television ignores (except to rip off for an effect here and there) in its mindless, soulless embrace of a simplistic, homogeneous fantasy of American life and of a degraded American Dream based on continual exploitation, acquisition, and consumption. The true potentials of American film culture were being realized precisely at the moment when television was supplanting cinema. In the decades that have followed, this trajectory of cultural evolution has not changed; the traditions evoked in Stone's phantasmagoric visuals are even more fully endangered than they were thirty years ago, and television's transformation of both the cinema-culture it inherited and of the mass audience continues. If Mickey's and Mallory's destructive spree is a metaphor for Stone's decision to escape conventional, commercial, often-TV-inspired film approaches and live free for a time,<sup>26</sup> their capture and incarceration suggests the degree to which even Stone's own film career—like all American commercial film careers in the 1990s—is a prisoner not merely of television, but of some of the same TV genres Stone so violently disapproves of in *Natural Born Killers*: the TV talk show, most obviously, where most big-budget films are marketed.

Nevertheless, *Natural Born Killers* ends with Mickey and Mallory escaping, not only from prison, but also—by killing Wayne Gayle (whose camera runs out of power just before he's shot)—from commercial television. Unlike the pantheon of television victims and perpetrators Stone reviews in the moments after Mickey and Mallory shoot Gayle—the Menendez Brothers, Rodney King, Tonya Harding, O.J. Simpson, and the Branch Davidians at Waco—Stone's protagonists are allowed to escape back into domestic life; we see them, with their kids, travelling American back roads in their camper, as part of the film's final, exuberant montage.<sup>27</sup> If the fantasy of the original settlers was the transformation of their natural surround into a productive domesticity and a better future for themselves and their descendants, the 1990s fantasy of Stone and his protagonists

is an escape from the institutional brutalities and confinements of modern mediated society to an imagined past where personal and cinematic freedom were still conceivable.

We are face-to-face with a set of paradoxes. New World settlement narratives are about the failures of the settlement experience to live up to the dreams of the Discoverers and the hopes of the Explorers; and yet, in the end the New World was to become far more economically productive than even the most sanguine of early chroniclers could have imagined. But for Stone the very accomplishment of New World settlement has left no safe place for a healthy American individual. In the end, he re-settles Mickey and Mallory within the fantasy of a sixties-style domesticity; and, by making *Natural Born Killers*, he himself “settles” for at least the illusion of a momentary cinematic escape—an “escape” that, ironically, seems to most viewers merely another instance of the very status quo Stone finds so repulsive. If American settlers hoped to create for themselves a more liberated future, only to discover that, in most instances, they were recreating the past, Stone tries to escape into the past only to discover that for many viewers he seems to promote the horrifying future he seems to deplore.

### **ROAM SWEET HOME AS RE-SETTLEMENT NARRATIVE (#2)**

In *The Sky on Location*, Mangolte does her best to ignore the industrial and social developments that have transformed North America, at least in the visual imagery she records. Of course, these developments are implicit in the film technology Mangolte is using and in the system of roadways that allows her to “explore” much of the West in only eleven weeks, and explicit in the histories sketched on the soundtrack. Nevertheless, her quest is to re-imagine the vistas of the West as they might have looked to those original explorers with a sensitivity to landscape; Mangolte wants to *feel* like an explorer in unfamiliar territory. In *North on Evers*, on the other hand, Benning surveys the signs not only of industrial/social development, but also of industrial decay and social compromise and failure, though his frequently arresting imagery of American vistas provides a regular series of creative surprises amidst the entropy Benning sees everywhere, just as his new film develops out of the entropy he feels within himself. And in *Natural Born Killers*, Stone laments the loss not so much of the landscape itself (the most spectacular space recorded in the film—the chasm of the Rio Grande near Taos—is spanned by a bridge from which Mickey and Mallory throw pieces of apparel into the gorge; neither they, nor Stone seem concerned with pristine Nature), but the freedom and individualism this landscape has come to represent in American myth. For Stone, the psychic space of Americans is so cluttered and clogged by the institutions that dominate American society that the most one can hope for is a spree—a momentary defiance. In *Roam Sweet Home*, however, Ellen Spiro takes a different tack: she transforms our sense of the West, neither by ignoring development, nor by surveying (and artistically overcoming) its results, nor by lamenting the effects of the institutional products of this development, but

rather, by accepting the aging of the West and transforming our sense of how to come to terms with the aging process. Spiro finds a liberating new way of, in Franklin's words, recognizing the recalcitrant truths of settlement and naming them "by their proper names."

