

Acropolis Cinema presents



July 28, 2016 ~ 7:00PM ~ USC

ABOUT THE FILM

Gabe Klinger's intimate and unassumingly insightful documentary—winner of the Venezia Classici Award at the 2013 Venice Film Festival—brings together two masters of modern filmmaking for a series of casual, wide-ranging conversations touching on cinema, sports, and the unexpected artistic corollaries between their indelible corpuses. Forgoing tired nonfiction storytelling tropes, Klinger allows the natural rapport and shared camaraderie of his subjects, the Texas-born indie icon Richard Linklater and the Milwaukee-bred avant-garde figurehead James Benning, to shape a narrative that follows their discussions from the baseball diamond (where each spent a great deal of their youth) to the editing room (where we see Linklater working on *Boyhood*). The result is a portrait both unique and refreshing, locating affinities and drawing parallels between two unlikely comrades.

70 min // France/Portugal/USA // 2013

Double Play by Carson Lund

Anyone familiar with the former Sundance Channel program *Iconoclasts* will likely remember it as one of the more formally casual shows to ever enjoy extended play on American television screens. In each episode two celebrity personalities—one who fit the mold of a “visionary” (activist Maya Angelou, New Age leader Deepak Chopra, or musician Paul Simon, for example), the other occupying the status of a more utilitarian professional (actor James Franco, producer Brian Grazer, or singer Alicia Keys)—would get together for an extended session of chitchat. Pleasantly meandering in its rhythms, the show’s editing was seemingly dictated by the flow of conversation rather than any predetermined narrative arc.

With its feeling of eavesdropping on quotidian activity and its gradual sense of mundane talk drifting into philosophical repartee, *Iconoclasts’* pleasures were not entirely unlike those of a Richard Linklater film. It’s somehow fitting, then, to find Linklater gabbing away in Gabe Klinger’s *Double Play: James Benning and Richard Linklater*, a documentary that shares much of what made the Sundance Channel show modestly successful. Like *Iconoclasts*, which modeled itself after the similarly structured German series *Durch die Nacht mit*, an ARTE program that still airs today, *Double Play* is also associated with the long-running French documentary project *Cinéastes de notre temps*. Klinger, whose cinephilic credentials include criticism for journals like *Sight & Sound* and *Cinema Scope* and programming positions at distinguished festivals (Rotterdam) and screening hubs (George Eastman House), brought the idea for *Double Play* to André S. Labarthe, the co-producer and frequent director of *Cinéastes de notre temps*, and won him over despite the series’ legacy as a home for single filmmaker profiles. In fact, by staging a meeting between Linklater and Benning—with the former inviting the latter to his Texas home, a solicitation that implicitly echoes 20 years earlier when the director brought Benning to his then-newly minted Austin Film Society—there’s a palpable sense of Klinger consciously breaking from form.

As *Double Play* begins and Linklater’s eager curiosity is cast alongside Benning’s low murmur and over-careful word choice, one might suspect this is a tale of Benning the Great and Lin-

klater the Young—and indeed, the film flirts knowingly with a gaping critical over-simplification: Benning, ever the economical lone wolf, represents a zenith of pre-narrative “pure” cinema untouchable by Linklater, the naïvely movie-mad indie prodigy who signed off his avant-garde tendencies to the Hollywood machine somewhere along the line and is thus ideologically constrained by Benning’s arch-enemy of narrative language. Klinger establishes this false impression by playing up the filmmakers’ aesthetic distinctions in his montage, juxtaposing, for instance, Linklater’s more rambunctious sequences (say, the disproportionately effusive send-off of *Slacker* [1991]) with Benning’s unflappably even-tempered long takes. But *Double Play* is first and foremost a film made with humility and affection, and it ultimately goes about confidently deconstructing such judgmental dead-ends.

