



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

James Benning, taxidermist

Citation for published version:

Davis, G 2018, 'James Benning, taxidermist' *Moving Image Review & Art Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 38-51.
DOI: 10.1386/miraj.7.1.38_1

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1386/miraj.7.1.38_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/miraj.7.1.38_1)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Moving Image Review & Art Journal

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



James Benning, taxidermist

Glyn Davis

University of Edinburgh

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the relationship between cinema and taxidermy, and some of the ways in which artists and experimental film-makers have used the moving image to engage with the ramifications of stuffing and preserving animals. It is argued that the taxidermied creature's eerie mixture of death and life has particular resonance for film-makers with an interest in slowness and stasis. James Benning's 2014 film *natural history*, which was shot behind the scenes at the Naturhistorisches Museum in Vienna, serves as a central focus. As with other films by Benning, *natural history* can be understood as both structuralist and a landscape film. The film is compared to works depicting stuffed animals by other experimental film-makers who explore stillness and slowness; it is proposed that such film-makers can be conceived of as taxidermists. Finally, the article looks at the complex relations between cinema, taxidermy and sound. The aural dimension of Benning's film, missing from many other artists' engagements with taxidermy, enables a richer exploration of its operations.

KEYWORDS

James Benning, experimental film, taxidermy, sound, structural film, *natural history*, slowness, stasis.

A doleful ape stares out from the screen. Preserved by a taxidermist, it sits frozen and immobile, a loop of string around its neck leading to an identification tag that hangs out of frame. The lighting is subdued; the only sound the hum of air conditioning regulating the climate of the space in which the creature sits. Shot in tight framing, the location is unclear except for broad background swatches of dull colour, grey and a muddy brown. The shot is held still for five minutes – time in which to inspect the rather decrepit form of the animal, the glassy sheen of its false eyes, the forlorn cast of its brow, and consider the unsettling lack of motion in the frame. ‘Narrative’, however minor, however broadly conceptualized, fails to materialize: the light levels and industrial drone remain constant, and nobody comes to check or move the beast.

This is the final shot of the American artist and experimental film-maker James Benning’s *natural history* (2014), a screen work that features amongst its content a considerable number of static shots of taxidermied creatures. Like thousands of other stuffed and mounted animals in museums around the globe, the ape in this shot sits hidden away from public view, relegated to the lost time of storage. Simultaneously, the primate’s static form engages other distinct temporal registers: it is dead, removed from the current of time, yet its stuffing imbues it with an imitation of animation, provides it with a kind of dessicated immortality, and inserts it into the durational ebbs and flows of museal display. This essay explores how artists and experimental film-makers have engaged with the tangled temporalities of taxidermied animals, and

the ways in which these durational dynamics may connect and intersect with similar aspects of cinema. Benning's *natural history* (2014) will serve as the main object of focus, though a range of other works will also be discussed. In particular, it will be proposed that experimental film-makers with an interest in slowness and stasis can be understood as taxidermists, their films offering up frozen dioramas of purposely stilled and framed materials which, nevertheless, are haunted by the potential eruption of movement.

Behind the scenes at the museum

In the spring of 2013, James Benning accepted an invitation to become artist in residence at the Naturhistorisches Museum in Vienna, an offer made by the institution's director-general, Christian Köberl. Given a tour around the museum, Benning was especially intrigued by the spaces behind the scenes: 'We spent [a] few hours looking at the stuff stored and at the underground architecture itself. I told Christian I think I'd like to make a film there, a landscape film, and without hesitation he said yes' (Benning 2014: online). Köberl has compared the Naturhistorisches Museum to an iceberg: as he has written, 'only a small part of it is visible above water, while the rest remains hidden. [...] Less than 100,000 square feet of a total space of over 500,000 square feet are open to the public, while no more than one percent of the 30 million objects held by the Museum are on display at any one time' (Köberl 2014: n.p.). For him, Benning's film had the potential to provide 'a fresh, unconventional take on the Museum's collections and spaces' (ibid). In May and June of 2013, Benning shot for thirteen days in the depths of the institution. *natural history*, the work that emerged from this material, was first screened as an installation

within the museum itself in September 2014, before having its theatrical premiere at the Vienna International Film Festival in November 2014. Subsequently, it has been shown in film festivals such as the Seattle International Film Festival (2015), and in museums including two screenings at Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid (2015). It has also been installed in galleries; for instance, it was part of the show 'Fictitious Tales about the History of the Earth' at MAK Centre for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles (2015), where it showed alongside work by Nicole Six and Paul Petritsch. The film was released on DVD in 2014 by the Austrian Film Museum.

