

'Illinois Parables' is Beautiful, Telling and Needed

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Deborah Stratman's "Illinois Parables" is a story told in celluloid verse — a cinematic poem. Placing this film within a genre will yield no helpful result, for it gathers strength from its free-from and lack of pretense to present any one objective. Instead, the film enthralls its audience with a series of self-contained, somewhat abstract vignettes of particular moments in the state's complex history.

"Illinois Parables" surveys issues such as resettlement, persecution of religious groups, natural disasters, nuclear research and racism in eleven brief chapters, each announced with a Roman numeral over a black background. The numerals serve as a visual thread tying the film into a whole.

As the fifth most populous state, endowed with rich natural resources and home to rapid industrial and technological development, Illinois undeniably harbors many conflicts. However, rather than bluntly addressing the politics of progress, Stratman contemplates these issues indirectly by the means of visual analogies and subjective voiceovers.

For Stratman, Illinois is a land beautiful in nature but soiled with suffering and secrets. In the beginning chapters viewers see almost entirely still images of various fields, each with a small hill in the middle of the frame. Later on, in chapter seven, the audience's suspicions are confirmed when they learn that radioactive material is in fact buried in random forest sites after nuclear research conducted in the 1940s.

Still, refusing to focus on the particulars of the scandal but rather aiming to convey a general feeling of awe and absurdity, Stratman doesn't tell her audience the location of these burials and reach facilities (only revealed in the closing credits). In a similar manner, viewers are taken into the deep of snow-covered woods. There, an aged and indignant male voice informs us of the impossible trails Native Americans were forced to tread through as a result of forced resettlement.

There is no reenactment (so painfully fake in most historical documentaries) or forced conclusive statements. Instead, viewers are given beautiful images of frozen rivers and cool, silent swamps, suggesting that memory quickly fades with the unforgiving progression of time and nature.

Nonetheless — or perhaps precisely because of this notion — Stratman continues to draw parallels between the past and present. She juxtaposes archival footage with present-day

sites — events that have slipped into the past and the monuments that remain. These connections are not always obvious and, at times, even seem completely random.

However, the film, like poetry, follows a rhythm. Within each numbered verse, the beat is set by a distinct soundtrack, alternating between musical sounds, purely verbal and an elaborate combination of the two. The images follow in a visual dance of sorts. In one chapter, a rapid archival video of a tornado-devastated town is ingeniously set against a blues song overlapped by a radio-broadcast and the cries of witness. The jazz-like tempo of this sequence perfectly simulates the chaos of a post-disaster atmosphere.

Through these and other unconventional techniques, Stratman is able to relay the complexity of emotions inherent in the plethora of issues she unearths from the soil of Illinois. Her parables, lyrical and imaginative, offer a valuable reminder of the problems of citizenship and governance that remain unchanged in essence to this day. Now, more than ever, it is important to bring them back into memory.

"Illinois Parables" was released on Jan. 21, 2016.