In *Roam Sweet Home*, Spiro embraces age, both as a historical/geographic reality, and as personal experience. Like Mangolte, Benning, and the protagonists of *Natural Born Killers*, Spiro and her travelling partner, her dog, Sam (a small, aging mongrel who provides a poetic narration; he describes himself as "pure-blooded American road-dog") wander the West, in particular the Southwest, from the Texas panhandle across New Mexico and Arizona to the Southern California desert. Ignoring most of what would today be considered the tourist attractions of the region, Spiro seems drawn to our touristic recent past. The first extended stop in the videotape—after an introductory sequence, the title, and a flashback of Spiro and Sam leaving Manhattan for the West—is at an Airstream trailer rally (actually, this rally took place in Canada, though Spiro edits it into the tape so that we assume it takes place in Texas) where the focus is on those trailer aficionados who are committed to Wally Byam's original design of the Airstream trailer. *Roam Sweet Home* is full of old trailers, and old motels, restaurants, tourist sites, and roads (the final sequences of the tape focus on old Route 66). Spiro and Sam stop for a time at Quartzsite, Arizona, "the Flea-Market Capital of the World," and at Slab City, a trailer village established in a now-defunct marine base in Southern California, near the Salton Sea (like Benning, Spiro includes imagery of the now-flooded town of Bombay Beach; as Benning explains in *North on Evers*, "In 1905 the Colorado River broke its levee and created the Salton Sea. Over the past ten years increased irrigation run-off has caused flooding. The town of Bombay Beach was drowned and discarded"). Even what might be considered a relatively recent tourist site—the media-collective Ant Farm's *Cadillac Ranch* (1974), near Amarillo, Texas—has been "redesigned" by graffiti artists and vandals. Like Mangolte, Spiro avoids major sites of industrial decay, though she focuses on places and things recently "left behind" by what is generally considered progress.

Like *North on Evers*, Spiro's tape seems instigated by the personal aging process, but while Benning runs *from* the reality of aging, Spiro runs *toward* it: the exclusive human focus of her travels is aging women and men, and in particular, women and men who see life, and growing old, not as loss, but as opportunity. As one older, single woman tells Spiro early in the film, "You want to experience everything there is, and being old is just one of the parts of life." During *Roam Sweet Home*, Spiro meets and talks with dozens of older people, whose lives seem as varied as the lives of any comparable group—and often a good bit more free. While some of these people are wanderers (the introductory sequence includes two comments, one by a man: "I have the same kind of brains as a bird. I fly south in the winter and north in the summer"; the other by a woman: "I've been a wanderer as long as I've been free to wander"), others seem to have settled, at least for a time, in small, simple desert communities where they feel, and to a considerable degree are, free of societal restriction. Some women seem





**Figure 5:** Sam on Ellen Spiro's Airstream trailer.

to live happily alone; others enjoy having boyfriends (sometimes several at one time); and others live in groups, some presumably lesbian-defined, others not.<sup>28</sup> All seem to agree with one woman, who gave up marriage, established a temporary-help agency, and saved enough money to live unfettered: "I thank God every day I don't need a man to take care of me. I take care of myself." The men, too, seem happy to have escaped most of the economic, political, and social developments that dominate the media, and see their lives as acts of political defiance. In *Truth or Consequences*, New Mexico, Gypsy George explains that he "can't say we're all free spirits. We just understand how the system works and we're side-stepping the system." In *Slab City*, Charles (who lives in a trailer with a poodle and two llamas—the poodle, he explains, demanded they get the llamas) says, "You have control of your life here, and that's something that most of these people did not have for most of their life."