natural history is a documentary composed of 54 static shots of varying lengths; shot on digital, the film is 77 minutes long. The first three shots lead us into the building: we see Carl Kundmann's allegorical statue *America and Australia* (c.1889), which is located near the institution's entryway, the grand entrance stairway, and a 1773 portrait of Kaiser Franz I. Stephan von Lothringen, whose collection of natural history items formed the basis of the museum's holdings. All of the subsequent shots present us with images of the building's unseen spaces and their contents. We see empty corridors and stairways, vacated offices, murky boiler rooms, storage facilities, a library. Interspersed are shots of the museum's holdings removed from display to the public: a glass case holding spiders and other insects, taxidermied bears filed away on shelving units, two human skulls on a shelf, fish preserved in jars, fossils, ceramics, and so on. Depictions of stuffed animals constitute a notable percentage of *natural history*'s content (twelve of its 54 shots, to be precise). Human presence is largely eradicated from the film: moving bodies appear only in three shots, and these are either fleeting or barely observable. Voices can occasionally be heard, but even when audible they mostly echo from a distance, muffled. The title of *natural history* is all

lower case, as with other films by Benning, including *casting a glance* (2007) and *small roads* (2011). As Clarence Tsui suggests, in a review of *natural history*, there is a purpose behind the lack of capitals here: the film ‘is not about a parade of relics celebrating history with a capital H, but at once also a look at the ordinary spaces in which these grand histories are mounted for posterity’ (Tsui 2014: online).

The length of the shots of these ‘ordinary spaces’ and their cargo varies widely, in a seemingly arbitrary manner: some flick by very swiftly, others last for a minute or two, up to five minutes. There is a mathematical basis for the decisions that were made about these lengths. Benning studied to be a maths teacher before taking an MFA in film-making, and has taught a course to students at Cal Arts entitled ‘Mathematics for Film-makers’. In interviews, he has stated that the film’s editing protocol is derived from Pi, the ratio of a circle’s circumference to its diameter which, expressed in a decimal form, never ends (see, for instance, Pattison 2014: online).

natural history is not the first film in which Benning has used Pi as an editorial tool – it also shaped sequences in his 1979 film *Grand Opera: An Historical Romance* (see Benning 1980: 25, 31, 42) – but here it is sustained throughout, with individual shot lengths arranged according to the first 27 digits of Pi. For Köberl, drawing on Pi as a structuring principle makes sense in relation to the operations of the Naturhistorisches Museum. As he writes,

Although the images concentrate primarily on the Museum’s geological and biological collections, it is physics, chemistry and mathematics which provide the basis for our understanding of the other natural sciences. The mathematical

rhythm of Benning's editing gives the scientific objects and their surroundings a mathematical base. (Köberl 2014: n.p.)

An alternative perspective on the editing has been offered by Benning himself: he has also claimed that the different shot lengths are linked to the regimes of attention and distraction that museum visitors deploy when visiting such spaces. 'I realised', he has said, 'that the typical art museum-goer spends anything between two and 18, maybe 36 seconds between a painting [sic], and then they move on. That's how the film's structured: the short shots go from two seconds to 18 seconds, and then the long shots go from 18 seconds to up to five minutes' (Pattison 2014: online). Though plausible, this take on the film's rhythm and pace sets aside the fact that *natural history* concentrates almost wholly on documenting spaces and objects away from public consumption, which thus operate according to temporalities other than those of 'the typical art museum-goer'.

James Benning has been making experimental films since the 1970s. His work is predominantly framed in two particular ways. First, in relation to structuralism: Benning's screen works often adhere to the tenets of structuralist film outlined by such theorists as P. Adams Sitney (2002) and Stephen Heath (1981). In Benning's films, the camera is almost always fixed in place and does not pan or zoom; the overall structure of each film is as important as (if not more than) any depicted content; and through the paring back of that content, the viewer is often made reflexively aware of the presence of the film-maker and his recording equipment. To give examples, each of the films in the 'California Trilogy' (*El Valley Centro* [1999], *Los* [2000], and *Sogobi* [2001]) is 90 minutes in length, comprised of 35 shots each

lasting for 150 seconds. In contrast, *Nightfall* (2012) is a 98 minute single-take film, shot on digital, of a forest location as the light slowly fades at the end of the day. The sheer length of this film provokes consideration of Benning's role: is he there, silent, out of shot? Did he set the camera going and wander off? *natural history* fits the structuralist template: Benning's use of Pi as a structuring principle draws attention to the film's architecture as a whole, and its many lengthy static shots encourage reflection on the act of documenting.

Second, Benning's films are discussed in relation to landscape. Scott Macdonald, for instance, has claimed that 'probably no film-maker has been more involved with exploring and documenting the American landscape and cityscape than Benning. Place has nearly always been a central concern in his films' (2007: 220). The geographical focus of a number of Benning's films is revealed by their titles: *Deseret* (1995), its title derived from the Mormon designation for Utah, the California Trilogy, *Ruhr* (2009). Some of his films deploy extended takes – *13 LAKES* (2004), *Nightfall*, *BNSF* (2013) – inviting the viewer to dwell in or with particular locations, landscape serving as a prompt for reflection, reverie, pause. Others offer more conceptual approaches to geography. *Landscape Suicide* (1986), for example, contrasts the cases of murderer and grave robber Ed Gein, arraigned and committed to a secure facility in 1957, and Bernadette Protti, who was convicted in 1984 of killing fellow schoolgirl Kirsten Costas. As Barbara Pichler notes, the film 'circles around the relationship between landscape and the violence that takes place in its midst' (Pichler 2007: 85).¹ *natural history*, in contrast to many of Benning's other films, concentrates on interiors. Christian Köberl draws attention to this fact, and states that it was made

¹ Gein was the inspiration for the character of Norman Bates in Hitchcock's *Psycho* [1960], a film that I will return to shortly.

