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DESERET

★★★★

Directed and written by
James Benning
Narrated by Fred Gardner.

By Jonathan Rosenbaum

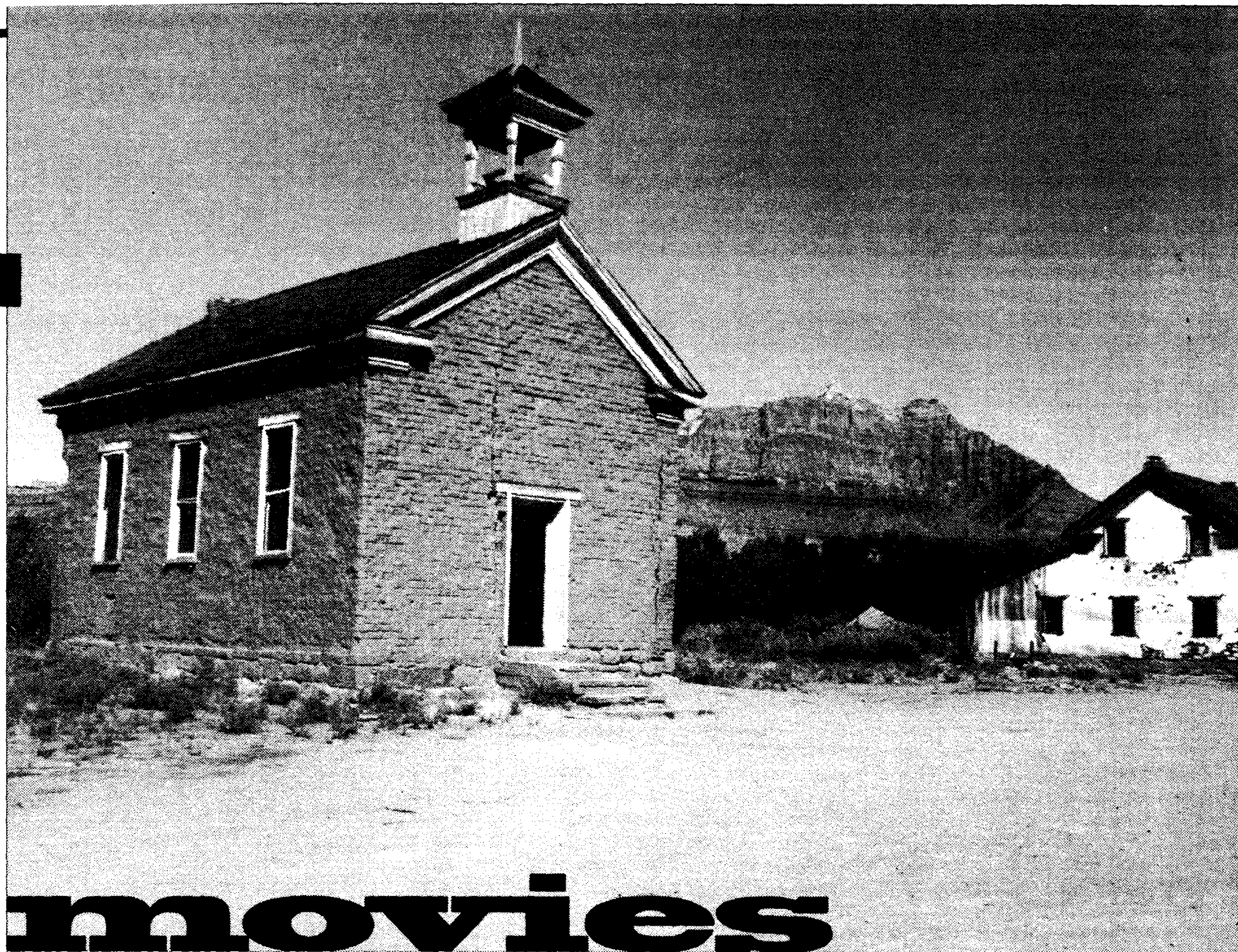
LANDSCAPE ARTIST

Andre Gide's The Counterfeiters is too tremendous a thing for praises. To say of it "Here is a magnificent novel" is rather like gazing into the Grand Canyon and remarking, "Well, well, well; quite a slice."

