
Cinema and the Kansas / Plains Past

Film Reviews

*edited and introduced by
Thomas Prasch*

As any Kansan who crosses a border knows—as soon as it occurs to some wit to say something in that familiar “not in Kansas anymore” range—there is one universal association everyone has with the Kansas past: *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). And, with *Wicked* still packing houses on Broadway, with Oz references proliferating in every sphere of popular culture (from an homage episode of the television series *Scrubs* to characters from Oz materializing in the “I’m Glad I’m Gay” musical number of *Queer Duck: The Movie* [2006]), that is unlikely to change soon. It says something about the depth of Ozian references that it now seems impossible even to talk about the war in Iraq without dropping an allusion to the classic film: the Emerald City serves as metaphor for the illusions and isolated character of American policy in Iraq in Rajiv Chandrasekaran’s recent critique *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Iraq’s Green Zone* (2006), while White House spokesperson Tony Snow has lately urged reporters: “Please avoid the idea that Iraq is like Oz, and one day it’s going to be black and white and the next day you’re going to wake up and it’s color” (White House Press Briefing, May 8, 2007). Wherever one finds a yellow brick road or a wizard behind the curtain, someone is thinking of Kansas.

Insofar as Kansas history figures into the mainstream imaginary in any other significant way, it is as that mythologized repository of changeless American midwestern values. Even when events are set in the present, it may as well be the past, say somewhere in the 1950s (or, more precisely, a *Back to the Future*-esque, minimally modified, idealized past: the fifties with cell phones and laptops). This is the Kansas familiar to viewers of television shows such as the ongoing *Smallville* series or the newer *Jericho*. That it is not real history—indeed, that its essential changelessness denies history entirely—is part of the trope’s perpetual attraction.

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*Translating history to the screen is a formidable task. While trying to convey events with accuracy, one must also be attentive to so many other details, such as the music, cinematography, and finally, the clothing and accessories of actors. Image of reenactors from *Bad Blood*, courtesy of KCPT and *Wide Awake Films*.*

Those who actually know anything about Kansas history understand how deeply these continuously perpetuated constructions misrepresent the contours of the Kansas past. For in fact, from the time Lewis and Clark cut across Kansas's as-yet-unmarked boundaries on their way West to the next picket Fred Phelps's minions choose to mount at a fallen soldier's funeral, Kansas has been a bellwether state—for good or bad—for significant trends and moments in United States history. In the Bleeding Kansas era, the state provided a practice ground for the sectional and ideological conflicts that defined the Civil War. From homesteaders at mid-century to Exodusters near its end, with the railroad built in between, Kansas provided the territory for

the nineteenth-century settlement of the American West. On the losing side of that process, Kansas was, in part, where interactions between European-Americans and Native Americans—from skirmishes to wars to reservations to assimilative schools—took shape. And gun battles on the streets of Kansas's Dodge City defined the much-mythologized image of the American frontier.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, Kansas played a central role in the emergence of Progressive politics, with William Allen White, the "sage of Emporia," figuring as a key spokesperson. New trends in American religious thought—the social gospel and Pentecostal movements—grew from roots in Topeka, in the mission work of

Reverend Charles M. Sheldon and Charles Fox Parham, respectively. In fields ranging from public health (where Samuel Crumbine played a leading role) to mental health (where Karl Menninger pioneered new forms of treatment and played so key a part in introducing Freudian ideas to America), Kansas was in the forefront in the early decades of the twentieth century. By mid-century, Topeka's position as the lead plaintiff in the breakthrough *Brown v. Board* case ensured its place in the emerging Civil Rights movement. The continued legal tangles over the implementation of that decision to desegregate public schools kept Kansas in the forefront of battles to shape public policy about race well into the 1970s. And, while struggles over the teaching of evolution in public schools have played out in over twenty states in the last decade, it has been the Kansas case that has drawn the most headlines and heat.

Fortunately for those interested in Kansas and Great Plains history, filmmakers seem increasingly drawn to the full range of the region's history. This year's selection of films vary in subject matter from those about territorial Kansas and Westerns to treatments of living Kansas governors and the evolution debate, while also touching points in between.

It has been our custom, in these biennial selections, to open with a retrospective appreciation of a classic film connected to Kansas or Great Plains history. This year, we are modifying that custom in order to honor two Kansas-connected filmmakers who passed away last year. Fort Scott native Gordon Parks, who died in March 2006 at the age of ninety-three, pioneered an African American role first in photography and then, with the adaptation of his novel *The Learning Tree* to film in 1969, in filmmaking (and this while writing books and composing music on the side). It is fitting to honor Parks with a retrospective look at his breakout film. It is fitting, too, to put the work into the hands of a pioneer in his own right: Thomas Cripps, whose major early works, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film 1900–1942* (1977) and *Black Film as Genre* (1978), did so much to open up the territory of African American involvement in Hollywood film to serious scholarship. Cripps, now a university distinguished professor emeritus at Morgan State University in Baltimore, has continued to contribute to that scholarship in books such as *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (1993), as well as through his engagement in broader explo-

rations of cinema's role in America's past, as in *Hollywood's High Noon: Moviemaking and Society before Television* (1997).

The other filmmaker whose passing we wish to honor this year is Robert Altman, the Kansas City native who died in November 2006 at the age of eighty-one, with over sixty films to his credit as director. Two of those films, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) and *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976)—both made in that especially rich decade of Altman's filmmaking, the 1970s—mark his contribution to the continual reshaping of a genre close to the mission of *Kansas History's* film reviews: the Western. Cynthia Miller of Emerson College provides our retrospective look at Altman's Westerns. Associate editor-in-chief of *Film and History*, her Western credentials include a contribution to Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor's collection *Hollywood's West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History* (2005), and she will be editing the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of the B Western* (as soon as she finishes editorial work on the forthcoming *Too Bold for the Box Office: A Study in Mockumentaries*). Miller claims that she can rope and drive cattle, too.

Our survey of recent films on Kansas and Great Plains history commences with a trio of works on territorial Kansas. Ball State University's Nicole Etcheson reviews Charles Cranston's fictional short film *Through Martha's Eyes*, which treats slavery, sectional conflict, and Native American schooling on the Kansas frontier. Etcheson's *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (2004) has rapidly become a standard reference on the subject. Although her current research project returns her to parts further east (in a work provisionally titled *The Union Home Front: Putnam County, Indiana, in the Civil War Era*), Etcheson has also contributed articles on Kansas history to John Wunder's forthcoming collection *Commemorating the Sesquicentennial of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854*, Virgil Dean's *John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History* (2006), and Dean's *Territorial Kansas Reader* (2005). Readers of *Kansas History* may also recall her articles "The Great Principle of Self-Government: Popular Sovereignty and Bleeding Kansas" (Spring/Summer 2004) and "Labouring for the Freedom of This Territory: Free-State Kansas Women in the 1850s" (Summer 1998). *Kansas History's* own Virgil Dean reviews Kenneth Spurgeon and Jonathan Goering's documentary *Touched by Fire: Bleeding Kansas*. Aside

from the above-mentioned *Territorial Kansas Reader* and *John Brown to Bob Dole*, Dean penned *An Opportunity Lost: The Truman Administration and the Farm Policy Debate* (2006) and coauthored, with Homer Socolofsky, *Kansas History: An Annotated Bibliography* (1992). Our review of the documentary *Bad Blood*, produced for KCPT by Pam Reichart and Angee Simmons, is by Debra Goodrich, author most recently (with husband Thomas Goodrich) of *The Day Dixie Died: Southern Occupation 1865–1866* (2001), editor of *Badlands! A Journal of Military History*, and long familiar to aficionados of Kansas history.

The Western, a genre almost as flexible as the vampire film, continues to shift shape to reflect current cultural concerns and changing perspectives on the American past, and it has come a long way since Altman's work in the 1970s. Two recent contributions to the genre by major filmmakers stand out among recent work. In *Broken Trail*, Walter Hill returns to the Western (to which he had already made significant contributions in *The Long Riders* [1980], *Geronimo: An American Legend* [1993], *Wild Bill* [1995], *Last Man Standing* [1996], and the opening season of HBO's *Deadwood* [2004]), complicating its ethnic and gender politics. And Ang Lee, whose memorable treatment of bloody Kansas in *Ride with the Devil* (1999) readers of *Kansas History* will likely remember, limned a more recent West in *Brokeback Mountain*, which, in rethinking the sexual orientation of the cowboy, opened new spaces for the genre (while providing late-night comedians rich fodder). University of Kansas film scholar John Tibbetts tackles both films in his review. His latest book, *Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography* (2005), may seem pretty distant from the concerns of Westerns, but readers of *Kansas History* will recall his treatment of assorted Hollywood versions of Quantrill's Raid in "Riding with the Devil: The Movie Adventures of William Clarke Quantrill" (Autumn 1999), as well as previous film reviews for this publication. The most recent of Tibbetts's many editorial collaborations with James Welsh is *The Encyclopedia of Novels into Film* (2005).

In the early twentieth century, shifting religious currents in Kansas were reflected in the development of the social gospel movement, and the Reverend Charles M. Sheldon's best-selling novel *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* (1896) not only gave us a still-familiar bumper-sticker slogan but laid out the social and political aims of the movement. A new documentary by KTUW's Dave Kendall, *Beyond The-*

ology: What Would Jesus Do?, revisits the work. Washburn University historian of American religion Alan Bearman, whose research interests range from the Puritan era (as seen in his dissertation "'The Atlas of Independency': The Ideas of John Owen") to the modern period (in, for example, his current work on Billy Graham's Greater London Crusade of 1954), reviews the film for us.

Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), and the film version of the following year, reshaped the landscape of Kansas in fundamental ways for a wider American audience. Two recent films have revisited Capote's encounter with Kansas: Bennett Miller's *Capote* and Douglas McGrath's *Infamous*. Philip Heldrich, who himself revisited the original version of the film *In Cold Blood* for *Kansas History's* first selection of film reviews in 2001 (when he was still at Emporia State; he now hails from University of Washington-Tacoma), takes on both new film incarnations of the story. Readers interested in Heldrich's own take on the Plains landscape should read his award-winning collection of essays *Out Here in the Out There: Essays in a Region of Superlatives* (2005).

The Kansas landscape would be reshaped in more than merely imagination the same year Capote's book came out, when the Topeka tornado wreaked destruction on the capital city. Jim Kelly of KTUW produced a documentary to mark the fortieth anniversary of the event, and it is reviewed for us by long-time Topekan and Washburn professor Tom Averill, who edited the collection *What Kansas Means To Me: Twentieth-Century Writers on the Sunflower State* (1991), and whose most recent collection of fiction is *Ordinary Genius* (2004). Radio listeners may better know him, however, in the persona of his alter ego William Jennings Bryan Oleander (whose thoughts on Kansas have been collected in *William Jennings Bryan Oleander's Guide to Kansas: How to Know When You're Here* [1996]). Readers of *Kansas History* may recall his "Kansas Literature: Review Essay" (Summer 2002), "Kansas Wheat Harvest" (Spring/Summer 2000), "Kansas Literature of Drought and Dust" (Winter 1997–1998), or "Oz and Kansas Culture" (Spring 1989).

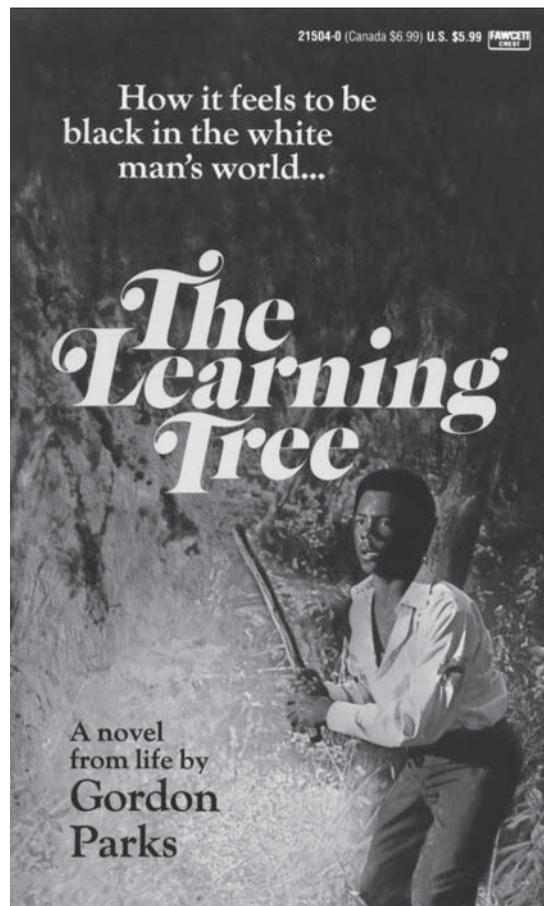
We bring our survey up to the present with reviews of two films treating more recent Kansas history. In *The Kansas Governor*, Bob Beatty, Department of Political Science, Washburn University, has assembled interviews with all living Kansas governors, from John Anderson to the cur-

rent officeholder, Kathleen Sebelius. Reviewing the film for us is University of Kansas professor Burdett Loomis, whose recent scholarly works include *The Contemporary Congress* (with Wendy J. Schiller, 2005), *Republic on Trial: The Case for Representative Democracy* (with Alan Rosenthal, John Hibbing, and Karl Kurtz, 2002), and the edited collection *Interest Group Politics* (with Alan Cigler, 2006). Finally, in the film *Flock of Dodos: The Evolution-Intelligent Design Circus*, Randy Olson explores and offers his thoughts on the recent controversy about the teaching of evolution in Kansas schools. Our reviewer, University of Kansas history professor Jeffrey Moran, reflects on the current controversy in his discussion of the film. Moran's scholarly work has considered such debates in the past, in *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the Twentieth Century* (2000) and, even more directly, *The Scopes Trial: A Brief History with Documents* (2002).

The Learning Tree. Directed, written, and produced by Gordon Parks. 1969; color; 107 minutes. A Winger production, distributed by Warner Bros. / Seven Arts.

In 1968 Gordon Parks was already famous for his African American "firsts" in several arts, among them commercial and journalistic photography. In that year he produced, wrote, and directed his first movie, *The Learning Tree*, drawn from his own autobiographical novel. With touching respect and love for his native Kansas, he shot the film on location in a replica of his Fort Scott birthplace. Yet, of all his works, the movie shimmers with the cosmopolitan eye of a man of the world. Like the character of the stage manager in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, he chooses everything—scene, incident, character—to open the viewer's eye first to the racial condition of Kansas and then to the human condition, all captured in the coming of age of an endearing black manchild.

Such universality was a central idiom in the tragic era of the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy, three figures often posed as popular icons and invoked as martyrs to a lost rightness of things. This unifying sentiment became an essential element in movies made by and for African Americans and helped extend the screen imagery of the previous two decades, the "age of Sidney Poitier." The historian Mark Reid, in his study *Redefining Black Film* (1993), has named the genre "the



black family film," a species that, in this case, placed a black family in a sweet, embracing world of its own, but also set that family in the larger white world defined by its oppression of and discrimination against its black neighbors.

Thankfully, in Parks's hands the movie did not become a black instance of "Capra Corn," the sort of sentimental movie of which Frank Capra had been the master, as with *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). Rather, Parks leavens his nostalgia with an edge of melodramatic reality by portraying the oppressive racial arrangements of life in the Kansas of the 1920s. That is, he manages to juggle often jarring melodramatic racial incidents along with reportage of life as it was. Indeed, at some moments *The Learning Tree* becomes almost an "anatomy" of midwestern life as lived by African Americans, the burden of rich detail slowing the action. In one such moment, for example, every detail of life in a low-down rural brothel—each detail except the *real* reason for its existence—is vividly sketched, including a raspy original "blues" rendition by none other than the fabled Jimmy Rushing himself (credited as "James" Rushing!).



In 1968, with touching respect and love for his native Kansas, Gordon Parks (far right) shot *The Learning Tree* on location in a replica of his Fort Scott birthplace.

Not that this calculatedly slow pace acted as a drag on the plot. In fact, it moves not so much linearly as through an accretion of layers, creating a portrait of a long-gone black culture as though following the anthropologist Clifford Geertz's method of "thick description" (see, for example, his classic essay "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" in *The Interpretation of Cultures* [1973]). The Kansas setting is established as the film's main titles scroll past, complete with a "twister" that echoes the opening of Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Parks ends his introduction, however, not in the Emerald City, but in a dreamy, half-seen bit of adolescent erotica. The black characters are piously

churched, dutiful, and familial. They are studious in school despite ceilings imposed by "helpful" whites, who believe they know what is best for "colored" children doomed to lives as servants and cooks. White teachers and doctors seem civil, courteous, even solicitous—unlike those lower down the social ladder, who lash out at them as though in compensation for their own lives on the bottom rail. One such harsh farmer beats a black child for stealing apples; a fat, sweaty, white cop, tobacco plug in his cheek, shoots a fleeing black boy; white kids in an ice cream parlor snub the blacks; and so on. Apart from one angry black kid—named "Savage"—the black circles are, by way of contrast, even-

handed and tolerant. At one moment Newt, the protagonist, offers to work for free all summer to atone for an incident in the orchard in which one of his friends had given the farmer a licking, after the farmer had beaten the boy for stealing apples.

Away from the invisible line that sets black apart from white, the black side of life seems a rich, multilayered idyll that includes a sprawling, joyous summer fish fry; Newt's romantic stroll with his black girl through "our private little garden"; a rousing church service; a humble funeral for the family matriarch. The fact of segregation that denies the black kids access to school proms and athletic teams is only spoken of, not shown. Interracial and intraracial tensions are seen only in a running subplot in which Savage calls the sheriff a "Peckerwood," does a stretch in a "reformatory" (during which a spiteful guard wishes him "Merry Christmas, nigger"), and viciously fights Newt in a carnival "battle royal" in which black kids brawl in a ring for the amusement of white bettors and gawkers. In the end, in an echo of a similar courtroom drama in Robert Mulligan's film adaptation of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1962), Newt bravely testifies before a white judge in a way that leads to the death of a black man. Part of Newt's (and Parks's) coming of age in Fort Scott, Kansas, in the 1920s includes choosing right conduct rather than loyalty to the race.

Admirable, yes, but not entirely according to the lights of the black urban generation who lived through the flagging of the Civil Rights Movement, the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the ensuing "long hot summers" of urban despair that followed. The age of the Black Panther had begun, almost coincident with the release of *The Learning Tree*. Its homely virtues might have earned *The Learning Tree* a more indelible mark in movie history as an exemplar of a genre of sentimental realist views of black life were it not for the coming of so-called "blaxploitation" movies that followed the release of Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song* (1971) and Parks's own *Shaft* (1971), models for a decade of violent, urban tales of the streets. Still, one might imagine a future in which Gordon Park's *The Learning Tree* becomes an annually rerun television celebration of homely virtues in the manner of Steven Spielberg's film adaptation Toni Morrison's *The Color Purple* (1985).