Of the many older people whom Spiro visits, two seem the quintessential instances of aging-as-opportunity, rather than as an accumulation of loss: Leonard Knight, a folk artist who arrived in *Slab City* with the idea of a brief

stopover, but has remained to paint the side of a small mountain; and Margie McCauley, a 66-year-old woman who is walking Route 66 with her dog Lollie as a response to the Gulf War. Knight has apparently remained in Slab City because of the nature of the community it offers: "I'm proud of the people of Slab City," he explains to Spiro, "I think that they're the 1994 pioneers of this country," and he sees his environmental painting as a monument to this particular pioneering spirit (one Slab City resident explains that outsiders are sometimes interested in "improving" Slab City with an array of services that would kill freedom by destroying opportunities for imagination).<sup>29</sup> Margie McCauley, who explains, "When you're dead, honey, you're dead a long time, and so you better get busy and do what you're gonna do," is seen walking along old Route 66 with a glorified pushcart. Bob Waldmire, who introduces her to us, explains that while he attempts to live an environmentally moral life (he drives his mobile home at a speed that's "sub-lethal" for butterflies), he hasn't the nerve to do what she is doing—to walk and camp along the old road full-time as a protest of the nation's dependence on petroleum products and as a legacy for her grandchildren. Margie McCauley is the final person Spiro meets on her journey.

In *Roam Sweet Home*, age is not only tolerable and enjoyable (even politically committed), it is an improvement. One woman tells Spiro, "the more wrinkles, the better," and (by this point, well into the videotape), the discovery that she's talking about her dog, a sharpei, is virtually a punch line. In addition to painting the mountain, Knight shows us his method of dealing with cracks in the surface of his trailer: he uses window putty, which causes the repaired cracks to look like vines and flowers—"the more cracks in it, the better it looks!" The discovery of the creative energy in what society calls "decay" is the central theme of *Roam Sweet Home*, and in general the most effective means for exploiting this discovery involve a reversal of conventional consumer patterns. Whereas industrial society develops by convincing people that a good life means expanded accumulation of ever-better products, the people whom Spiro meets are minimalists; for them, less really *is* more—more time, more freedom, more peace, more happiness. If Oliver Stone is nostalgic about the idea of living on the frontier, Spiro's acquaintances have defined age *as* the frontier, and are content to explore it, using the simple technologies they can carry with them. For these people, improving the quality of life involves getting more out of what they have and what they know. Early in the film, during her visit inside Spiro's trailer, a woman explains that Spiro's trailer stove is not broken, she just does not know how to turn it on: "You need *experience!*" And in general, the magic of the trailers Spiro visits is a function of their owners having found ways, over time, to modify those simple living spaces using the most frugal means, until they are comfortable for and expressive of those who live in them.

That Spiro is fascinated with these people, and that they are at home with her fascination, is also, implicitly, a function of a transformed sense of economics. For Oliver Stone, television is a monster in danger of consuming/destroying its own parent; it is the quintessential, materialistic New destroying the spiritually

essential Old. In general, the people whom Spiro meets seem unusually detached from television: we do not see them watching it (we do not even see TVs) and they rarely talk about it. Virtually all the activities Spiro records are outdoor activities.

Further, the camcorder she carries, and especially its economic accessibility and one-person portability, are historical functions of the aging of the Hollywood film industry, of its being “past its prime.” Of course, Hollywood continues to deploy ever-larger budgets—budgets big enough to finance even more extravagant directors than Oliver Stone; but on the byways of media production, independent filmmakers and videomakers, using the technological spin-offs and trickle-downs of the Industry and very limited budgets, continue to produce a various and vital alternative media history that provides its audience with exhilarating visions of reality and possibility. Spiro and her camcorder are a media version of Maggie McCauley and her pushcart.