‘without living nature to serve as a time keeper’ (Köberl 2014: n.p.). Here, Köberl not only contrasts *natural history* with the bulk of Benning’s output, but gestures towards the fact that *natural history* operates according to distinct durational forms – such as the multiple temporalities associated with taxidermied animals identified earlier. By virtue of not being about landscape, is *natural history* unique in Benning’s oeuvre?

On the contrary: *natural history*, I would argue, combines Benning’s interests in structural form and landscape. These two conceptual frames blend in Benning’s belief that landscape is a function of time, a position that he has repeatedly stated. In an interview with Danni Zuvela, Benning outlined this perspective in detail. He distinguished ‘real time’ from ‘how we perceive time’ (Zuvela 2004: online). ‘Time affects the way we perceive place’, he said; ‘In my films, I’m very aware of *recording place over time*, and the way that makes you understand place’ (ibid., italics in original). Benning revealed an interest in ‘how much time is necessary to understand place’ (ibid). Long takes, he proposed, have a particular effect: ‘Once you’ve been watching something for a while, you become aware of it differently’ (ibid). From this perspective, *natural history* is as much of a landscape film as Benning’s other works. It considers how long we need to spend behind the scenes of the museum in order to grasp the place – its rhythm, its textures, its workings, the relations between people and objects in space. Shot lengths should open understandings, alter awareness. The shorter shot lengths in *natural history* provoke questions: is the content of this shot of less value and significance, or easier to comprehend at speed? Benning himself has drawn a connection between the content and form of *natural history* and his approach to landscape: ‘The idea of setting things out and portraying them in particular spaces, either flat or suggesting depth, has to do with the way I perceive landscape’ (Pattison

2014: online). It is the framing of the space, and the time that individual shots last, that opens up particular landscapes – whether interior or outdoors – for interrogation.

Museums – at least on the publicly-accessible side – often contain an array of landscapes. Constructed landscapes in the form of dioramas, artificial sets populated with a cornucopia of preserved creatures, remain a constituent component of the contemporary museum experience. In these dioramas, time is frozen; animals strike curious poses, arranged in ersatz action, a static installation that nevertheless suggests narrative, drama and dynamism. Benning's *natural history*, due to being filmed behind the scenes, does not include any depictions of museum dioramas. Instead, we see a succession of creatures removed from such locations, waiting in the wings for their cue to take the stage. What Benning repeatedly presents are alternative dioramas: the false wilderness of painted backdrops and plastic plants are stripped away yet the animals remain, suspended in lifelike postures, lodged in places that resemble sparse theatrical sets. This observation provokes reflection on the rest of Benning's career: examined through the optic of museal display, the repeated depictions across his career of still and empty locations, shot in long takes, can be read as dioramas.

Indeed, I would push this further, and argue that we can productively conceptualize of Benning as a taxidermist. He peels the skin off landscapes and mounts them for spectatorial contemplation. His shots are arranged meticulously. In common with the taxidermist, Benning sometimes employs artifice: sequences in some of his digital films, for instance, have been tidied up, manipulated, in order to smooth appearance or enhance a sense of drama. Activity is regularly stilled, creating an intimation that something could happen. Taxidermy serves as a preservation technique, driven by a desire to stop time; similarly, some of Benning's films such as *RR* (2007) and *Ruhr*

capture for posterity particular facets of the industrial world: the slow rumblings of cargo trains, the sporadic burping of a coking plant's cooling tower. Beyond such a perspective on Benning, we can ask: what other experimental film-makers with a formal or conceptual interest in slowness and stillness could also be framed as taxidermists and what might such a framing reveal about the affiliation between taxidermy and the moving image?

Cinema and taxidermy

Any consideration of the relationship that film has to the stuffing and mounting of animals must necessarily begin with Carl Akeley (1864-1926), a key individual in the histories of both taxidermy and cinema. Akeley, argues Mark Alvey, was 'the single most important figure in the development of the art of taxidermy' (Alvey 2007: 23). He was a pioneer in taxidermic technique, the first to create lightweight, lifelike casts of an animal's body over which skin would be stretched, rather than stuffing a hide with straw or cotton. Akeley was also a trailblazer in the creation of museum dioramas: his work is still on public display in the Milwaukee Public Museum, the Field Museum in Chicago and the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Akeley explored other forms of creative practice: he took photographs and made sculptures. He was also an inventor, most famously constructing a motion picture camera designed for mobility and flexibility in external locations that was adopted by documentarists, deployed for shooting aerial sequences in fiction films, and became a standard device for recording newsreel footage. Histories of cinema technology often mention the Akeley camera.