Thomas Cripps
Morgan State University

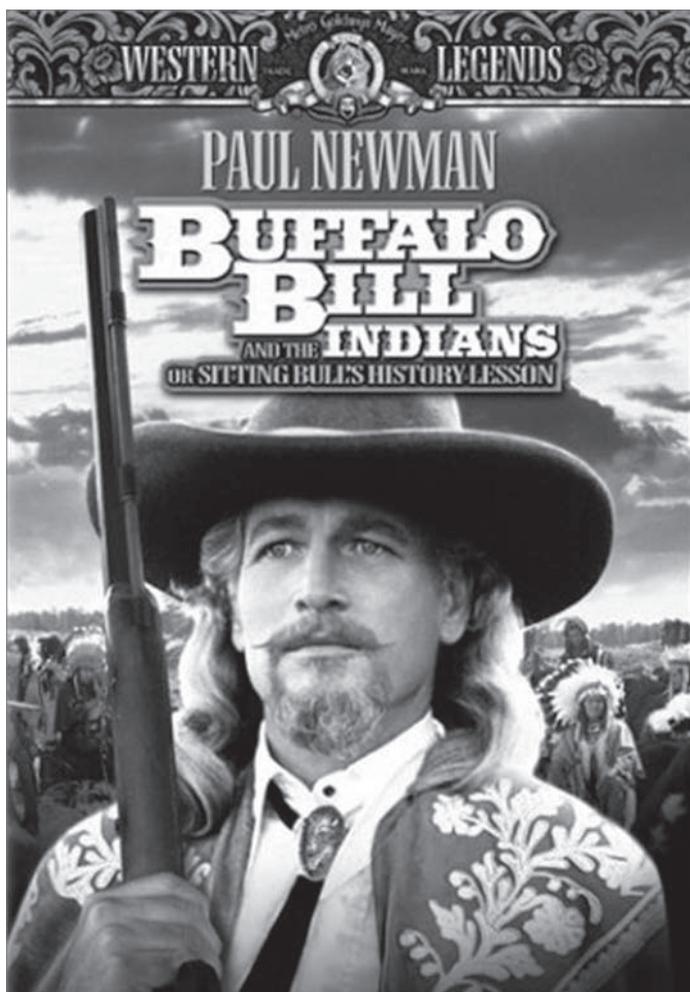
Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson. Directed and produced by Robert Altman; screenplay by Robert Altman and Alan Rudolph. 1976; color; 123 minutes. Distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

McCabe & Mrs. Miller. Directed by Robert Altman; screenplay by Robert Altman and Brian McKay; produced by Mitchell Brower and David Foster. 1971; color; 120 minutes. Distributed by Warner Home Video.

Robert Altman's West can be overwhelming at first glance. Sweeping landscapes full of vibrant color and gritty grays are animated by icons and anti-heroes, strangers and stereotypes, all struggling to negotiate their authenticity, make their mark, find their place. Altman's West offers the chance of a lifetime for those with vision and foresight, but devastation for the weak or foolhardy. It is a polestar for progress, yet unyielding and timeless. Here, Indians dream the future in silent moments of sleep, while white men "dream out loud." More than merely a setting, Altman's West is a constellation of ideas.

Two of Altman's films—*Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (1976) and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971)—most fully realize these ideas of the West. The two films are utterly dissimilar to the senses: *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show* sends a shockwave of color and a blaring of trumpets through the craggy, barren frontier, while *McCabe's* tiny boomtown of Presbyterian Church is nestled amid drizzly mountain wilderness, awash in hushed grays and browns. The films vastly differ in narrative form and style as well; yet, taken together, they speak to the tensions inherent in images and portrayals of the West, with their struggles over authenticity and their attempts to reconcile lives and landscapes. Each film offers critical commentary on the creation of popular notions of the West and the ravages of time on all created things.

Buffalo Bill and the Indians tells the tongue-in-cheek story of "the man who is the Wild West"—Buffalo Bill Cody—and his Wild West Show. It is 1885, and settlers, adventurers, and railroads are pushing back the frontier. As the actual Wild West vanishes, it is replaced by an over-articulated spectacle of the imagination orchestrated by one of its most ruggedly iconic figures, Buffalo Bill (Paul Newman), and his partner, Nate Salisbury (Joel Grey). Dazzling displays of showmanship thrill and astound, as audiences



In Altman's film, Buffalo Bill dons the Wild West, much as he would his flashy costume or trademark hairpiece, but he is not of the Wild West. Video cover by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

marvel at the show's cast of cowboys and Indians, including Annie Oakley (Geraldine Chaplin) and Sitting Bull (Frank Kaquitts). The West has been "Cody-fied"—amplified, overwritten, and spit-shined into a garish pretense that lays claim, through Bill, to authenticity.

But Bill has no authenticity to share. He cuts a striking figure, but everything about him is inauthentic and disingenuous. Bill dons the Wild West, much as he would his flashy costume or trademark hairpiece, but he is not of the Wild West. The Wild West Show is a place betwixt and between, neither the authentic West nor "civilization," and Bill suffers the fate of a man who does not fully belong in either world. With his vanity, false bravado, and weakness of character, Bill and his imported operatic paramours present feminized figures glaringly out of place in the minimal-



The town depicted in McCabe & Mrs. Miller, at the farthest edge of habitable frontier, barely hangs on. It is a fine setting for a traditional Western, but Altman bends and complicates those expectations. Video cover by Warner Home Video.

ist Western landscape. Sitting Bull, by contrast, is small, unassuming, and silently powerful, in harmony with the rhythms of the terrain that surrounds them: a stereotype, but one invoked to retrieve the truth from history.

Buffalo Bill, the living legend, is living a lie, the creation of the man who discovered him, Ned Buntline (Burt Lancaster), who Bill now shuns as he tries to forget that the glorious deeds of his past, like so much history, were invented and refashioned to give audiences what they wanted. When Sitting Bull insists that Cody's show reenact the true events of Custer's Last Stand to show the slaugh-

ter of Indian women and children, Buffalo Bill once again refuses to acknowledge the lack of authenticity in representations of things past. When Ned laments that Bill has not changed since their parting of ways, Bill reminds him that “I ain’t s’posed to. That’s why people pay to see me.”

Altman fashions another figure whose pretensions strain at the Western landscape in John McCabe (Warren Beatty), anti-hero of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*. When a rain-soaked McCabe makes his way into the tiny mining town of Presbyterian Church and is mistaken for a gunslinger, he offers no objection, taking advantage of his newfound notoriety. He makes no bones about his disdain for the town’s grit, harshness, and lack of refinement, all displayed to the fullest in Altman’s naturalistic vision. The town, at the farthest edge of habitable frontier, barely hangs on, thanks to a fleabag hotel, a saloon, and steady work from the mining company. It is a fine setting for a traditional Western, but Altman bends and complicates those expectations.

McCabe holds himself apart from the townsfolk. He is too clever by half, and the squalid shacks and lack of women spell opportunity to the gambler-turned-businessman. With three small tents and three sorry women, he opens a makeshift whorehouse, where the sex is as isolating and lackluster as the wilderness on the other side of the canvas flap. Enter Mrs. Miller (Julie Christie), who knows her way around a bordello and convinces McCabe that they should partner. She is a woman of vision, and, under her watchful and insistent eye, a “proper” whorehouse is constructed. Mrs. Miller persuades McCabe that the trappings of “civilization” matter, and that more refined pursuit of pleasure will loosen the purses of the men of Presbyterian Church and make them both rich. She brings “class” to McCabe’s frontier whorehouse: clean linens, mandatory baths, and higher rates than McCabe thought possible. And while Mrs. Miller and her ladies are archetypal characters in service of the template of the Wild West, she succeeds in taming some of that wildness, and domesticating male space (at least within limitations of her profession and the confines of the bordello).

In Altman’s muted Western landscape—its puddles of mud gently blended with evergreen and snow—McCabe’s establishment provides glimmers of vibrant color and warmth uncharacteristic of the world outside: lingering images of playfulness and laughing faces, lit by warm, yellow lamplight. McCabe’s whorehouse shares the liminal quality of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show: one, a spectacle

of women, the other, a spectacle of Indians, both playing to the imagination, betwixt and between frontier and “civilization,” but containing bits of each. McCabe, like Buffalo Bill, also contains bits of each and, like Cody, his flawed character wrestles with inner demons, struggling between hero and anti-hero: “There’s poetry in me, Constance,” he argues to the absent Mrs. Miller. He clings to poetry, honor, truth—a hero trying too late to emerge.

But the power of frontier nihilism overtakes the pair full force when the mining company tries to buy out McCabe. His vanity and bravado lead him to arrogantly reject the offers, until the company stops negotiating and sends hired guns to do their talking. Desperate panic grips McCabe, but his foolishness cannot be undone. He consults a lawyer (William Devane), who convinces him to take a stand against the corporation and become an icon for the frontier spirit: “If men stop dying for freedom, freedom itself will be dead.” McCabe is trapped in a deadly game of cat-and-mouse with the gunmen while the local church burns, the townspeople unaware of his plight as they salvage their icon of civilization and redemption. As he dies alone from his wounds, McCabe is silently covered by drifting snow, the gentlest act the harsh wilderness landscape can offer.

In the end, Altman’s West amounts to a landscape of the mind. It is not one idea, but a cluster of closely held values and beliefs, sometimes perpetuated at great cost. Altman reminds us that the West resists the narrow confines of traditional renderings. His films cast a critical eye on the ways that history has been invented and retold, reminding us that the West must change with time. As Buffalo Bill chided Sitting Bull’s ghost: “Look at ya! You want to stay the same! Well, that’s going backwards!”

Cynthia J. Miller
Emerson College

Through Martha’s Eyes. Directed and produced by Chuck Cranston; screenplay by Marcia Cebulka. 2006; color; 40 minutes. Distributed by Telemark Pictures and Outpost Communications.

We first see Martha (Asona Lui) riding in the back of a wagon headed for Kansas Territory, just after having been purchased in Missouri by the Reverend Thomas Johnson. Indeed, Johnson ran a voca-



When Martha and the free black barber, John, fall in love, they speak of “jumping the broomstick,” the slave marriage ceremony. Photo courtesy of Telemark Pictures and Outpost Communications.

tional school for Native Americans in Kansas Territory, and he did buy a fifteen-year-old girl named Martha in May 1856 (<http://www.territorialkansasonline.org>). The story of this girl becomes the lens through which the viewer of *Through Martha's Eyes* sees slavery in the Upper South, the plight of Native Americans, and the turmoil of Bleeding Kansas.