*Roam Sweet Home*'s other crucial theme—the relationships of humans and animals, especially dogs—may appear unrelated to the idea of age as frontier; but in fact, it is an intrinsic dimension of this idea. As is made clear in Sam's narration (written by Allan Gurganus, spoken by Sam Raymond), Sam is more than Spiro's property or pet (Sam's introduction of himself, and Spiro: “It's me, Sam. Experienced, if gettin' up in years. And Ellen, a pup who sometimes slips and calls herself my owner”). He is her companion—as the many dogs Ellen and Sam meet on their travels are companions to those they travel with—but he (and implicitly his colleagues in *Roam Sweet Home*) is a particular kind of companion: a teacher, a guru. As Sam explains, “You guard them [humans] whenever possible . . . but you're really training *them* to guard *you*. It's a service occupation really. When you die, what you've left them is the skill of noticing others . . .” The perceptual alertness of Sam, and of dogs in general, is a model for Spiro's videomaking. As Sam says early in the tape, “Her strange need to shoot everything matches my strange need to smell it.” One of the central motifs of *Roam Sweet Home* is Spiro filming Sam as he leans out the passenger's side window.<sup>30</sup> We see him sometimes from the driver's side, sometimes reflected in the side mirror; and appropriately, it is in these shots that we most regularly see Spiro herself—in the double-lensed side mirror. Sam is not only Spiro's subject; he is her model: she is learning from her aging dog to smell the roses, and everything else.

That virtually all those Spiro spends time with in *Roam Sweet Home* live and travel with a dog or dogs functions as a sign of their creative stance toward aging. In Hemingway's “Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick Adams' war experience—his having come close to death and having seen the violent deaths of others—has made him more perceptually alert. What Nick has learned from the sudden violence of war, the free spirits of *Roam Sweet Home* have learned from the long lives they have lived; and the result is a Zen-like ease with the everyday that is reflected in Spiro's camerawork. Spiro frequently uses extreme close-ups of Sam as he watches the world go by, and she regularly provides “dog's-eye-view” imagery: a beetle crossing a roadway, for example. Of course, it is precisely *because* of the history of the close-up as dramatic emphasis in the violence of



**Figure 6:** Sam and Spiro, on the road.

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Industry melodrama that Spiro's gentle, in-close observation is arresting and amusing.

Unlike *North on Evers* and *Natural Born Killers*, and less openly than *The Sky on Location*, *Roam Sweet Home* creates a scrambled geography. Many of the places Spiro passes through and stops to see are identified; but no attention at all is given to providing anything like a coherent trajectory through the Southwest. Even in the opening sequences we are everywhere at once, including in one instance, in a location quite distinct from the Southwest: one of the earliest images is of an old Northern California trailer park entered by a tunnel cut into a sequoia tree. Basically, this is a reflection of the lives Spiro documents: for these people location may be important (the Slab City residents love Slab City), but trajectory is not; they have learned to enjoy life wherever they are. In fact, Slab City's close proximity to a bombing range seems ironic and amusing to Slab City residents. Most of those with whom Spiro talks may agree with Sam's mantra, "Elsewhere is better; elsewhere better *be*," but their wanderings are a means not for getting anywhere in particular, but for keeping the spirit occupied and at peace. Even

Margie McCauley's plan to walk Route 66 to Chicago is open-ended; she reserves the right to change direction whenever the spirit moves her.

There is also no seasonal organization in the tape. The only temporal emphasis Spiro provides is a focus on sunset—not simply as a metaphor for conclusion and loss, but as one of life's great beauties and rewards. Just after Margie tells Spiro that life is “more magical than anything we can begin to think about,” we see, amidst shots of the sunset, circular reflections created by the light of the setting sun striking the camcorder lens—it's essentially the same mandala-shape that Larry Gottheim uses to conclude his exploration of the seasonal cycle in *Horizons* (1973). For Spiro, and for those she meets during *Roam Sweet Home*, the beauty of life is precisely in the *completion* of *all* its phases, the entire cycle, and the recognition not only that each phase offers its own rewards, but that the particular pleasures of age are *only* possible for those who have recognized the limitations of “progress” and “success.”