For Mark Alvey, Akeley's development of innovative techniques capable of capturing 'lifelike' representations makes him of both historical and theoretical interest: the wide variety of tools that Akeley used, Alvey argues, 'is suggestive of a fundamental human drive'— the impulse 'to record and/or replicate reality' (Alvey 2007: 24). This impulse is also identified by Donna Haraway in her analysis of Akeley: taxidermy, she writes, 'fulfills the fatal desire to represent, to be whole; it is a politics of reproduction' (Haraway 1984-5: 25). In order to theorize this drive, Alvey turns to André Bazin and in particular to his notion of the 'mummy complex'. Bazin's essay 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image' (1967) begins with a reflection on the act of mummification, and its relation to forms of artistic activity. 'If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis', writes Bazin, 'the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation. The process might reveal that at the origin of painting and sculpture there lies a mummy complex' (Bazin 1967: 9). Mummification in ancient Egypt, he proposes, provided 'a defense against the passage of time' and thus 'satisfied a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time' (ibid.). Bazin argues that such tactics, with modifications, continue throughout the history of artistic practice *as realism*. This history includes cinema. Famously, Bazin wrote that:

the cinema is objectivity in time. The film is no longer content to preserve the object, enshrouded as it were in an instant, as the bodies of insects are preserved intact, out of the distant past, in amber. [...] Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were. (1967: 14-15)

Crucially for the concerns of this essay, Bazin provides an initial attempt to forge theoretical connections between techniques used to preserve bodies and the operations of cinema.

However, Bazin's link between film and mummification is problematic, the binding unravelling under scrutiny. Mummification is a distinct practice involving dehydration and dressing of the corpse. The result, as Rachel Poliquin notes, does not 'strive for a liveliness in form' (Poliquin 2012: 23). Taxidermy, in contrast to mummification, 'involves removing skins from bodies, discarding all flesh and viscera, and rearranging the skins in a life-like manner' (ibid.). Alvey also identifies this contrast between mummification and taxidermy, and proposes that the latter serves as a better analogue for cinema. As he argues, Egyptian mummies, once buried, were 'never intended to be seen again', whereas stuffed and displayed animals are arranged 'explicitly to be viewed, studied, admired, wondered at – like photographs and motion pictures' (Alvey 2007: 40). Highlighting the 'congruence of photographic negatives with tanned and mounted skins' (ibid.), Alvey speculates that, perhaps, Bazin was just 'one visit to the Musée national d'histoire naturelle away from adding taxidermy to his list of metaphors for cinema' (2007: 41), in which case 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image' would have had a different – and technically more appropriate – base thesis.

The analogy between film and taxidermy can arguably be applied across cinema as a whole. The word 'taxidermy' derives from the Greek words *taxis* (order) and *derma* (skin), and it is possible to think of the process of editing a film – especially in its pre-digital formats – as the ordering of skeins of material into a whole that breathes, life-

like yet mechanical, when run through a projector. Even the making of those skeins, the recording of footage, can be compared to flaying, peeling a thin skin off profilmic reality in an attempt at preservation. Here, however, my focus is specifically on films that feature taxidermy as part of their content; such examples, I would propose, can conspicuously comment on the relationships between the moving image and stuffing creatures for preservation and display. Within mainstream narrative cinema, depictions of taxidermied animals tend to play specific and limited roles. Stuffed and mounted creatures are sometimes a source of comedy: in *The Naked Gun* (Zucker, 1988), a taxidermied beaver serves as the basis of a blunt sexist gag; in Hitchcock's remake of his own *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), a chase around a taxidermist's office results in James Stewart getting his hand snagged in a tiger's mouth. By contrast, in horror films, stuffed creatures generally operate as a sign of the monstrous, a mark of unease, a none-too-subtle forewarning of forthcoming scares. For instance, it is no great surprise when the mounted deer head in *Evil Dead II* (Raimi, 1987) comes to life and taunts the film's protagonist Ash (Bruce Campbell) by laughing at him.