The film is most effective as an account of slavery in a non-plantation setting. The Kansas territorial census shows that most slave owners in Kansas possessed only one or two slaves, usually a woman or a child. In the film, the Johnsons are shown with only one other slave besides Martha, an older woman. Martha does the many kinds of labor a slave might do in the territory, from laundry to skilled fancy sewing. Drunken Missourians leer suggestively at Martha on

one occasion, hinting at the sexual violation slave girls so often endured. One subplot concerns a secret night school in which Martha learns to read and write. This reveals slaves' fierce desire for education as well as the hidden lives they often led under the master's nose.

When Martha and the free black barber, John, fall in love, they speak of “jumping the broomstick,” the slave marriage ceremony. Even as Martha and John contemplate forming a new family, we are reminded of the cruel breakup of slave families: Martha mentions her mother; John did not know either parent. The reverend's wife, Sarah Johnson, becomes concerned that Martha's friendship with John might lead to un-Christian behavior, but the Christian missionary woman is not above having Martha brutally whipped for disobedience. Yet, despite the graphic evidence of the slave's oppression, Martha is not totally helpless. In an early scene, she cleverly manipulates Sarah Johnson into granting permission to take in sewing, in addition to her regular work, in order to save the money to purchase her freedom. The filmmakers have packed a lot of information about slave life into their narrative.

The film also offers a view of Indian manual labor schools. Our understanding of these institutions has been dominated by Carlisle, Haskell, and other such institutions of the late nineteenth century that sought to assimilate American Indians. Here, we see a pre-Civil War incarnation of the same assimilationist agenda. One of Martha's tasks is to cut Native American children's hair when they arrive while Sarah Johnson gives them new, English names. Martha also cuts away any sacred bundles the parents may have secreted on the children. We see something of the difficulties oppressed peoples experienced in realizing their shared oppression, as Martha initially disdains Emily Blue Jacket (whom she calls Emily Blue Nose), the Native American graduate of the mission school.

The climax of the film comes when Martha, influenced by John, fully realizes this common oppression. John believes the Native Americans are trying to retain their own identities. Martha does not understand this at first, saying that the Indians are Americans. After one nighttime school session, Martha and John dance. John teaches Martha the steps the white Missourians will be dancing at an upcoming ball for which Martha is sewing a gown, and Martha shows him an African dance. John tells her not to forget to dance “like your own people.” When Sarah Johnson next demands that Martha cut the Native American children's hair and sacred bundles away, Martha refuses, an offense for which she is whipped.



The film portrays something of the difficulties of oppressed peoples realizing their shared oppression in Martha's initial disdain for Emily Blue Jacket, the Native American graduate of the mission school. The two eventually come to care for one another, as seen here when Emily (middle) dresses Martha's (left) wounds as the other of the two Johnson slaves (right) assists her. Photo courtesy of Telemark Pictures and Outpost Communications.

The film is least successful in telling the story of Bleeding Kansas. Martha sees the Missourians preparing for an attack on Lawrence. In a later scene, Martha and Emily tend the Southern wounded, but it is not clear which mobilization of several against Lawrence is being depicted or where or how the wounded were hurt. Brief vignettes show the belligerence—and drunkenness—of the Missourians (listed as “ruffians” in the credits), which run true to much of the literature, especially as written by the free-state side. The political and military events of Bleeding Kansas, however, are simply too complicated to be told as part of Martha’s story. A slave such as Martha—confined to one place in the territory—would have limited exposure to these events. The view of Bleeding Kansas through Martha’s eyes cannot go beyond a few isolated incidents, making it impossible to develop the range of occurrences and ideologies that made up the territory’s crisis.

Despite this caveat, the filmmakers have done an excellent job portraying themes about slavery that historians value, especially the tension between oppression and agency, between the suffering slaves endured and their ability to resist hardship and shape their own destinies. After Martha is whipped, we see her rise the next day and resume her sewing. From that sewing she will earn money to buy her liberty. At the end, Martha and John set out westward after having purchased her freedom. The wide-open spaces of Kansas, much depicted in this film, give a sense of limitless possibilities. Even a slave could have hope.

Nicole Etcheson
Ball State University

Touched by Fire: Bleeding Kansas. Directed by Nathan King Miller; written and produced by Kenneth R. Spurgeon and Jonathan Goering. 2005; color; 78 minutes. Distributed by Lone Chimney Production and SoulSearcher Films.

Since *Kansas History* first began reviewing films in the summer of 2001, Civil War-era films focusing on the decade-long conflict that raged—hot and cold—along the Kansas-Missouri border between 1854 and 1865 have been a regular feature. Thus, Director Ang Lee’s critically acclaimed *Ride with the Devil* (1999) was reviewed that first year. The only feature film in recent years to take on the border-war story, *Ride with the Devil* told the tale from the perspective of Missourians, “a handful of young people caught in the bloody Civil War struggles of the Missouri-Kansas border,” as Bruce Mactavish put it in these pages. Two years later, in the documentary genre, we had *John Brown’s Holy War*, produced and directed by Robert Kenner for the PBS series *The American Experience*. This year, along with the film under review, both the dramatic production *Through Martha’s Eyes* and the documentary *Bad Blood* (reviewed by Nicole Etcheson and Debra Goodrich, respectively) return to the territory of territorial Kansas and its struggles. The continuous release of such productions, both feature film and documentary, the plethora of scholarly books and articles on this subject that have appeared during the past decade (most notably Nicole Etcheson’s *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* [2004]; Jeremy Neeley’s *The Border between Them: Violence and Reconciliation on the Kansas-Missouri Line* [2007]; and my own collection of article-length studies, *Territorial Kansas Reader* [2005]), and the interest generated by recent museum and on-line exhibitions on the subject all attest to the broad continuing interest in this deeply contested period of Kansas history.

This all brings us to *Touched by Fire*, a historically sound but productionally deficient documentary that ambitiously seeks to tell the entire Bleeding Kansas story in seventy-eight minutes. Framed by reenactment footage of the December 1859 execution of abolitionist John Brown in Charles Town, Virginia, Kenneth Spurgeon, Jonathan Goering, and Nathan Miller muster a truly impressive troupe of experts who discuss a wide array of relevant issues and events from the Missouri Compromise of 1820 through the ratification of Kansas’s free-state Wyandotte Constitution. Part one, “Prelude,” which provides background to the ter-

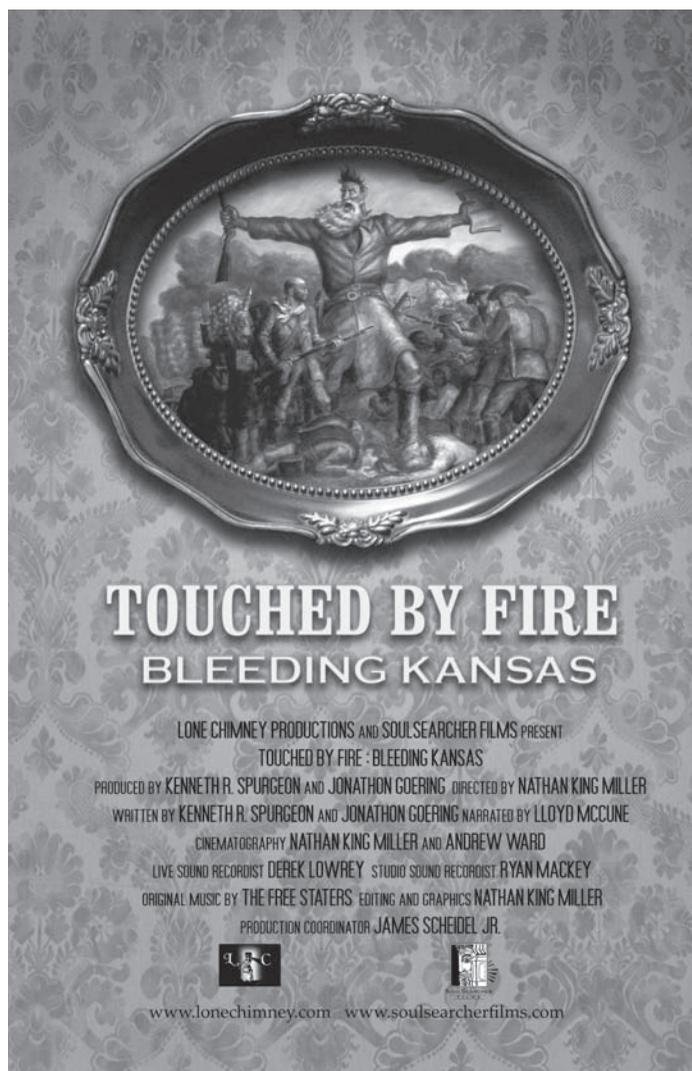


Image courtesy of Lone Chimney Production and SoulSearcher Films.

ritorial violence of 1856—the year in Kansas Territory that gave rise to the “Bleeding Kansas” epithet—is in my opinion the most effective part of the film. Here we have a nice discussion of westward expansion, slavery, popular sovereignty, and the first efforts of free-state and pro-slavery settlers to gain a foothold and an advantage in the newly opened territory of Kansas. The use of recorded slave narratives is creative, and the expert commentary, most notably by historians Nicole Etcheson and Craig Miner (other expert commentary is provided by John Sacher, Rita Napier, and Thomas Goodrich), along with several appropriate historic images, makes this the most enjoyable part of the film, despite some problems with production quality that distract from its visual appeal. Regrettably, the final two

sections, "1856" and "If It Be God's Will," rely far too heavily on re-enactors, whose acting abilities vary too widely to carry the narrative visually, and as a result I found myself quickly losing interest.

In an effort to be too comprehensive in its coverage, perhaps, the final section also suffers from chronological confusion. After dealing with life on the ground in Kansas and the role of women, including Clarina Nichols and the Wyandotte Constitutional Convention of 1859, the narrator takes us back a few years to mention in brief the Dred Scott case, James Montgomery and Jim Lane, the Marais des Cygnes Massacre of 1858, and John Brown's final foray on the Kansas-Missouri border during the winter of 1858–1859.

