

Cine-File Blog

CINE-LIST – Friday, April 8 – Thursday, April 14, 2016

CINE-LIST

Friday, April 8 - Thursday, April 14, 2016

CRUCIAL VIEWING

Deborah Stratman's THE ILLINOIS PARABLES (New Documentary)

Conversations at the Edge Series at the Gene Siskel Film Center – Thursday, 6pm

When I was in the second semester of my senior year of high school, drenched with that special hyperactive glee that can only come from being a teenager about to change the world through the power of having read very serious books by very dead people, I came across an unhinged and hyperbolic profile in the *New York Times* of a young writer of prodigious passion, voluminous productivity, and dangerous proclivities. He had embarked, the author of the article said, on a multi-novel project that set out to do nothing less than reconstitute the history of the European conquests in the North American continent, from the Viking settlements to the present day, through myth, autobiographical recreation, vividly poetic deconstruction, and obsessive archival research. The man being discussed was William T. Vollmann, arguably the greatest novelist in America today, and his cycle of books about America, 'Seven Dreams,' had its fifth volume published just last summer. As I was watching, and obsessively rewatching, Deborah Stratman's beautiful new film, THE ILLINOIS PARABLES, I was unavoidably reminded of the gargantuan ambition and microhistorical approach that Vollmann has taken in his series. Stratman's lyrical documentary takes the form, not of dreams, but of parables, eleven of them, each a loving, sometimes poignant and often terrible, frozen moment from Illinois' past. A parable, in contrast to a dream, is a tale that encapsulates a spiritual truth, a way through story to teach a difficult lesson about a higher, better way of life, a grander, more virtuous kind of world, and how we might find a way to deserve those. THE ILLINOIS PARABLES is about the land of Illinois as much as it's about the people who live here. Stratman shows it as a grand, expansive place, a landscape of fecundity and cruelty and catastrophe. Each of the parable-sections of the film offers a miniature meditation on an event from Illinois history, lushly photographed in gorgeous, complex shots combined in mesmerizing patterns. We see a wilderness, a pre-Columbian ruin, a snow-drowned dirt road, a crime scene recreation, a close-up of a painting, of a monument. The lives that once inhabited and once brought life to these images have been expelled: by the force of nature, by the force of racism, by the force of religious bigotry, by the force of greed, by the force of police assassination. Over the dense soundtrack, the sounds of nature form a peculiar and funereal music, punctuated only by the recitations, in voice-over, of unforgiving and blunt first-person narratives culled from our state's past. The heart of the film for me is parable 9, an exploration of the Macomb Poltergeist, one of the most notorious poltergeist hauntings in American history. In the film, a young girl sits alone in a room. Slowly, a small spot appears on the wallpaper opposite her. It darkens, spreads, begins to glow hot. Small tongues of flame start to lick up out of the growing hole. Stratman cuts to found footage of a house mid-conflagration, moments away from

collapsing entirely. The incomprehensible has become the palpable. The ineffable has descended to flesh. But the mystery has only deepened, and the state of emergency, the state of Illinois, is always just about to burst into fire. Stratman, like Vollmann, gives us each moment as a vision of how a place, how a person might have been, and what that possibility can mean to us now as we glacially awaken from our long nightmares into an incandescent present. *Stratman in person*. (2016, 60 min, 16mm) **KB**