For Spiro, the settler's—or *re-settler's*—vision need not take the form of the jaundiced nostalgic cynicism evident in *Natural Born Killers* (and in so much of the history of the American Western since World War II); if originally *settlement* was a process of facing the real problems and difficulties of cultural development, *re-settlement* can be a process of confronting reality and using this confrontation as a means of moving beyond the apparent limitations of an often-corrupt history. In the case of *Roam Sweet Home*, “reality” is not, as in *The Sky on Location*, a (however beautiful) nostalgia for the “depopulated,” wilderness West as it was envisioned by nineteenth-century European American painters; or, as in *North on Evers*, the disconcerting reality of the filmmaker's (and America's) being past middle age; or, as in *Natural Born Killers*, the “reality” that the ideals of the past have been thoroughly corrupted (except, perhaps, within the production process of Stone's defiant film). In Spiro's tape, reality is the fact that real people, many of them economically “lower class,” can and do create lives that are meaningful to them and exemplary for us—and that personal, low-budget media-making can be an accessible, progressive emulation of this creativity.

The “Jericho gypsies” in *Roam Sweet Home*, and *Roam Sweet Home* itself, can serve as metaphors and models for a revived sense of national (and media) history. Though we may often feel ethically immobilized as a result of the corrupt compromises of generation after generation of European Americans—with Native America, with our own more vigorous and rigorous ancestors—history has placed us at a moment of remarkable opportunity: so much remains to be done! In the time we have left, we can surprise ourselves and the world by learning from the lessons of the past and moving into a more capable future, one more respectful of human and environmental development and variety. And as lovers of culture, we can recognize the emptiness of so much of commercial media and the breath, diversity, and relevance of so much of independent/avant-garde film and video; and in the time cinema has left, we can make sure that at least some of the accomplishments in all the economic “classes” of film history are passed on to the

next generation. We can work to be sure that the best of alternative media-making inspires a morally, aesthetically, and culturally respectable media future.

### SOURCES OF FILMS/VIDEOS:

*The Sky on Location*, and Mangolte's other early films, are available from Filmmakers' Cooperative, 175 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10016 (212-889-3820); *North on Evers*, from Benning, School of Film and Video, California Institute of the Arts, 24700 McBean Parkway, Valencia, CA 90038 (805-295-1620); *Natural Born Killers* (in 16mm), from Swank (see their distribution catalogue for regional distributors); and Spiro's videotapes, from Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 112 S. Michigan Ave., Suite 312, Chicago, IL 60603 (312-345-3550).

### NOTES

1. Wayne Franklin, *Discoverers, Explorers, Settlers: The Diligent Writers of Early America* (Chicago and London, 1979), 23, 24.

2. *Ibid.*, 69, 70.

3. *Ibid.*, 132, 131.

4. *Camera Obscura* was one journal that supported Mangolte's early films. See "Camera Obscura Interview with Babette Mangolte," *Camera Obscura*, no. 3-4 (Summer 1979), 98-210; and Constance Penley's "What Maisie Knew by Babette Mangolte: Childhood As Point of View" and "The Camera: Je/La Camera: Eye (Babette Mangolte)," *Camera Obscura*, nos. 2 (Fall 1977) and 3-4 (Summer 1979), 130-136; 195-197, respectively. See also my interview with Mangolte in *A Critical Cinema* (Berkeley, 1988), 279-296 (a more complete version of this interview was published in *Afterimage*, 12: 1-2, (Summer, 1984), 8-13.

5. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema*, 295.

6. With few exceptions, Mangolte's visuals chart a series of journeys through particular, always-rural locales. We never see Mangolte herself, her assistant, or their automobile. We are given almost no indication of their accommodations (in a single instance, reference is made to her and her assistant camping along the road; and, from time to time, Mangolte toys with her own decision to keep her process outside the film's visuals, by throwing pebbles into a lake from off-screen, in one instance, and by throwing snow into the frame from just beyond our field of vision, in another). Indeed, we see people only three times during the film (in two, brief, successive shots in Yosemite, first one person, then two are walking in a field; in another instance, a person is climbing down a snow-covered hillside; and near the end, a Navajo shepherd is at work in Canyon de Chelly—altogether, these shots last less than half a minute) and other vehicles in only a few instances.