Nevertheless, with a very few exceptions *Touched by Fire* is commendably true to the history of the era—no small accomplishment, considering the complexity of the issues and often chaotic nature of events—and might be put to beneficial use in the proper setting and with the right audience. While the film can be faulted in its treatment of some particulars, one must at the same time commend the filmmakers' efforts to retell this story for a still largely uninformed general audience. The story "is so compelling," concludes Professor Etcheson, "because it brings together so many elements that were important in nineteenth century life and politics. It is the story of the greatest moral dilemma of the nineteenth century, slavery. . . . And the story of Kansas Territory is also compelling because it is a story about our politics and democracy." Because the makers of *Touched by Fire* share this sense of compelling interest in the events of Bleeding Kansas, the film has virtues as a classroom tool despite its flaws as a finished documentary.

Virgil W. Dean
Kansas State Historical Society

Bad Blood: The Border War That Triggered the Civil War. Directed and produced by Pamela Reichart and Angee Simmons for KCPT; co-produced Shane Seley, Ed Leydecker, and Robert Lee Hodge for Wide Awake Films. 2007; color; 90 minutes.

While researching in the Library of Congress a few years ago, I came across the *London Times* from June 1856. In the upper right hand corner of the front page, the headline read, "War in Kansas." The

eyes of the world were on Kansas Territory in the 1850s. After the monumental conflict of the Civil War enveloped the nation, however, events here became a footnote to that epic struggle. Recently, historians have taken a renewed interest in this unique period of American history. In 1991, Thomas Goodrich published *War to the Knife: Bleeding Kansas, 1854–1861*, and then in 2004, Professor Nicole Etcheson released *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War*. In 2005, a Wichita-based film company released *Touched by Fire*, a thorough and well-done documentary on this era (reviewed by Virgil Dean in this issue).

The most recent offering is *Bad Blood: The Border War That Triggered the Civil War*. This film lets the historical characters themselves speak, although a narrator provides the third-person overview. Producers thought this would give the film an immediacy that suits the subject matter. They were right. *Bad Blood* brings this era to life in a way that rarely happens. Jim Lane, Charles and Sara Robinson, David Rice Atchison, Mahala Doyle, and a range of lesser known farmers and housewives describe events as they unfold. Combined with the most credible acting and reenacting this reviewer has ever seen in a documentary, the resulting film is a valuable educational tool.

KCPT producers Pamela Reichert and Angee Simmons were working on another project when they visited the territorial capital at Lecompton, Kansas. The site sparked their interest in that era and they met with Kansas City-based Wide Awake Films to discuss the project. Partners Shane Seley, Ed Leydecker, and Robert Lee Hodge have a reputation for producing realistic Civil War battle scenes, and the company won a Midsouth Regional Emmy for their documentary *The Battle of Franklin* (2005).

Translating history to the screen is a formidable task. While trying to convey events with accuracy, one must also be attentive to so many other details, such as the music, cinematography, and finally, the clothing and accessories of actors. For this job, producers looked to Greg Higginbotham, a reenactor and historian from Independence, Missouri. His contribution cannot be overstated. Commercial and documentary films rarely go to such efforts to insure historical accuracy, resulting in firearms or hats or even entire costumes that are not representative of the period. So much time and attention went into this aspect of *Bad Blood* that it can be used as a reference work for these details alone. The music is appropriate and well done thanks to the talents of Connie Dover, a folk musician from Weston, Missouri.

BAD BLOOD



Bad Blood lets historical characters themselves speak, though a narrator provides the third-person overview. Wet-plate photo by Robert Sbazzo; courtesy of KCPT and Wide Awake Films.

In the opening narration, the speaker states, “the truth as best known is here told.” This is mostly true, but it is such a difficult task. For example, *Bad Blood* is so fast-paced, packing in so many events and so much motion, that one might well assume that life in Kansas Territory was as action packed as a martial-arts movie. A lot did indeed happen in those seven years, but the viewer must remember that in the film events have been condensed. Rather than a continuous conflict, there were isolated periods of violence. May 1856 stands out as an especially bloody month. The geography of violence shifted as well, from one part of the territory to another. We must ask, then, were all settlers experiencing a level of constant terror? Probably they were not, although the uncertainty of the time must have been troubling. Most people were busy simply making a life, and a living, on the plains. If the film conveys this, it is subtly, as when a housewife is interviewed while she sews, or a farmer when he is feeding hogs.

There is also the challenge of keeping a film interesting while accurately portraying the personalities of the characters. For instance, Jim Lane is simply spellbinding, and this reviewer found herself wanting to see and hear more of the firebrand who left such a mark on Kansas. Equally compelling was the portrayal of Charles Robinson, theoretically on the same side as Lane but a bitter personal enemy. In the film’s portrayal, Robinson matches Lane’s passion and charisma, although this is not historically accurate. Had Robinson been as effective a public speaker in real life as he is in *Bad Blood*, Kansas history might have been different. While Robinson was bright, brave, and experienced, his oratory was no match for the tempestuous and controversial Lane.

This film is so realistic in so many respects that one longs for even more realism in the accents. White folks living in Kansas Territory in the 1850s would have been immediately identifiable by their accents, if not by the nuances of their dress. As soon as they opened their mouths, they would have been identified as having come from Indiana, Massachusetts, South Carolina, or Alabama. In bringing this era so accurately to the screen, it would have been the finishing touch to have heard the clipped northeastern accents of Charles and Sara Robinson, or the Indiana twang of Jim Lane. It appears that the Southerners are easier to imitate.

It is impossible for those of us living today to critically and objectively look at Bleeding Kansas or the Civil War. Slavery is now seen as indefensible, which makes it difficult to relate to people who may have supported it. *Bad Blood* is

as close as we can get to objective, entertaining, and historically accurate documentary.

Debra Goodrich
Independent scholar

Broken Trail. Directed by Walter Hill; screenplay by Alan Geoffrion (based on his novel). 2006; color; 3 hours. Sony Pictures. Released by American Movie Classics.

Brokeback Mountain. Directed by Ang Lee; screenplay by Larry McMurtry and Dianna Ossana (based on the story by E. Annie Proulx); produced by James Schamus. 2005; color; 134 minutes. Paramount Pictures. Released by Focus Features.

The plains surrounding Calgary, Canada, have recently been doing great service for filmmakers of Westerns. That the timeless region and the ample store of horse flesh (many recruited from the Calgary Stampede Horse Ranch) convincingly stand in for the livestock and locales of the American northwest of Oregon and Wyoming is amply demonstrated in Walter Hill’s *Broken Trail*, set in the waning years of the nineteenth century, and Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain*, whose more contemporary drama spans two decades, from the 1960s to the 1980s. In the hands of these two master directors, amazing landscapes are seamlessly intertwined with story, character, and incident.

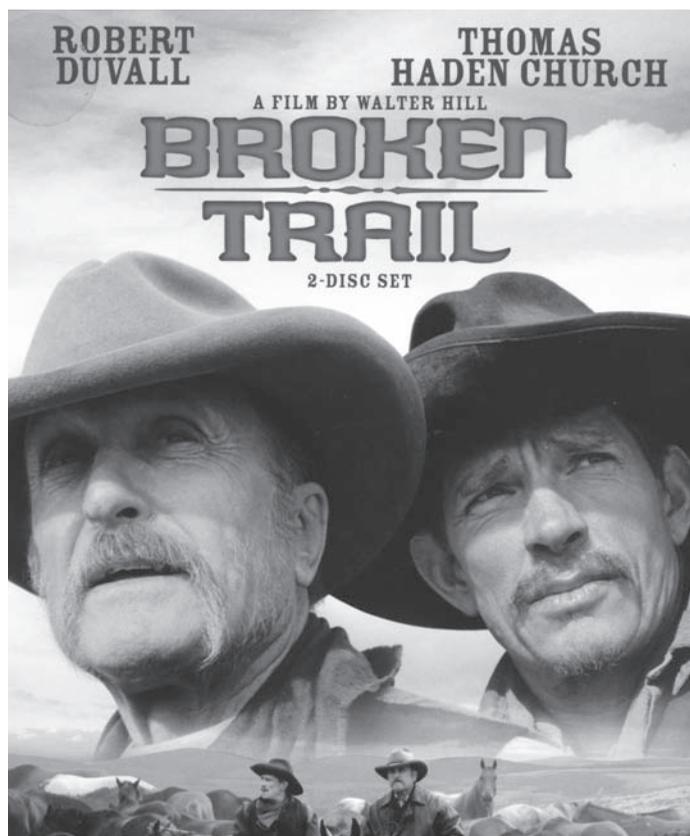
Broken Trail, a three-hour miniseries from American Movie Channel, chronicles an 1898 trail drive of four hundred “tough-hide mustangs” from John Day country in Oregon to a final destination in Sheridan, Wyoming. Presiding over the long trek are grizzled trail veteran Prentice “Print” Ritter (Robert Duvall) and his nephew Tom Harte (Thomas Haden Church). At the end of the trail lies a bounty that assures Print of his long-dreamed of ranch and Tom of an end to his menial chores as a cowpuncher. The horses pose little problem, but the drive is complicated by an accumulation of incidental characters and incidents, chief among them an encounter with the vicious slave trader Captain Billy Fender (James Russo) and the five young Chinese girls in his charge, recruited for prostitution at the brothel of “Big Rump” Kate (Rusty Schwimmer) in the mining camp of Cariboo.