In contrast, artists and experimental film-makers engage with taxidermied animals for their conceptual complexity, the potential they offer to open up for contemplation a host of issues: the relations between animals and humans; the ethics of using animals as the basis for art production; the status of the taxidermied animal as an art object; the fragile, even porous distinction between stasis and movement and so on. As Steve Baker writes of the taxidermied animal, 'this animal-thing [...] is almost the epitome of the kind of unstable object that is so highly regarded in contemporary art' (Baker 2014: 302). Indeed, a broad array of contemporary artists – including Damien Hirst,

Claire Morgan, David Shrigley, Angela Singer and Iris Schieferstein – have produced works that use dead and preserved animals as part of their material content. ‘In significant part’, argues Baker, the interest of artists in these stuffed creatures ‘is intimately tied to the thing’s having-been-a-living-being (or, at least, [...] some of its materials having recognizably been part of such a being)’ (302-3). The ‘animal-thing’ is dead yet intimates liveliness: as such, it unsettles, disconcerts. Yet its ‘thing-ness’ is richer than this, more complicated. In a different essay, Baker offers another perspective, drawing on Derrida’s essay ‘The Animal That Therefore I Am’ (2002). When artists use stuffed animals in their work, Baker argues, the creatures are often botched, wonky, shoddy, fraying, incomplete – and this, he says, facilitates engagement with what Derrida calls ‘the animal at unease with itself’ (Derrida 2002: 372). Art, argues Baker, ‘gives physical form to that unease by botching the animal body’ (Baker 2006: 93). With age, practices of taxidermy become outmoded, their seams exposed; over time, taxidermied animals begin to show signs of wear and tear. Artists, suggests Baker, often purposefully engage with such an aesthetic, as a constituent component of their exploration of the manifold resonances of the ‘animal-thing’. Rachel Poliquin summarises these resonances, tapping into the troubling nature of stuffed animals: ‘All taxidermy’, she writes, ‘is a disorientating, unknowable thing’ (Poliquin 2012: 7).

For experimental film-makers and artists working with the moving image, it is notable that taxidermied creatures recur throughout works made by those especially concerned with examining the nature of slowness, stillness and stasis. In Douglas Gordon’s *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), for instance, Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 original is slowed down to a projection speed of approximately two frames per second. In

Hitchcock's thriller, Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) is a taxidermy hobbyist who likes to stuff birds but not other beasts; when he tells Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) that she 'eats like a bird', her impending death is telegraphed (as it is by her surname). Hitchcock uses stuffed birds primarily as background detail, but in Gordon's film the frames in which these birds appear on their own last considerably longer, an owl's predatory swoop sustained on screen, a crow perched on an artificial branch seeming to wait, the halted movement of each more emphatically registered. To take another example, in Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), the male lead character travels back in time and is reunited with a woman. They visit a natural history museum. The 'live' human couple looks at 'dead' animals; they lark and laugh, but as the film is assembled from static images edited together, their poses are captured in frozen frames. As Sarah Cooper writes of this sequence, the couple is simultaneously lifeless, not moving, and deathless, caught within the still, photographic images: as such, 'we see the humans no differently from the animals and birds, captured in their poses or stopped in their tracks' (Cooper 2010: 55). The stasis of the images in this sequence, she argues, 'reinvests the photograph with time and renders the borderline between the animate and the inanimate indistinct' (ibid.). In both of these examples, then, explorations of stasis – whether produced by slow motion, or rooted in photographic stills – are enriched, complicated, through the presence of taxidermied creatures on screen. Like single frames extracted from the flow of celluloid, taxidermied animals, dead but posed as though alive, are simultaneously frozen yet redolent of movement.

A further example is provided by a short, silent 16mm film by João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva, *Darwin's Apple, Newton's Monkey* (2012). Just sixty seconds in

length, the film is comprised of six shots: each depicts taxidermied monkeys next to which, in slow motion, a red apple falls. Shot three features two monkeys, whereas the other five only depict a solitary creature. The primates and apples are clearly lit, but the remainder of each shot is dark, the location unclear. *Darwin's Apple* operates through a series of discombobulations, beginning with its title, which muddles Darwin and Newton's most famous discoveries. Darwin's notion of evolutionary development, the pace of progress, is subjected to stasis in the film, the monkeys stilled in preserved form. Gravity's temporality is also challenged, slowed, the apples gently drifting from the top of the frame to the bottom. *Darwin's Apple* engages with themes (research discoveries about natural laws) and formal devices (slow motion) that recur throughout Gusmão and Paiva's work. A number of their films feature live animals making small movements, these gestures slowed down – as, for instance, with the macaw in *Glossolalia* ('*Good Morning*') (2014). In contrast to these live creatures, the taxidermied monkeys in *Darwin's Apple* pose a challenge to the filmmakers: how to depict slowness with animal-objects that are completely still, yet which hint at movement in the configuration of their preserved bodies?