7. Trinh T. Minh-ha was to use a soundtrack structured in virtually the same way in *Naked Spaces—Living is Round* (1985), as a means of suggesting the hybridity of human identity.

8. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema*, 295.

9. See Joni Louise Kinsey's *Thomas Moran and the Surveying of the American West* (Washington and London, 1992) for an overview of the role of Moran (and Jackson) in the Western expeditions, and in the governmental decisions to protect these and other scenic regions.

10. Mangolte makes clear her particular admiration for Ford in *A Critical Cinema*: "What I think has been missing in film recently is what you found in classical cinema, what you find above all in Renoir and John Ford, who are the two classical filmmakers I like the best: I'm talking about a trust, a belief. It's not there any more in a lot of independent cinema" (p. 287).

11. See Franklin's discussion of the rhetoric of the discovery narrative in *Discoverers, Explorers, Settlers*, Chapter One.

12. In cinema's infancy the "landscape film"—generally single-shot panoramic depictions of American natural wonders—was an important genre. Indeed, the American tradition of the Great Picture, epitomized by Frederic Church, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran seems a more important contribution to early cinema than is generally known. For a list of early "landscape films" in the Library of Congress, see Iris Cahn, "The Changing Landscape of Modernity: Early Film and America's 'Great Picture' Tradition," *Wide Angle*, 18:3, (April, 1966), 85-100. *Frederic Edwin Church: The Icebergs* by Gerald L. Carr (the catalogue published by the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts

in 1980 to celebrate their acquisition of Church's *The Icebergs*) includes a discussion of the Great Pictures and of their painters as "matinee idols."

13. That Mangolte is aware she cannot escape a cultural history that tends to diminish our awe of the sublime landscapes of the New World is evident in her abrasive soundtrack. Mangolte's own *Visible Cities* (1991) is a follow-up to *The Sky on Location*. Using a strategy reminiscent of the earlier film, Mangolte contemplates the expansion of San Diego (where she lives and teaches) and the distance of the new suburban man-made environment from the landscape it is transforming. See also Mangolte's earlier short, *There? Where?* (1979), a European's view of Los Angeles. Mangolte's reputation has continued to rest on her distinctive cinematography; and the clear, authoritative visuality of her camerawork continues to have a positive impact on the reputations of those for whom she works. She was Director of Photography on Jean-Pierre Gorin's *Routine Pleasures* (1986) and *My Crazy Life* (1982), and Ludovic Segarra's *The Road to Damascus (A Life of Saint Paul of Tarse)* (1988).

14. A similar rolling text in *American Dreams* follows the journey of Arthur Bremer (a fellow Milwaukee native) as he tracks Richard Nixon, and then George Wallace, during the 1972 presidential campaign, leading up to his attempted assassination of Wallace in Laurel, Maryland, on May 15, 1972. Of course, Benning's presentation of Aaron memorabilia reminds us of Aaron's considerable travels as an athlete.

15. Though less central to *North on Evers* than race, references to small and large scale violence also punctuate the film, from the mention of a military installation near Albuquerque that takes up an entire mountainside and Trinity Site in southern New Mexico, to the University of Texas tower from which Charles Whitman killed twelve and wounded thirty-three in 1966, to the Texas Schoolbook Depository Building in Dallas, to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington where Benning finds the name of a friend, to the young woman he meets in a bar in central New York State who asks him to burn her breast with a cigarette, to his visit to Laurencia Bembenek at a prison in Taycheedah, Wisconsin (Bembenek, jailed for supposedly murdering her husband, is the subject of Benning's 1988 film, *Used Innocence*) and to the domestic violence he remembers from 1968, when he was working in a poor white neighborhood in Springfield, Missouri. Violence, past and present, remains, as does race, a psychic frontier for Benning.