Fender is dispatched, courtesy of Tom's rope ("A man like that ain't worth the food he eats or the price of a rope"), and the girls are saved and placed under the protection of Print, who acts as a kind of *pater familias* for the group ("We didn't look to save no Orientals and a broken-nosed whore, it just happened"). But now dogging their trail is the equally villainous "Big Ears" Bywater, who has been sent by the disgruntled "Big Rump" Kate to retrieve the girls and shoot Print and Tom dead. Meanwhile, other characters amble in and out of the story, including a Chinese cook, careworn prostitute Nola Jones (the great Greta Scacchi), and a drifter named Heck Gilpin (Scott Cooper).

"We're all travelers in this world," says the philosophical Print on more than one occasion, "from the sweet grass to the packin' house, from birth to death. . . . We travel between the eternities." And if for some viewers the span of the three-hour viewing time seems a veritable eternity, seeming even longer with the rather lackadaisical pacing of encounters and escapes, for others the spare dialogue, moderate pacing, and inexorable movement toward a blazing shootout at the end prove to be rewarding. As Print says to Tom, in words that viewers might well heed, "Sometimes you just gotta roll with what's thrown at ya."

Thus, as the trail lengthens, in campfire conversations, fishing expeditions, and horseback exchanges we get to know better these two men, customarily so warily wrapped in their silences but literally roped together by their common quest. We learn that their apparent strained relationship as uncle and nephew hearkens back to Tom's estrangement from his late mother, Print's sister. Print's attitude toward women is a mixture of reverence, cynicism, and bafflement ("The habits and ambitions of women are more a mystery to me than Egyptian hieroglyphics. . . . And I ain't found the Rosetta Stone yet. . . . I'll stick to horses"). Yet both men show their vulnerability as they grow closer to the women in their charge: Print accepts with a measure of philosophical resignation his growing attraction to Nola, and Tom softens his stern reserve toward one of the Chinese girls, Sun Foy (Gwendoline Yeo). The story's epilogue, set in 1912, reveals that Print will ultimately prefer the single life as a rancher to marriage with Nola. Her memory will be his only solace: "You are more afraid of success than failures," she ripostes as she rides out of his life. Tom, on the other hand, will marry Sun Foy and find fulfillment in a new life.

Broken Trail, for all its flashes of action, gritty details of trail life, and eloquent silences, is primarily a medita-

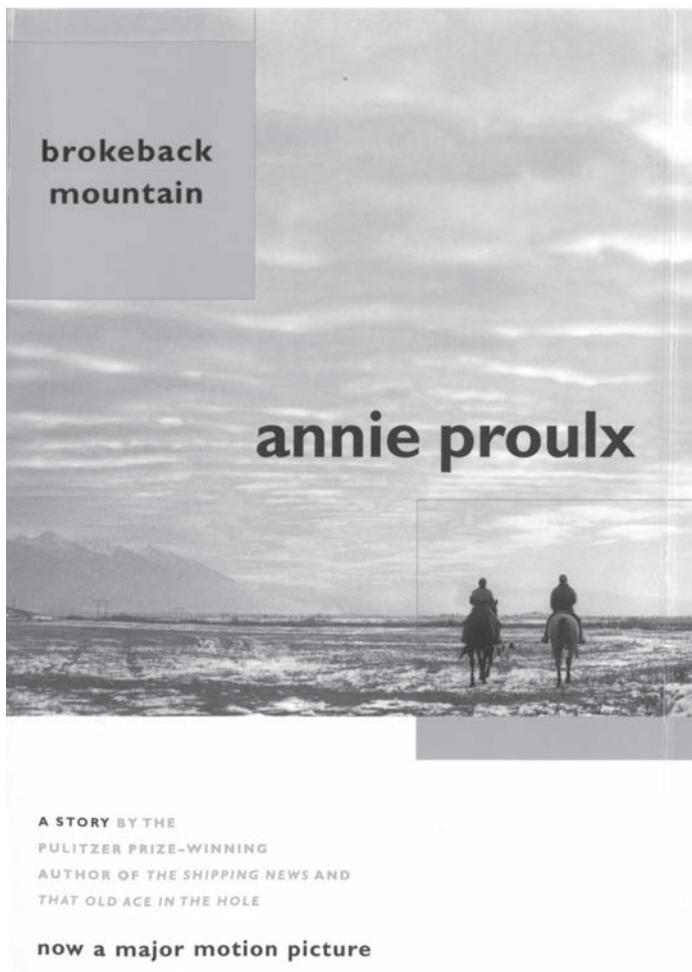


Broken Trail, for all its flashes of action, gritty details of trail life, and eloquent silences, is primarily a meditative study of figures in a landscape. Video cover by Sony Pictures.

tive study of figures in a landscape. Photographed by Lloyd Ahern, the grassy plains, winding creeks, rocky slopes, and limitless skies surround these men and women in an embrace by turns liberating and stifling. The plains provide the litmus test for the characters and their destinies.

The same holds true for Ang Lee's Oscar-winning *Brokeback Mountain*. While very different in its focus on the psychological makeup, sexual orientation, and repressed frustrations of its main characters, Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger), Lee's film also envelops its action in prolonged silences and situates them amidst a landscape (lensed by the admirable Diego Prieto) that effectively serves as a metaphor for the liberation and/or subsequent isolation the characters find in their relationship together. "We're ridin' a horse," Jack tells Ennis, "but we don't have a saddle." Indeed, these two cowboys embark on an emotional relationship that affords them little comfort and threatens to spin out of control.

They meet while herding sheep on Brokeback Mountain in Wyoming. The laconic Ennis is a virtual orphan, raised



In the film adaptation of E. Annie Proulx's story, two cowboys embark on an emotional relationship that affords them little comfort and threatens to spin out of control.

by his siblings after the deaths of his parents. He is a stolid, rather stiffly mannered type, whose few words emerge only with difficulty from his stiffened jaws. Jack Twist has been brought up by a rough-mannered ranch hand, a former rodeo cowboy incapable of instilling in his son a respect for family life. By contrast to Ennis, however, Jack is more easy-going, closer to his feelings, possessed of a sweet, even tender nature. They hardly speak to each other at first. Out on the meadows and mountain passes, they work the sheep, pitch their tents, and cook beans by the twilight campfire. These are lovely moments, the sort of measured, deliberate, beautifully filmed, and quietly moving moments Lee has repeatedly captured in his films.

Gradually, they relax with each other. Then comes a bone-cracking cold snap and they have to bunk together

in the tent. Suddenly, urgently, they grapple. It is more a tussle than sex. The next morning, they urgently whisper that they are *not* gay, and that this has to stop and not be talked about. But soon they are back together again. Brokeback Mountain becomes their tender idyll. But the season is about to end and their homophobic employer suspects that something is going on.

Soon, they are out of work and they go their separate ways. Ennis returns home to Wyoming and marries his childhood sweetheart. Two baby daughters come along and Ennis finds himself buried in a squalid home life. After drifting around Texas, Jack marries a rodeo girl, the daughter of a wealthy farm-machine manufacturer. But when the two men reunite after four years' absence, their passion returns in a rush. Ennis's alarmed wife witnesses their urgent embrace and kiss. For the next decade or so, the two men are forced to lead a double life, barely managing what to them have become stifling marriages, surviving only by looking forward to their monthly visits back on Brokeback Mountain. They fear they might arouse suspicions amongst family members and strangers, and they live under a constant threat (indeed, Jack remembers as a boy witnessing the corpse of a man who had been battered to death by homophobic townspeople).

After a prolonged separation, Ennis gets the news of Jack's death. He is told it is the result of a bad accident, but a quick cutaway reveals angry men beating him to death. In an emotionally wrenching scene, Ennis visits Jack's parents, who live in a rundown shack in the middle of the Texas plains. Under the dubious eye of Jack's father, he climbs the stairs to Jack's starkly bare room. He finds Jack's blood-stained clothes and touches them reverently. He leaves, after his offer to scatter Jack's ashes on Brokeback Mountain is refused.

The final scene encapsulates the whole sad business. Back in his untidy trailer, the solitary Ennis is quietly glad to learn his daughter is getting married. He toasts her with a dirty glass of whiskey. Then, as she drives away, he turns to a closet, where he has hung Jack's clothes. Beside them hangs a color photograph of Brokeback Mountain. Abruptly, when the closet door swings toward the camera, an adjacent window simultaneously discloses a view of the bare, flat Texas plains. The contrasting juxtaposition of the romantic splendor of the photograph with the sterility of the landscape leaves you breathless. Again, landscape says it all: we realize that the men's glorious days on the green

slopes is only a dream, now blunted and diminished by the level, featureless ground that lies hard on the horizon.

In sum, the men in *Broken Trail* and *Brokeback Mountain* are the sorts of “travelers” about whom Print Ritter speaks. Each has chosen his own trail between “the sweet grass and the packin’ house, from birth to death.” And each is crossing the rough terrain “between the eternities.”

John C. Tibbetts
University of Kansas

Beyond Theology: What Would Jesus Do? Directed, produced, and written by Dave Kendall for KTWU-TV; Dave Kendall, Series Producer; Eugene Williams, Executive Producer. 2006; color; 60 minutes.

The producers of *Beyond Theology* hope it will become a series of ten documentaries on the topic “Beyond Theology,” and to begin such a series with an investigation of the life and impact of the Reverend Charles M. Sheldon on twentieth-century American religious history is a fine idea. Sheldon (1857–1946), who pastored Central Congregational Church of Topeka, Kansas, from 1888 to 1912 and 1915 to 1919, was a great pillar of the American social gospel movement because he wrote for a popular audience. Often criticized by his contemporaries for his non-theological writings, Sheldon’s most famous work, *In His Steps: “What Would Jesus Do?”* (1896), one of what Sheldon referred to as his “sermon stories,” continues to inspire American Christians in the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, *Beyond Theology: “What Would Jesus Do?”* fails to do justice to both Sheldon and the historical impact of his writing because it tries to accomplish too much within one hour.