Benning's *natural history* also deploys the moving image to engage with the strange, unsettling temporality of the stuffed animal – and uses taxidermy to highlight the tension between stasis and movement that lies at the root of all cinema. Although he has occasionally used slow motion in other films such as *Faces* (2010), Benning does not deploy the technique in *natural history*, experimenting instead with a variety of shot lengths to explore the impact of holding the gaze on specific preserved creatures. As argued previously, although the private interiors of the Naturhistorisches Museum in Vienna may seem like an unexpected choice of topic for an artist associated with

filming outdoor landscapes, it is the manner of filming the contents of the museum – place being explored through time – that provides a conceptual connection to his other work. Gusmão and Paiva, who frequently explore the effects of slow motion, pair their stuffed monkeys with gently gliding apples, the drift of the fruit revealing (along with the purr of celluloid through the projector) that the images are actually moving, that cinema is happening. In contrast, Benning generally limits any indications of movement to the audio track. In one lengthy shot, the labels around the necks of a group of stored, stuffed donkeys and zebras rustle subtly in the draft of an air conditioning unit, but such depicted motion is rare in the film. Indeed, as I will now argue, *natural history* also opens up a complex line of enquiry into what stasis – and specifically the stasis of the museum and its holdings – sounds like. What happens when we listen to the taxidermied animal?

The noise of the museum

As part of the output associated with his residency at the Naturhistorisches Museum in Vienna, Benning also created a sound installation. *Infinite Displacement* (2013/14) was exhibited in the TONSPUR passage of the city's Museums Quarter. It consisted of an eight channel sound installation 60 minutes in length, and a seven-part series of posters. The images depicted the first seven digits of Pi (3.14159), one digit per poster, the figures in black and somewhat out of focus against a mottled brown background. The aural component of the work, meanwhile, was recorded in the Naturhistorisches Museum. Benning accessed the domed ceiling by the museum's entrance, and from there documented, as he describes it, 'the noises drifting up from the floors below – a cacophony of footsteps, screams, and yells, with occasional voices, police sirens, and museum announcements' (Benning 2013). He made three

separate recordings and selected the third for installation; it was not manipulated or altered. *Infinite Displacement* actually effects a specifically finite displacement of its audio component. Benning is precise in his description of this shift: the installation, he stated, ‘displaces the original recording in time and space: six months later, 43 metres below, and 153 metres southwest. The volume level is the same’ (ibid.). *Infinite Displacement* serves as an alternative take on *natural history*. Benning conceived of the two works as ‘companion pieces’ (ibid.), and they require comparison with each other. Though its constituent parts may seem unrelated, the installation’s juxtaposition of still images – posters affixed to a corridor wall – and a field recording of a particular location operates in an analogous manner to the completed film. The images are static but there is variety and movement in the aural component of the work. The installation invites speculation on whether its combination of sound and images is sufficient to count as ‘cinema’ – and, correspondingly, whether *natural history* can be framed and understood as a sound installation.

Infinite Displacement is not concerned with taxidermy, but broadens Benning’s investigation of the workings of the Naturhistorisches Museum as an institution and a public resource. *natural history* largely concentrates on locations below ground or behind the scenes of the museum, whereas *Infinite Displacement* centres on audio material captured in one of the same institution’s public spaces: in combination, the two serve as partial, oblique and complementary portraits of the institution as a whole. In this regard, it is worth noting that Benning’s film and installation were made and released around the same time as several other films about cultural heritage institutions. These include Jem Cohen’s fictional *Museum Hours* (2012) and Johannes

Hozhausen's documentary *The Great Museum* (2014), both filmed in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna; the portmanteau documentary *Cathedrals of Culture* (Wenders et al, 2014), which includes a sequence exploring the Pompidou Centre directed by Karim Aïnouz; *The New Rijksmuseum* (Hoogendijk, 2014), which documents the rebuilding and re-launch of the Amsterdam institution; and Frederick Wiseman's *National Gallery* (2014), which focuses on the eponymous establishment in London. Benning's *natural history* is distinct from all of these in its structural form, its almost entire lack of human presence, its denial of explanatory framing and its concentration on non-public locations.²

It is also aurally distinct: the others all include a considerable amount of dialogue.

When Richard Brody reviewed Wiseman's documentary in *The New Yorker*, he called it 'the noisiest movie coming out this week' (Brody 2014: online). Brody drew attention to the amount of talking that the film includes, which he then used to critique the filling of public gallery spaces with noise from people delivering talks and guided tours – what he termed the 'ear-drowning, mind-deadening, vision-killing flood of official and didactic discourse about art' (ibid.). In marked contrast, the soundtrack of *natural history* is predominantly a hushed one. Daniel Kasman, reviewing the film's exhibition in Vienna, where it was shown as an installation within the museum itself, commented on its pared-back sound. He described the film as 'ambiently quiet', its muted soundtrack featuring 'muffled building noise taking place in some abstracted distance from whatever [Benning] is photographing'

² An earlier film about a cultural heritage institution that provides a valuable contrast to Benning's *natural history* is Nicolas Philibert's *Un animal, des animaux* (1996). Philibert's documentary follows the renovation and refurbishment of the Zoology Gallery of Paris's Musée national d'histoire naturelle; it features sequences of creatures being stuffed by taxidermists, and animal exhibits being transported and organized for display. Unlike *natural history*, Philibert's film has narrative drive, sustained depictions of human agents, and a traditional 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary style. For a useful analysis of Philibert's film and its representations of taxidermy, see McMahon (2016).