Time, that constant that haunts the work of both directors, is the most salient equalizer on display. Both men look comfortably scraggly and out of shape, their demeanors softening along with their drooping features (archival appearances of Benning and Linklater in the ‘90s reveal a brooding artiste and a winsome loafer, respectively, both of which play like more self-conscious versions of their current personas). This acknowledgment of the physical and psychological effects of time’s passing, emphasized by an editing pattern that serves to visually reinforce the subjects’ recollections, dovetails with the major thematic preoccupations of Linklater’s best work, even touching upon the more poetic dimensions of this theme in Benning’s elegiac *actualités*. It also carries with it a charge specific to Klinger’s film that works itself out through discussion: theoretical divisions fall away with time, leaving in their wake more general appreciations of visual art and the creative process.

The conversations shared here—volleyed back and forth in parking lots, basketball courts and editing rooms, over lunch and before the Texas countryside—are marked by a relaxed sense of chivalry. Linklater, who advertises his voracious cinephilia all over the walls of his residence, showers Benning with the compliment that his films afford him special time to observe the natural world, inviting him to experience a state of tabula rasa awe that’s rare in the cinema. Benning, a Wisconsin-born, California-based aesthete whose work more often shows in museum spaces than arthouse theaters, approaches his colleague’s filmmaking from an anthropological rather than reverential frame of mind, singling out moments and qualities from Linklater’s movies—the credit sequence of *School of Rock* (2003), the affection toward baseball that courses through his filmography—as windows to his directorial personality. In one memorable sequence, Benning views rough edits of *Boyhood* (2014) and expresses genuine curiosity with regards to how Linklater went about assembling the film’s year-leaping ellipses. The two artists occasionally poke at each other—Benning’s comment about the manipulative nature of modern crosscutting seems at least partially an attempt to provoke his lunch companion, and the same goes for Linklater’s retort that slow cinema is inherently just as manipulated—but ultimately they’re pacifists recognizing the fact that they’re at similar junctures in life and relishing an opportunity to share feelings and memories with one another.

Double Play’s title is both a reflection of the two-handed nature of the film’s conception and an invocation of baseball, a sport near and dear to Benning and Linklater. Both directors attended university on baseball scholarships and subsequently left the game in favor of filmmaking, and both let their wistful fondness for it show through in their work. It’s hard to imagine anyone

with similar passions—waning or otherwise—not working up some goodwill watching these two humbled men partaking in the eternal gratification of playing catch, which they do at various points in the film. Similarly, those of us who've obsessed over memorabilia in our pasts might be charmed by Klinger's repeated use of clips from Benning's montage film *American Dreams: Lost and Found* (1984), a deviation in his durationally-fixated body of work that sets vintage Hank Aaron baseball cards against a backbeat of late 20th-century American ephemera, both aural and textual. The deliberate, thoughtful drama of baseball shares a loose affinity with the patience and care put into Linklater and Benning's films, a notion made especially apparent during the pair's laid-back batting practice session, composed so as to isolate the batter and outfielder in separate, telephoto-flattened frames—a long-distance shot-reverse-shot pattern that collapses the space between them.

Klinger's low-key visual style repeatedly stresses this quest for connection and understanding. During one key scene, his camera frames his subjects in intimate profile-sideways glances, as opposed to direct eye-line views, are used frequently to underscore the director's presence as an attentive listener and student—and pans into the negative space between the two men. Metaphorically speaking, it's this space—the air in which the baseball travels back and forth—that Klinger's film is exploring. What kind of synergy can occur between two artists who work in the same medium but in disparate modes? From what recesses of imagination and theory do the moments of crossover in Linklater and Benning's films emerge? *Double Play* is not particularly concerned with providing resolution to these conversational touch points, but it does create a tantalizing reflective space for the engaged viewer that could feasibly extend far longer than the 70 breezy minutes assembled here.



Upcoming Events

The Academy of Muses (date and venue TBA)

José Luis Guerín's beautiful docu-fiction experiment

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