This is not to say that this documentary is without value. Indeed, during its best moments—when, for example, it is discussing how Sheldon established the first kindergarten for African-Americans west of the Mississippi or his commitment to the notion of Christian sacrifice—this documentary is excellent. Its problem is not one of content but of organization. Arranged into three distinct parts, the film begins with an exploration of the

roots of the modern “WWJD” movement, correctly tracing it to Sheldon’s *In His Steps*. Next, a discussion, featuring multiple scholars in talking-head format, explores how one might consider Sheldon’s famous question of “What Would Jesus Do?” in light of modern America’s growing pluralism. The final segment offers an examination of how Sheldon practiced the social gospel in his Topeka ministry. Interspersed throughout the documentary are excerpts from Phil Grecian’s play “What Would Jesus Do?,” along with

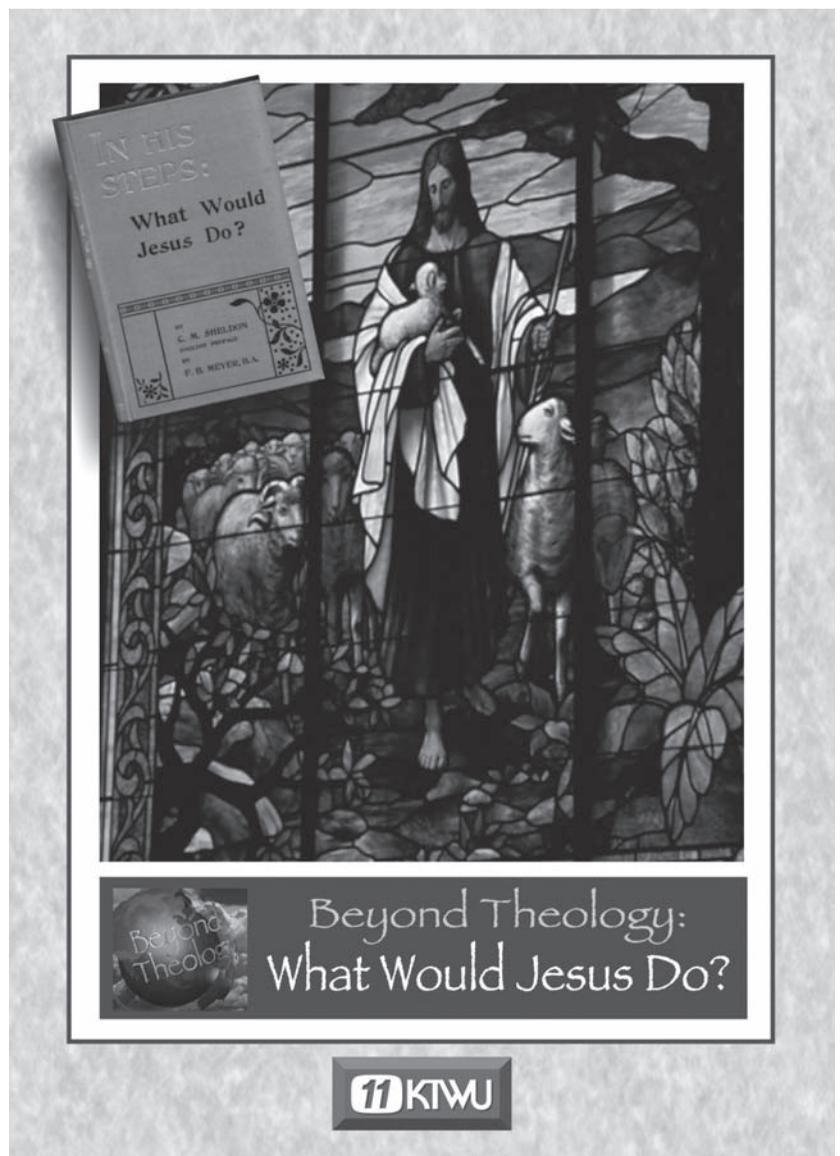
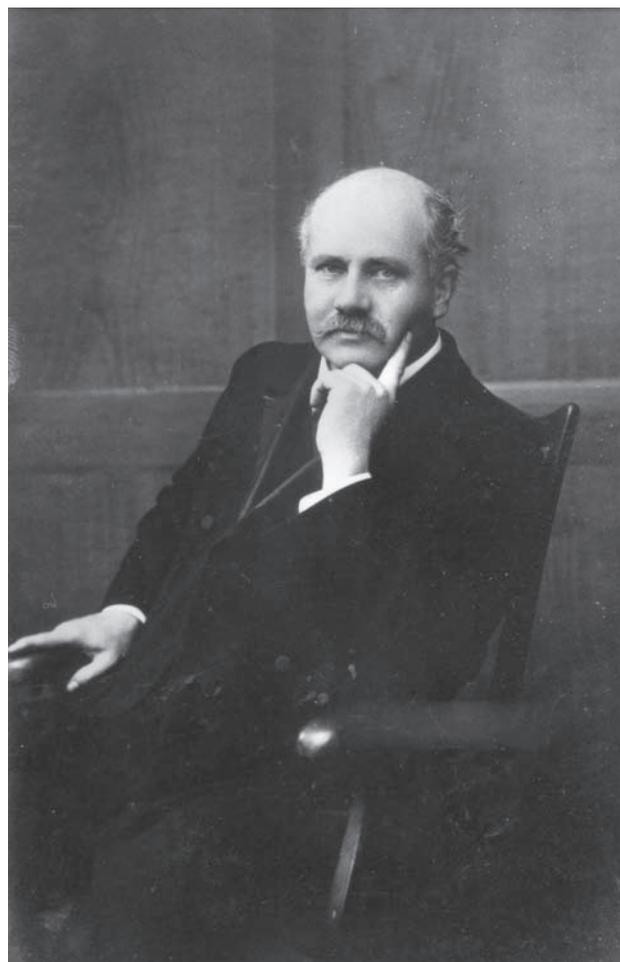


Image courtesy of KTWU-TV.

comments from Grecian about *In His Steps*. The problem is that although Grecian understands the value of the story, he does not seem to appreciate the importance of Sheldon. Indeed, Sheldon too often disappears entirely from the documentary as the producers choose to emphasize contemporary uses of his work. In the process, they seemingly miss the fact that the enduring value of *In His Steps* is rooted in the example that Sheldon personally set by acting out his faith.

Sheldon's writings were not theological treatises, but sermon stories designed to inspire Christians to live according to the model of Jesus Christ himself. What made, and one can argue makes, his stories so engaging to readers were their simplicity and that the minister who wrote them walked in the shoes of those who were suffering. Read in its original context, the work makes clear that the author's deepest sympathies were with those displaced or deprived by the process of industrialization occurring in the United States at the time Sheldon wrote. The latter portion of *Beyond Theology*, for example, tells well the story of Sheldon taking vacations and, to the dismay of his parishioners, working as a day laborer in the shops of the Santa Fe Railway. Likewise, the sophistication with which the documentary and, in particular, Sheldon's biographer Timothy Miller, point to Sheldon's mature understanding of race relations and the role of education in improving the lives of the Exoduster population of Topeka's Tennesseetown is impressive. Unfortunately, such pearls needed to begin the documentary rather than end it, because they demonstrate Sheldon's authenticity as a reform thinker and provide insight as to how a graduate of Andover Theological Seminary could relate, through his writings, to millions of readers throughout the twentieth century. In addition, it is worth noting that the filmmakers underuse Miller, whose insights into Sheldon's life and his historical importance are first rate.

By beginning with the story of a Harvard University course on religion and ethics, and then subjecting the viewer to the ramblings of "mythologist" Karen Armstrong as she explains how the Dalai Lama claimed that all religions are the same, the producers seem determined to downplay Sheldon's personal faith. Grecian followed this same line of thought, arguing that regardless of whether one is Christian, Muslim, or Jewish the only thing that matters is making others' lives better. Diana Eck, director of The Pluralism Project at Harvard University, also appeared in this portion of the documentary, talking about how Christians under-



Often criticized by his contemporaries for his non-theological writings, Sheldon's most famous work, *In His Steps: "What Would Jesus Do?"* (1896), one of what Sheldon himself referred to as his "sermon stories," continues to inspire American Christians in the twenty-first century.

stand religious difference. Yet Sheldon was a Christian, and it was this specific faith that drove his actions. Sociologist Robert Bellah understands this notion. He speaks to the idea that Jesus did not preach an easy faith, and one should not forget that Sheldon well understood this point. Sheldon was not, as *Beyond Theology* argues, a modern American evangelical. His was the faith of a more liberal-thinking social gospeller. Nevertheless, it was his desire to be Christ-like—and this is an issue that deserved far more focus—that drove him to ask the now-famous question, "What Would Jesus Do?"

The promised "Beyond Theology" series could offer much to both academics and laypersons interested in American religious history. Future episodes, assuming they are rooted in the impact of particular religious figures on

American religious thinking, will be improved if they follow a simpler form of organization and better emphasize historical background and context. There is nothing wrong with following the chronology of a story as it actually happened. Examining the life of Sheldon, and how his beliefs compelled him to act out his commitment to the social gospel, would provide a far more compelling beginning to any story about why the WWJD phenomenon continues to exist in the twenty-first century. American religion is usually defined less by its commitment to theological purity than by its innovative and energetic practices, thus making "Beyond Theology" a potentially worthwhile endeavor. Future episodes need more focus and clearer structure for that potential to be realized.

Alan Bearman
Washburn University

Capote. Directed by Bennett Miller; screenplay by Dan Futterman; produced by Caroline Baron, William Vince, and Michael C. Oheven. 2005; color; 1 hour 38 minutes. Sony Pictures.

Infamous. Directed and written by Douglas McGrath; produced by Christine Vachon, Jocelyn Hayes, and Anne Walker-McBay. 2006; color; 1 hour 58 minutes. Warner Independent Pictures.