(Kasman 2014: online). Across its shots, these sounds alternate with the drone of air-conditioned locations, the airy emptiness of office noise, the quiet of workrooms and preparation spaces. Though the industrial grind of climate control machinery is louder in some of the storage spaces and basement corridors, the dominant register is one of quietude. Kasman related this register to the stillness of the film's images, the lack of depicted activity or motion. 'I wouldn't be surprised', he wrote, 'if those who walked into the gallery, looked at the projection for a beat, and left, assumed it was simply a slideshow' (ibid.). Kasman described a group of unsupervised school children camped out in front of the film's projection, who variously ignored or interacted with the screen. Only a ringing telephone – one of the film's few louder noises – 'startl[ed] the inattentive kids into alertness' (ibid.).

Watched away from the ambient noises of the gallery installation such as other viewers and the room's own hums and cracks, the subtle textures of the soundtrack to *natural history* are more evident in a cinema or on DVD. These are most obvious at the cuts between shots, when the audio timbres of each location shift and modulate to those of the next. As Michael Pattison noted in his review of the film for *Sight and Sound*, the structure of its editing is revealed by the 'sonic contrasts between the distinct ambiances of each space: whirring generators, distant hums, the charged non-silence of a vacant hallway' (Pattison 2014: online). It may seem as though these aural textures are merely documentary, recorded at source and then replayed in synch with the associated image. However, Benning often edits his soundtracks. As Michael Pisaro notes of Benning's films, 'sometimes (rarely) the sound has been recorded simultaneously with the image. Sometimes the sounds have been recorded in the same location as the visual image, but at a different time. Often sounds have been changed,

added, subtracted or simply placed onto the sound track' (Pisaro 2007: 233). For Pisaro, despite the lack of musical score in most of Benning's films, and despite their use of soft ambient sounds and subtle atmospherics that may get somewhat lost in a gallery setting, there is still a great deal of complex aural information being presented. 'There is so much sound in a Benning film', he writes, 'so many kinds of noise that they become as differentiated as kinds of light, colours of the sky' (ibid.). He suggests that Benning's soundtracks can be thought of as music, proposing that they 'could play as pieces unto themselves' (ibid.). Pisaro relates the aural textures of Benning's films to a history of experimental music within which John Cage occupies a pivotal position. Certainly, *Infinite Displacement* can be seen as deploying Cagean tactics: environmental sound presented as artwork, ambient noises substituting for musical score, complex layering produced by playing a recording of environmental hubbub within and over the acoustics of a different public space.

Benning's uses of atmospheric sound and hushed ambience have a significant impact on the exploration of taxidermy that he undertakes in *natural history*. Although, as noted earlier, Benning's film has no storyline or voiceover, taxidermy silently hints at narrative by preserving animals in gestural poses. The practice of taxidermy itself has an audio dimension, but the finished animal-object makes no sound. The taxidermied animal may evoke noise in its pose, an open mouth suggesting a shriek or yelp – absent sound that needs to be provided by the imagination of the spectator. Museums sometimes compensate for taxidermy's silence by adding an aural channel to their dioramas – either playing on a continuous loop, or activated by the push of a button. These sound effects (insect chirps, bird squawks, animal snuffles, grunts and bellows) attempt to supply a form of motion, story, drama, or at the least an extra dimension to

the exhibit's simulacrum of reality. In contrast, artists who work with taxidermied animals rarely accompany such works with sound. Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson's 2004 exhibition *Nanoq: Flat Out and Bluesome* at Spike Island, Bristol featured ten stuffed polar bears each in a separate glass case. Rachel Poliquin noted that the gallery 'was marked by a sense of absence, an uneasy silence, a loneliness and longing' (Poliquin 2012: 1, 3). Darren Ambrose, surveying Claire Morgan's sculptural work and its taxidermic components, commented on its 'vibrant silence' (Ambrose 2014: 16). 'Through the tension created by its stillness and silence', he wrote, 'the work vibrates with a new form of intense energy' (ibid.). With these examples, the uneasiness provoked by the 'animal-thing', the animal-object, is made more palpable through silence: the absence of noise heightens awareness of the taxidermied beast's alterity, its unsettling characteristics.

Artists and experimental film-makers using the moving image to engage with taxidermy and its associated temporalities often similarly withdraw from the audio. Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* is silent; the film's familiar dialogue and Bernard Herrmann score are stripped away, though they may continue to echo in the head of the spectator. Gusmão and Paiva's *Darwin's Apple* is also silent, though the film's install includes the 16mm projector on which it is looped, adding the clanking rhythm of machinery to any viewing. In contrast, Benning's *natural history*, by engaging with the aural and having an associated sound installation, is altogether more complicated. The noises that we might associate with viewing dioramas of taxidermied animals in a museum – the chatter of other visitors, the bustle of the public institution – are here removed to an alternative location, used as one of the components for a distinct piece of work, *Infinite Displacement*. The stuffed and preserved creatures depicted in

natural history are, instead, accompanied by subdued aural ambience: the constant tone of atmospheric pressure being artificially maintained; the chilly scientific quiet of cataloguing spaces; the dull echo of the storage vestibule; the occasional distant murmur of human activity. As the film unfolds, and we engage with the museum's spaces over time, what is revealed is a lack of the texture and variety that is usually associated with the human experience of animals. Stripped of life, of habitat (whether artificial or not), and even of an audio environment (whether synthetic or not), the viewer is left with the taxidermied creature in its most rudimentary form. Facing down a tattered taxidermied ape for five minutes adds yet another layer of unease to the human encounter with stuffed animals: a recognition of our reliance on contextual noise to make sense of, make safe, these objects.

