

THE ILLINOIS PARABLES - DOCUMENTARY REVIEW: LONDON FILM FESTIVAL 2016

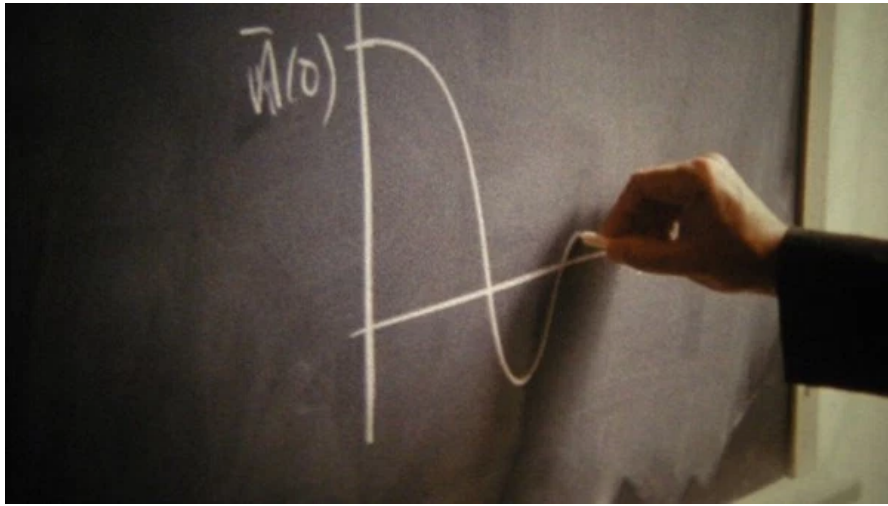
18 October, 2016 — by [Douglas Clarke-Williams](#)

More a visual essay than a [documentary film](#), in *The Illinois Parables* Deborah Stratman knits together archive footage and her own scenes shot on 16mm film to form a long, pensive sweep of the state's history. Just an hour long, it feels as crammed with as much nuance and imagination as the centuries which it covers.



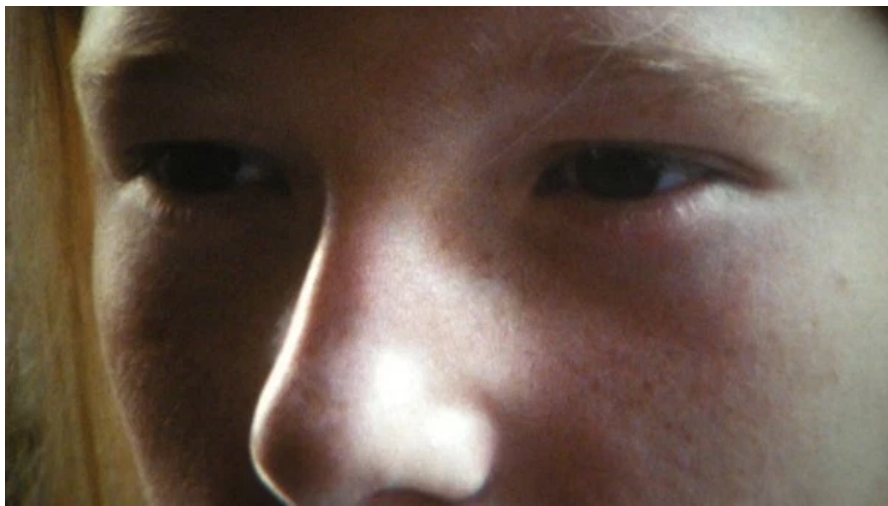
Place matters. One need only look at the uproar when some popular British novel is adapted onto the big screen and the setting suddenly jolts 5000 miles across the Atlantic to a more Hollywood-conducive location – *The Girl On The Train* being only the most recent example. As with most things, we only really notice it when things change.

'*The Illinois Parables*' comprises 10 chapters, each covering a sliver of the state's history: the passage of Native Americans along the Trail of Tears, or a devastating tornado, or the FBI's persecution of the Black Panthers. Intersected with bold white-on-black Roman numeral intertitles, as these chapters follow one another you find yourself building your own connections between them. There's no running narrative, and indeed little in the way of obvious story within many of the segments themselves. By choosing her building blocks in this way Stratman is at least partly encouraging us to consider the way in which our more canonical sense of history is constructed out of similarly arbitrary slivers of time, and makes us doubt it all.



as important as the film's philosophy, of course, is its execution, and on the whole *The Illinois Parables* succeeds in that regard. The best moments are the deeply engaged yet meditative shots of the Illinois landscape itself. The use of 16mm film adds a rougher, more domestic texture to the proceedings which simultaneously draws one in while also subverting expectations, running gleefully against the super-crisp, hyper-dramas which one would expect to find in a more mainstream piece of this type. It's the other side of the coin to an expansive globalism like that in Malick's recent [Voyage of Time](#): both abstracted, but on vastly different scales.

That's not to say that there isn't genuine aesthetic pleasure to be had here. Stratman, whose work has been exhibited in numerous galleries and who teaches art and art history at the University of Illinois, has an artist's eye for the sublimely banal. Her lingering shots on the sun setting through the dense branches of a tree, or Confederate flags fluttering outside a run-down rural home, hold the viewer's attention through their straightforward yet compulsive framing as well as their simple patience. The camera is allowed the luxury of stillness.



These visual pleasures are complemented by a generously and engagingly varied soundtrack. Soundtrack is the wrong word; the film foregrounds everything from Native American ritual chants to crashing classical music to the tap and scrape of chalk on board. It's an effective technique, encouraging a closer listening than might otherwise be the case, and fits very well into the overarching notion of a creation of one's own rhythm.

So this is not a history of the state of Illinois; it is the state of Illinois' history. Stratman has chosen her vignettes with intelligence, and together they form a patchwork image of the place which is quite unlike any you've seen before. It's not an approachable piece; many of its sections are as much challenges as they are examinations. Its brevity also naturally restricts it, with its densely layered imagery necessarily laying the burden of interpretation on the viewer. But for those seeking a film which is as much about ways of looking as it is about the actual subject, *The Illinois Parables* is a powerfully unconventional picture of America's most average state.