

Review: Erika Balsom, *TEN SKIES*

Richard Bolisay

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15664/fcj.v21.i0.2711>



Frames Cinema Journal

ISSN 2053-8812

Issue 21 (2023)

<http://www.framescinemajournal.com>



This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. To view a copy of this licence, visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

TEN SKIES

By Erika Balsom

Fireflies Press, 2021

Reviewed by Richard Bolisay, University of St Andrews

A reasonable comparison can be made between the BFI Film Classics, the landmark series of books launched in the 1990s curating the milestones of world cinema, and the newly established Decadent Editions from the Australian-based publication house, Fireflies Press. Both engage the expertise of critics and scholars in expanding the importance of individual films as material, cultural, and historical texts. Both editions also adopt an attractive pocket-sized format, meant to attract a wider readership. Most importantly, both serve to elevate particular films to the canon, allowing them to be seen in high regard given the publisher's curation and the author's depth of study. Whereas the BFI Film Classics is sprawling in its scope, Decadent Editions is much more modest in its intent to publish 10 books from the noughties, one for each year. Four titles have been published since 2021: *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* by Nick Pinkerton, *TEN SKIES* by Erika Balsom, *Inland Empire* by Melissa Anderson, and *Tale of Cinema* by Dennis Lim (and, forthcoming, *The Headless Woman* by Rebecca Harkins-Cross). Not only does Decadent Editions fill the gaps left over by the BFI's tendency to overlook contemporary and non-narrative forms of cinema, it also challenges the exclusivity of the term "classics" and its conferment to much older works, restating the crucial role of critics in expounding the "modern" in modern cinema especially after the pandemic and the changes it has brought to art consumption.

A project that expands the canon is always a welcome initiative because it contends with the transformations happening in-and-around film. In writing about *TEN SKIES* (2004), critic and

scholar Erika Balsom is not particularly concerned with raising James Benning's film to the pantheon of *Sight and Sound*'s critics' poll or the like, but she makes a strong case for its singular importance to Benning's oeuvre, and to the conversations around American politics and the historical development of the moving image. Given the utter simplicity of its premise—"Ten shots of the sky, each ten minutes long"—Balsom notes that "the film punishes she who writes about it" (46). The widespread form of videographic criticism, which "[tends] to traffic in select methods of analysis: side-by-side comparisons, the accumulation of motifs" (43), cannot do justice to its textural complexity. But this "punishment" has enabled her to write an equally singular monograph that complements the growing literature on the American artist, such as by Scott MacDonald, Silke Panse, and Nikolaj Lübecker. In ten chapters that mirror the film's structural and phenomenological nature, Balsom utilises the sharp language of a critic and the erudite curiosity of a scholar without foregoing the pleasures of personal interpretation.

Foregrounding Benning's aesthetics allows Balsom to render in literary terms the poetry and physicality of Benning's images ("a film that was, at its core, a formalist enterprise emptied of content in which the thrill of light and movement was everything" (33)), emphasising the sublime quality that has attracted a devoted following over the past five decades. The rigour and difficulty associated with the experience of watching his pictures activates introspection, what she calls "igniting an imaginative extrapolation" (38). She locates the places where these skies are shot and, from this material evidence, as well as personal and existing interviews, she describes Benning's process and discerns the radiance on the surface with a sense of dread, "an attraction mingled with terror" (23). She acknowledges the elegant compositions of each sky's beauty ("a billowing column of pale yellows and purple greys" (21) or "a mouldy bloom of cloud" (75), or simply "a mackerel sky" (133)) and the

encroachments to this beauty. These modes of encroachment are admittedly the most engaging elements of this lengthy essay: how the ten shots of the sky that Benning concocts (“pictures not just taken but *made*” (36)) using a soundtrack added in post-production (“an elaborate audio fiction” (37)) relate to the larger issues influencing the cinema of the mid-2000s: the post-9/11 trauma, the continuous advancement of digital technology, the ongoing ecological collapse. The lattice Balsom constructs does not feel artificial because she is uniquely talented in its weaving: she gathers texts from different sources—the abundance of literature is staggering; from theorists and philosophers and critics to composers and scientists and video artists; to cloud painters, meteorologists, and nephrologists; from Joni Mitchell to Ted Kaczynski. She always goes back to Benning’s subject, the clouds and skies of a particular setting, the effort to capture something ephemeral and make it endure.

It is not that Benning’s *TEN SKIES* is hard to understand. But its lack of narrative and human figures (“the sky is not there to be tamed by story” (19)) and the near impossibility of seeing the film in its intended state tend to confine it to the realm of inflexible academic reading. The chapter in which Balsom discusses the availability of the bootleg copy on YouTube, probably not the best way to see it but the *only* way for most to see it, speaks largely about the economics of access that has made many important films unapproachable. In articulating the effulgence she has felt in her viewing of *TEN SKIES* in 16mm print alongside her subsequent re-viewings of it on a file ripped online to be able to write the book in depth, Balsom does not merely belabour the “perceptual experience of photochemical projection” (139). She contextualises Benning in the traditions of structural film and pre-classical cinema, seeing in his work the perceptual and rhythmical pleasures of the avant-garde often construed as masturbatory. In a piercing moment of association, Balsom notes that the fourth sky’s soundscape lets her imagine “a scene of invisible labour” (59). (“The migrant workers are

pruning grapevines in the San Joaquin Valley and this kind of cloud can be seen only in the mountains, over four hundred kilometres away”) (60). The richness of this thought conjures the image of the Lumières’ factory workers and its intersections with the evolution of film, the labour involved in any creative pursuit and engagement, the labour of filmmaking and criticism and spectatorship. When Balsom argues that “The demand [*TEN SKIES*] makes on its viewer has nothing to do with having specialised knowledge of film or art history” (63), one might feel that it is not the critic or scholar talking but a child who has discovered a hidden treasure, ecstatic to share it. Words and images, despite saying the same thing (e.g., “sky”), can never truly be the same.

But in her appraisal of Benning and the position of *TEN SKIES* in his oeuvre, Balsom cannot help but be a critic and scholar. The “groundlessness” of *TEN SKIES*, for instance, ignites a discussion of the role of skies in warfare, especially in the context of Benning’s own statement: “I think of my landscape works now as anti-war artworks—they’re about the antithesis of war, the kind of beauty we’re destroying. The *TEN SKIES* works came about because I’m thinking about what the opposite of war was.”ⁱ Looking at the eighth sky, Balsom hears gunshots, a sound re-used from an earlier Benning film called *13 Lakes* (2004), and is consequently reminded of the War on Terror being waged around this time. What Balsom achieves in “punishing” herself by writing about *TEN SKIES* is implicating a wider audience in her interrogation, creating richly rewarding paths in reading a film that would otherwise be left alone, overlooked. Clearly the mark of a generous critic.

Notes

ⁱ Danni Zuvela, “Talking About Seeing: A Conversation with James Benning,” *Senses of Cinema*, 33 (2004). [Talking About Seeing: A Conversation with James Benning – Senses of Cinema](#).