Doubtless you have heard that this book is not pleasant. Neither is the Atlantic Ocean. —Dorothy Parker

One of the main characteristics of experimental films is that they tend to make hash of the terms we use to speak about narrative features, and James Benning's haunting, beautiful, and awesome *Deseret* (1995)—his eighth feature-length film—performs this valuable function from the outset. To say that *Deseret* is "directed" and "written" by Benning requires some bending of the categories. He "directed" it insofar as he conceived the project, filmed the images, recorded the sound, and edited the sound and images; he "wrote" it insofar as he compiled and edited the texts that are read offscreen by Fred Gardner, though he didn't write them. In a Hollywood film the directorial tasks described above would be carried out by a producer, cinematographer, sound recordist, editor, and sound editor; it's anybody's guess what the compiler and editor of the text would be called (researcher? script editor? production assistant?).

Yet it still seems right to call Benning the writer and director of



Deseret. Part of the art he shows in compiling and editing the source material for the narration—93 news stories from the *New York Times* between 1852 and 1992 about what's today known as Utah—is shaping them into a single text that qualifies as his own writing. And surely by giving a discernible, if often mysterious, direction to the images and sounds

he recorded in contemporary Utah he's entitled to be considered director as well as producer.

Broadly speaking, *Deseret*—whose title refers to the name the territory of Utah originally proposed for itself when campaigning for statehood in the 1860s (it joined the union as Utah in 1896)—consists of the subtle, artful, and complex inter-

face of the condensed news stories, the recorded sounds, and several hundred stationary shots. Each shot generally corresponds to a sentence in the narration, the only exception being that each of the film's 93 segments begins without narration; the narration of a news story always begins with the second shot, on the lower portion of which is superim-

posed the story's date.

At first one might assume that
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film ratings

- ★★★★ Masterpiece
- ★★★ A must-see
- ★★ Worth seeing
- ★ Has redeeming facet
- Worthless

in art museums, which often means that the audience sits on folding chairs or benches; given the fine-arts aspect of this work, this seems logical enough, but the links between his work and other kinds of movies tend to get obscured by this arrangement.

Placing *Deseret* in the "experimental" category automatically suggests more kinship with the works of Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, and Peter Kubelka than with those of Chantal Akerman, Terrence Malick, or Gus Van Sant. If the latter group can be said to belong more to the history of landscape art than the former, that's clearly where Benning belongs. Yet as a filmmaker who started out painting, drawing, and studying mathematics in graduate school, he also has a strong relationship to structural filmmakers such as Snow and Hollis Frampton, whose works are often preoccupied with time, duration, and history and are also shown mainly in art museums and spaces like Chicago Filmmakers's Kino-Eye Cinema.

In a more enlightened culture Benning's uncanny flair for framing landscapes could be set alongside the compositional gifts of Steven Spielberg, even though Spielberg's painterly eye would come in second. In the utopia I have in mind literary critics would be more concerned with the fictional narrative spaces opened up by Benning's films than with the fictional narrative spaces closed down by, say, Ang Lee and Emma Thompson's (as opposed to Jane Austen's) *Sense and Sensibility*. After all, the topographical and historical spaces opened up by Benning—and the fictional and narrative spaces created by every viewer in relation to them—allow for genuine reconnaissance missions. By contrast, Lee and Thompson's topographical and historical spaces are at best pared-down illustrations of—and touristic theme-park rides through—territories conclusively mapped out by Austen 200 years ago.

To get a proper sense of all it's doing and setting in motion, *Deseret* should probably be considered in relation to Norman Mailer's best novel, *The Executioner's Song*—a narrative about Utah and Mormons and violence and the potential emptiness in all three—as well as other experimental films like *Too Early, Too Late*, *La region centrale*, and Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* and *Nostalgia* (neither of which is much concerned with landscape, but both of which have serial constructions that suggest *Deseret*). Ideally, such a film should be seen and discussed not only by film critics but by historians and people concerned with literature and the fine arts, because it's saying things about aspects of American culture that in the mainstream only corny, simpleminded demagogues like Oliver Stone are being allowed to hold forth on. Benning has much more to say about the vastness, complexity, and terror of American life than Stone (or Ron Howard, for that matter) has ever dreamed of. But because he's saying it in cold auditoriums, in 16-millimeter—without even the "benefit" of preview copies on video—and without big-studio approval, most of our tastemakers who adhere to the cultural agenda set by banks aren't even going to think of listening.