

Sadie Benning



"Film will only become art when the materials are as inexpensive as pencil and paper." - Jean Cocteau

"Some little fat girl in Ohio is going to make a beautiful movie with her father's camcorder...." - Francis Ford Coppola, *Hearts of Darkness*.

Sadie Benning is not a fat girl. And she is not from Ohio. But she has managed to make some of the most brutally honest, confessional films of the past decade with, quite literally, a toy she received from her father, avant-garde filmmaker James Benning (*Landscape Suicide*, *North on Evers*).

The PXL-2000 was developed by Fisher Price in the late-1980s as a low-price entry into the evolving home video camcorder market. Aimed at adolescents, the PXL-2000 recorded highly pixelated black and white images onto standard audio cassettes. Priced around \$100, the PXL-2000 was a commercial flop, but resurfaced years later as a medium of choice for many experimental and independent filmmakers. Perhaps the most recognizable film that has integrated Pixelvision into its filmed narrative was Michael Almereyda's *Nadja* (1994), which incorporated the ethereal Pixelvision into its filmed narrative. Almereyda also used the medium in other films, including *Another Girl*, *Another Planet*. It's been used by numerous other filmmakers (Michael O'Reilly, Joe Gibbons, Erik Saks, Peggy Ahwesh and Margie Strosser among them). The frame-within-a-frame look, low resolution, slow screen refresh rate and hazy black and white video quality combine to create a dreamy, claustrophobic end-product.

Since she was a teenager, Sadie Benning has been using the PXL-2000 to tell her unique brand of confessional stories, to varying degrees of success, beginning with her shorts and culminating with a fantastic feature, *Flat is Beautiful*.

Benning's early shorts are often tedious, though fascinating and immersive, exercises in self-indulgent posturing. Nearly always the centerpiece of her own films, Benning comes across as both troubled youth and dastardly troublemaker. It's often hard to tell when she's performing and when she's really opening up herself emotionally. Still, the videos are sometimes painfully effective.

In *A Place Called Lovely* (1991), Benning speaks in first person about a seemingly endless supply of sources of pain: physical violence, deceit, fear and social inequities. She pans the camera over the minutiae of yearbook pictures, toy cars, projected movies and tabloid rags like a crime scene investigator. Indeed, here Benning is playing the detective, the infiltrator. As a past victim of violence, she refuses to remain victimized: rather, she turns the tables and presents herself as an aggressor, an odd choice (such as when she pounds a Matchbox car furiously on a table), but an effective one. A highlight is a bravado scene where Benning tells of the time she set upon a bully and made him into the abused. The camera shooting her from below, Benning, shirtless, pounds away at an unseen villain, the shadows and light dancing upon her delicate, beautiful frame. In these quite, furious moments, Benning begins to shine as a filmmaker and an agitprop provocateur of emotive aggression.

Another highlight of Benning's early work is *It Wasn't Love* (1992), a fractured tale of a love affair that is both heartfelt and tongue-in-cheek funny. Benning herself poses as various types of stereotypical masculinity and femininity: the rebel, the vamp, the biker, the bimbo. Intercut is the fantasy of a past romance with a "bad girl". Here, Benning plays wonderfully with shadows and music. She lights cigarette smoke with the passion and formal delicacy of a Wong Kar-Wai/Christopher Doyle composition and the slow dances are comical and transcendent, seemingly at the same time. It might not have been love, but it was certainly beautiful.

From here, Benning begins to branch out into different approaches. With *German Song* we find Benning shooting a disaffected youth to the tunes of Come. Here, also, she has branched away from Pixelvision into Super 8 black and white film.

The Judy Spots (1995) are Benning's uproarious animated shorts, which feature a paper mache puppet (recalling Judy of the famous Punch and Judy duo) who, much like Barry Egan in P.T. Anderson's *Punch-Drunk Love*, sort of drifts through the world as life happens to her, without having much of an effect on the outcome. Unlike Barry, Judy is blissfully aware of her predicament, commenting hilariously on things, like how much she loves working in a fast food restaurant. Benning displays a quick, attuned wit with these "spots", which also serve in leading up to her near-feature-length coup de grace, *Flat is Beautiful* (1998).



Flat is Beautiful exists somewhere between reality and fantasy. Though it features human actors, they wear large, overexpressive paper mache masks (recalling the long, droopy look of *The Judy Spots*) that hide and enshrine each character with preconceived

perceptions. Taylor, 11 years old, lives in an apartment with her mother and her mother's gay roommate. She rarely sees her deadbeat father. She finds herself attracted to other little girls (she is herself an androgynous entity, slinky yet boyishly structured) and confused by the way in which her culture seems to enforce certain gender-specific expectations. Her mother is compelled to date a man she doesn't seem to care much for, except for sexual gratification. The gay roommate tries to give supportive advice to Taylor (like when she asks him about her desire of another girl), but often feels uncomfortable being the father figure. Benning switches between Pixelvision for the interiors and black and white film for the exteriors, giving the film a distinct POV. When at home, Taylor is trapped, boxed in. Outside, she feels free to explore the complex feelings she's experiencing. Ultimately, Benning does not hand out any pat answers. Rather, she's content to have offered up this heartbreaking portrait of a lonely child, one more lost in a world of the lost.

Benning's films point towards a specific political agenda. As much as any other contemporary underground filmmaker, Sadie wants to tell you something. Her images are rarely impressionistic. Generally speaking, her films are self-explanatory in terms of narrative and function. She wants you to know that she's been hurt. That hurt can cause emotional damage. That emotional damage can lead to extreme loneliness. That she says these things is not novel. But her approach, so blisteringly intense and personal, makes her light shine just a little bit brighter than most. Benning's formal abilities are really no longer to be questioned...she is a remarkable filmmaker, both thematically and technically. She's the rare artist who has found the perfect marriage between form and content. She'll be remembered as one of the finest experimental filmmakers the medium has ever seen.

Sadie Benning Filmography:

- *Aerobicide - Julie Ruin* (1998)
- *Flat is Beautiful* (1998)
- *German Song* (1995)
- *Girl Power* (1992)
- *If Every Girl Had a Diary* (1990)
- *It Wasn't Love* (1992)
- *Jollies* (1990)
- *The Judy Spots* (1995)
- *Living Inside* (1989)
- *Me and Rubyfruit* (1990)
- *A New Year* (1989)
- *A Place Called Lovely* (1991)

