

senses of cinema

Sundance: Above and Beyond

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How to Live in Illinois

One of the few theatrical films of New Frontier, Deborah Stratman's *The Illinois Parables* (also shown at the Forum in Berlin) starts with a series of aerial panning shots on flat agricultural landscapes: rectangles of a few different shades of brown, a spot of green here and there, empty roads, a few scattered constructions. We are in the "Prairie State", the land of agribusiness, one of the biggest producers of soy, corn and ethanol. Then the number 1 starkly marked indicates that we are now entering the first "parable" (there are 11 in all), and the landscape shown becomes more mountainous. Native American singing and drums are heard while a lone figure crosses the screen in the background of a long shot. Cut to a man, clad in black, shot head-to-toe in the dirt path, holding a small percussion instrument made of animal skin, the self-described shaman Ravenwolf (played by C. Felton Jennings II), who has come to these mountains "to receive their honour, their gift, their strength and wisdom." Then, over static shots of paintings in a cave and deserted spots (dirt roads, entrance of caves, cliffs, shrubbery), a French-accented voice (that of José Oubrerie) reads the missionary Father Jacques Marquette's account of his encounter with "two painted monsters" in 1673. This second parable ends up juxtaposing scientific shots of birds, reconstruction of Native American life in some museum of natural history diorama and period

paintings, and more landscape shots, such as on with the sign “Trail of Tears Rd”, as we are introduced to the third episode. Over a view of pristine white snow, while a lone bird is crowing, a text, dated 1830, is juxtaposed: “An Act to provide for an exchange of land with the Indians residing in any of the States or Territories and for their removal West of the river Mississippi” – giving the “Trail of Tears” its full meaning. (A few minutes later, a naïve painting on wood in indeed titled *CHEROKEE REMOVAL – TRAIL OF TEARS – OHIO RIVER XING 1838*). Over a soundtrack of footsteps seldom interrupted by the cry of a baby, a male voice (Daniel Verdier, reading from a text written by Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831) describes the ordeal of this “removal”, underwent by the Indians in stoic silence: “The catastrophe was irremediable, and they knew it.”



The Illinois Parables (Courtesy of Sundance Institute)

In the grand tradition of the “political landscape film” – as illustrated by James Benning, Lee Anne Schmitt, William E. Jones’ first period, Jenni Olson, or Stratman herself in her previous work – *The Illinois Parables* juxtaposes unmarked landscapes (the list of places come at the end), most often devoid of human figures and present as “traces” of a fraught history, with texts, archival footage and other artefacts yielded by a solid research. The seduction comes from the rigorous composition of the shots and from a strategy – not unlike that of Eastern Asian scroll painting – that allows the spectator to project him/herself in the “empty spaces” of the shot. The juxtaposition of image and texts is not authoritarian, but allows for gaps, (mis)readings, (re)interpretations, playfulness even; the spectator is invited to float over the image like a little boat over the crest of the wave,

Stratman eventually leaves the countryside, as the other parables become more urban – following the progressive industrialisation of the state, as we are now moving deep into the 19th century. The “trail” that crosses the state – no longer linked to the displacement of the Indians, but called, in different places, “the California Trail”, or “the Pony Express Trail” – has a “Mormon Trail” section, espousing the persecution of exodus of the Mormons as they fled Ohio and then Missouri under the leadership of the “Prophet Joseph Smith” and created a “safe haven” in Nauvoo, Ill. Smith was eventually arrested on trumped charges of rioting and treason, and shot to death by a mob while in jail in Carthage Ill, in 1844; the perpetrators were found not guilty, and many of the houses of Smith’s followers were burnt to the ground.

Another episode evokes the deadly tornado that razed several small towns around Gorham in 1925, killing hundreds of people and leaving 15,000 homeless. Yet industrialisation continues, and Illinois was to eventually boast, in Chicago, the third largest city of the United States. Parables VII and X take place in Chicago, the first one a black-and-white aerial shot over the city as it has been damaged by yet another tornado, accompanied by sounds made by the survivors of the catastrophe, over the rendering of *Sweet Hour of Prayer* by the by the African-American gospel group, The

over the rendering of *Sweet Hour of Prayer* by the African-American gospel group, The Lunenberg Travelers. By that time, the “Great Migrations” from the South to the North (1910-1960) had brought thousands of black people to Chicago, where their number swelled from 40,000 in 1910 to 278,000 in 1940).

After a segue into the well-publicised “Poltergeist” case of 1948 in Macomb – in which a teenage girl, Wanet McNeil (embodied with mysterious grace by Anna Toborg), living with her divorced father, was believed to have started 200 fires with the sole power of her mind – the tenth parable revisits the murder of Fred Hampton in 1969, with Stratman’s minimalist restaging of the FBI’s “reconstitution” of the attack of the Black Panthers’ safe house. The film ends up on an ironically “bucolic” note, with the reclaiming of a poisonous strip-mined bluff into a state park near Ottawa, Ill, in 1985, and the eloquent choral rendition of Alfred Shnittke’s *Zwei Kleine Stücke für Orgel* (*Two Pieces for Organ*, 1980), that concludes on a black leader. At the beginning, there was the image, but there was also the music. In-between the two, an imperfect, violent and polluting history perpetrated by human follies...

Sundance Film Festival

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Festival website: <http://www.sundance.org> [HTTP://WWW.SUNDANCE.ORG]