16. Franklin, *Discoverers, Explorers, Settlers*, 104.

17. Benning provides various curve balls within the conceptual trajectory of his overall narrative, just as he provides "extra" perceptual difficulties. From time to time, he varies the order of events in the photographed visuals from what we might predict from the rolling text, and from time to time an image seems to synchronize with what we're reading, until we recognize that the connection is a fabricated (and sometimes suggestive) coincidence.

18. Smithson, who made his own film about *The Spiral Jetty (Spiral Jetty, 1979)*, was much involved with the concept of entropy. For a discussion of the relation of the concept to *Spiral Jetty* and to Smithson's film and photo works, see Robert A. Sobieszek, *Robert Smithson Photo Works* (Los Angeles and Albuquerque, 1993).

19. See Frampton's "For a Metahistory of Film: Commonplace Notes and Hypotheses," in *Circles of Confusion* (Rochester, 1983), 107-116.

20. Franklin, *Discoverers, Explorers, Settlers*, 123.

21. Actually Cadillac's ironic response to the failure of Dauphine Island to live up to what has been said about it is a means to an end: the reestablishment of higher standards and long-term success for the Louisiana colony. Franklin, *Discoverers, Explorers, Settlers*, 123, 133. Franklin's definition of the "true settler's account" is part of his discussion of Bernard Diron d'Artaugiette (younger brother of one of the men Cadillac quotes), whose journal quotes at length from the memoirs of Sieur Feaucon Dumanoir. It is Dumanoir's text that Franklin sees as typical of the settler.

22. Hamsher is interviewed in the Director's Cut video of *Natural Born Killers* (ISBN 1-57362-167-6).

23. The choice of the Joliet prison may well have been motivated by the fact that in its design, this prison structure is a version of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, the model prison that Michel Foucault discusses with such ingenuity in *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1979), 195-228. Foucault's analysis has been widely discussed in film circles, as offering a means for understanding the institutions of media: like the Panopticon, which allowed a relatively few prison guards to see into the lives of a great many prisoners, modern cinema and especially modern television paparazzi, like the Wayne Gayle character in *Natural Born Killers*, have become forms of panopticon that market the invasion of privacy as a means of confirming ever-more-rigid social control.

24. My conversations with Michael Singer, who worked as a unit publicist on *Heaven and Earth* (1993), *Natural Born Killers*, and *Nixon* (1996) and has interviewed Stone extensively, made clear to me Stone's particular admiration of Godard and *Breathless*.

25. When I asked Singer (see note 24) how familiar Stone is with American independent film, he told me, "Oliver is familiar with all the filmmakers you mention in your piece—and many others as well."

26. In the interview included on the *Natural Born Killers* Director's Cut video, Stone is explicit

about this: "Once they [Mickey and Mallory] kill, they've entered into this world of breaking all the rules; it's fitting that the filmmaker is also breaking all the rules with them."

27. Stone shot an alternative ending for *Natural Born Killers*: In this version, Mickey and Mallory are themselves murdered by a psycho-killer, during their getaway from the scene of their murder of Wayne Gayle. The alternative ending is included on the Director's Cut video.

28. Spiro's earlier tape, *Greetings from Out Here* (1993) is a personal travel documentary during which Spiro reveals her lesbianism and travels the American Southeast, visiting gay men and women who have chosen to live in their native region.

29. The State of California has attempted to have Knight's painting adjudged a danger to the environment, an event he has commemorated in his song (sung entirely off-key and outside of any beat), "Toxic Nightmare": "I contaminated the bombing range/Killed most of the fish in the Salton Sea/And California's bulldozing this paintbrush from me."

30. Sam the dog died before all of *Roam Sweet Home* was shot. In some shots a hand-made puppet of Sam was used. Even the sense Spiro gives us of her travelling alone with Sam is sometimes a fabrication. At times, Spiro was accompanied by Emily Mode.