REFERENCES

- Alvey, M. (2007), 'The Cinema as Taxidermy: Carl Akeley and the Preservative Obsession', *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 48:1, pp. 23-45.
- Ambrose, D. (2014), 'A vibrant silence' in Andrea Peters (ed.), *Claire Morgan: The Slow Fire*, Cologne: Galeria Karsten Greve, pp. 7-19.
- Baker, S. (2006), "'You Kill Things to Look at Them": Animal Death in Contemporary Art' in *Killing Animals*, Animal Studies Group (ed), Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp. 69-98.
- Baker, S. (2014), 'Dead, dead, dead, dead, dead' in Garry Marvin and Susan McHugh (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Human-Animal Studies*, London: Routledge, pp. 290-304.

- Bazin, A. (1967), 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, pp. 9-16.
- Benning, J. (1980), 'Sounds and Stills from *Grand Opera*', *October*, vol. 12 (Spring), pp. 22-45.
- (2013), 'Infinite Displacement'. Available online: http://tonspur.at/w_60_en.html. Accessed 4 May 2017.
- (2014), '*natural history*, Vienna International Film Festival'. Available online: <http://www.viennale.at/en/films/natural-history>. Accessed 1 May 2017.
- Brody, R. (2014), 'Frederick Wiseman's *National Gallery*', *The New Yorker*, no. 6 November. Available online: <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/frederick-wisemans-relentless-museum-talk>. Accessed 4 May 2017.
- Derrida, J. (2002), 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)', David Wills (trans.), *Critical Inquiry*, 28:2, pp. 369-418.
- Haraway, D. (1984-5), 'Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936', *Social Text*, no. 11, pp. 20-64.
- Heath, S. (1981), *Questions of Cinema*, London: Macmillan.
- Kasman, D. (2014), 'Viennale 2014: James Benning's *natural history*', *mubi*. Available online: <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/viennale-2014-james-bennings-natural-history>. Accessed 4 May 2017.
- Köberl, C. (2014), '*natural history* – James Benning and the Natural History Museum in Vienna', DVD booklet to accompany *natural history/Ruhr*, n.p.
- Macdonald, S. (2007), 'James Benning's *13 LAKES* and *TEN SKIES*, and the Culture of Distraction', in Barbara Pichler and Claudia Slanar (eds.), *James Benning*, Vienna: Synema, pp. 218-31.

- McMahon, L. (2016), 'Dead Funny: Laughter, Life and Death in Philibert's *Nénette* and *Un animal, des animaux*', in Michael Lawrence and Karen Lury (eds.) *The Zoo and Screen Media*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 247-268.
- Pattison, M. (2014) 'The trials of life: James Benning's natural history and FAROCKI', *Sight and Sound*, 14 November, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/comment/festivals/trails-life-james-benning-s-natural-history>. Accessed 1 May 2017.
- Pichler, B. (2007), 'American Dreams, American Nightmares: *Him and Me* (1981) to *Used Innocence* (1988)' in Barbara Pichler and Claudia Slanar (eds), *James Benning*, Vienna: Synema, pp. 75-87.
- Pisaro, M. (2007), 'James Benning, Musician' in Barbara Pichler and Claudia Slanar (eds), *James Benning*, Vienna: Synema, pp. 232-7.
- Sitney, P.A. (2002), *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, third edition.
- Tsui, C. (2014), 'natural history: Vienna review', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 18 November. Available online: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/natural-history-vienna-review-749830>. Accessed 1 May 2017.
- Zuvela, D. (2004), 'Talking about Seeing: A Conversation with James Benning', *Senses of Cinema*, September. Available online: http://sensesofcinema.com/2004/the-suspended-narrative/james_benning/. Accessed 4 May 2017.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Glyn Davis is Reader in Screen Studies at Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh. He is the co-editor of *Warhol in Ten Takes* (BFI, 2013) and the co-author of *Film Studies: A Global Introduction* (Routledge, 2015). Glyn is the Project Leader

of 'Cruising the Seventies: Unearthing Pre-HIV/AIDS Queer Sexual Cultures', a three-year pan-European queer history project funded by HERA.

<https://www.crusev.ed.ac.uk>

E-mail: glyn.davis@ed.ac.uk