Coincident with the forty-year anniversary of the publication of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* in 1966, two films, *Capote* (2005) and *Infamous* (2006), present new examinations of the brutal Clutter killings in rural Kansas and Capote's obsession with them. Unlike the critically acclaimed film adaptation of *In Cold Blood* (1967), directed by Richard Brooks and starring Robert Blake as Perry Smith (a role that now seems somewhat ironic given Blake's own real-life trial for murder), *Capote* and *Infamous* focus less on the killers and more on Capote's fascination and fixation with the murders and the trial. These films suggest Capote's compulsion ruined his life. While both films treat a common subject, they present slightly different fictionalized versions that arrive at the same conclusion. To one degree or another, both films present a Capote who crossed the line between self and subject, fell in love with murderer Perry Smith, and suffered conflicted feeling over the capital punishment that ended the killers' lives and provided an ending to his book. In both films, Kansas itself be-

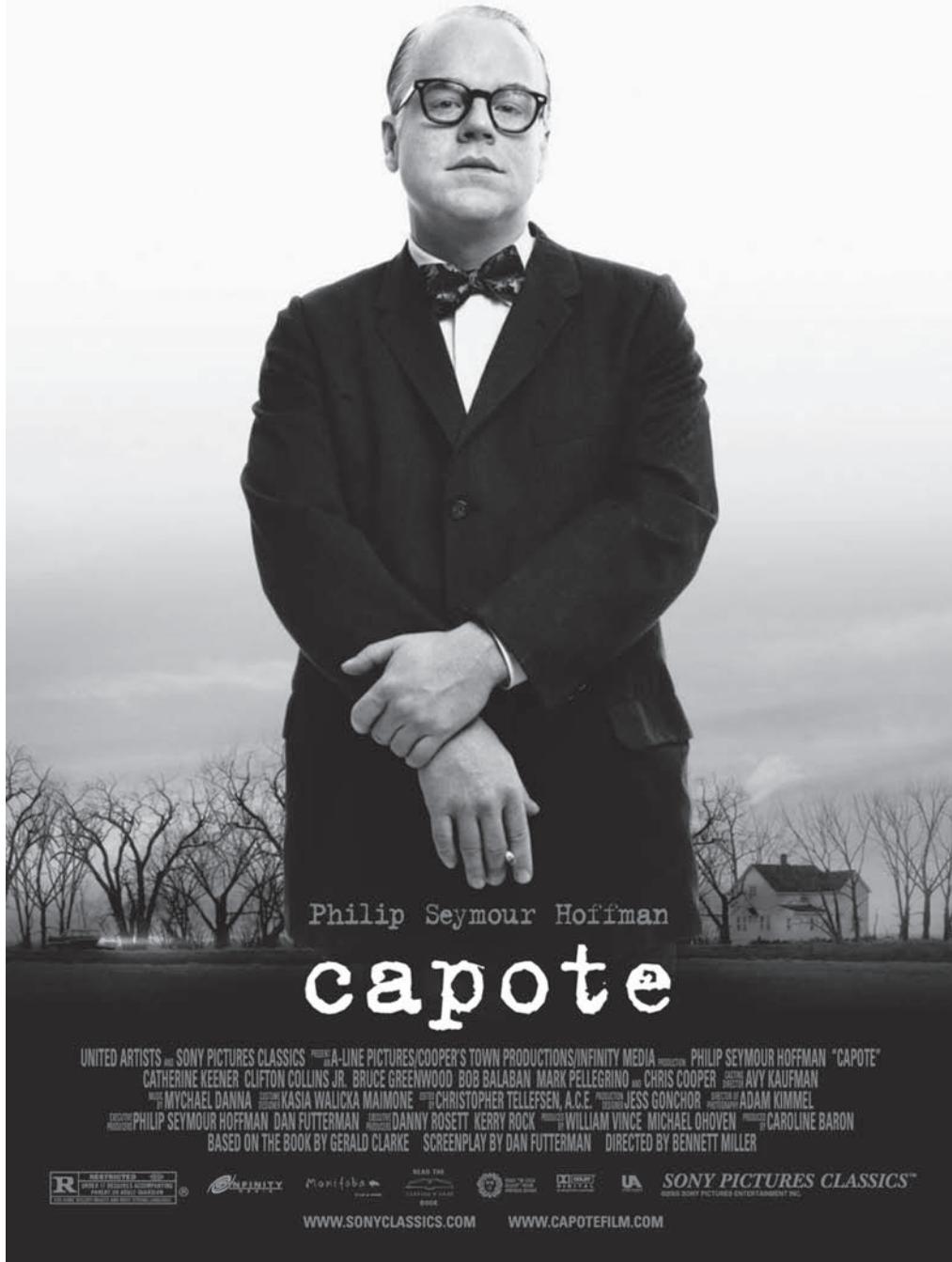
comes a symbolic repository for conservative, middle-class America in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a place that stood in stark contrast to the decadence of a boozy, high-society New York City in which a lauded Capote made his life. The place of Kansas in these films comes across as true to Capote's own symbolic use of the state in his book. Kansas, where the supposedly good citizens and values of the nation reside, the symbolic heartland, is no place for random murders, Capote's non-fiction novel and both of these films suggest. When brutal crimes take place in Kansas, it injures us all, leaving us with no place beyond reproach on which to project our necessary idealism.

Of the two films, *Capote* (2005), directed by Bennett Miller from a screenplay by Dan Futterman, presents the more successful cinematic exploration of Capote. Philip Seymour Hoffman, who won a Best Actor Oscar for his portrayal of Capote, gives a strong performance as the eccentric, gay southern writer. Hoffman—whose credits include *Cold Mountain* (2003), *Magnolia* (1999), and *Almost Famous* (2000), another film in which Kansas has an important symbolic role—plays Capote as an intelligent, witty writer whose life is transformed through his writing about the killers. He turns from a gregarious socialite to a detached depressive. With a pensive piano score by Mychael Danna and the film's numerous, uncomfortable pauses, *Capote* foreshadows the depression that would come to define the author's later years. With a much slower pace, *Capote* (2005) stands in stark contrast to Brooks's *In Cold Blood* (1967), with its frequent jump cuts, menacing jazz score by Quincy Jones, and emphasis on the killers and their violent crimes.

The actual place of "Kansas" in *Capote* (2005) is constructed out of a bit of movie magic. Both the Clutter home and the initial establishing shots were actually filmed in and around Winnipeg, Canada. The very emptiness of "Kansas," figured in the film's opening of wind-blown wheat, eventually becomes the emptiness from which Capote will suffer. Kansas in the film seems best represented through the figure of KBI lawman Alvin Dewey (Chris Cooper). Dewey embodies the law and order presumed to exist in Kansas before the murders. Summarizing this idea, Capote admits: "Two worlds exist in this country, the quiet conservative life and the life of these two men, the underbelly, the criminally violent, and those worlds converged that bloody night." How this convergence shattered the myth of the heartland constitutes the film's central theme. Such an epiphany would, the film suggests, destroy Capote as well. "Researching this work has changed my life. It has altered my point of view about almost everything," the

"'CAPOTE' IS A MOVIE THAT DOESN'T PULL ITS PUNCHES. IT'S A KNOCKOUT!
HOFFMAN'S UNMISSABLE AND UNFORGETTABLE PERFORMANCE SHOULD MAKE HIM THE FRONT-RUNNER FOR EVERY BEST ACTOR PRIZE IN THE BOOK."
-Peter Travers, ROLLING STONE

"THIS IS ONE OF THE MUST SEE FILMS OF THE YEAR!
STUNNINGLY DIRECTED BY BENNETT MILLER AND STELLAR PERFORMANCES BY ALL!"
-Paul Clinton, CNN



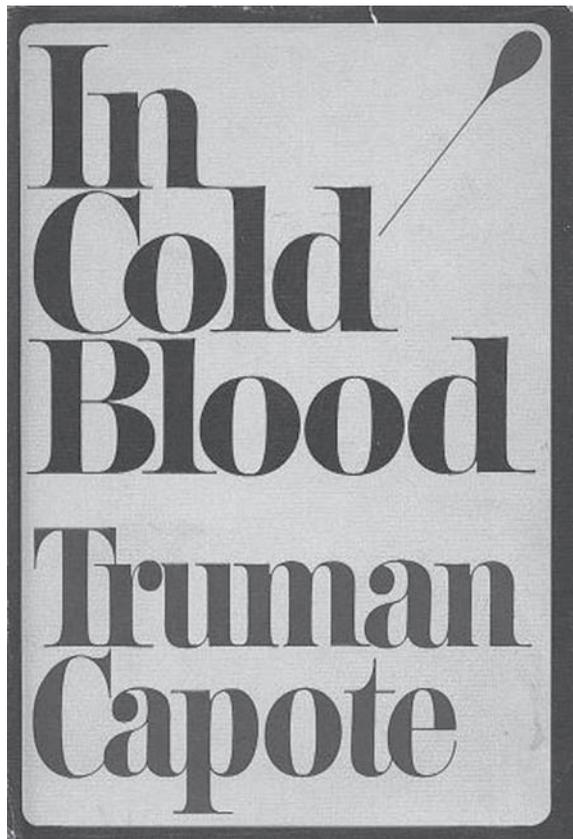
Philip Seymour Hoffman

capote

UNITED ARTISTS and SONY PICTURES CLASSICS PRESENTS AN A-LINE PICTURES/COOPER'S TOWN PRODUCTIONS/INFINITY MEDIA PRODUCTION PHILIP SEYMOUR HOFFMAN "CAPOTE"
CATHERINE KEENER CLIFTON COLLINS JR. BRUCE GREENWOOD BOB BALABAN MARK PELLEGRINO and CHRIS COOPER COSTUME DESIGNER AVY KAUFMAN
MUSIC BY MICHAEL DANNA EDITOR KASIA WALUCKA MAJMONIE EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS CHRISTOPHER TELLEFSEN, A.C.E. PRODUCED BY JESS GONCHOR DIRECTED BY ADAM KIMMEL
CASTING BY PHILIP SEYMOUR HOFFMAN DAN FUTTERMAN EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS DANNY ROSETT KERRY ROCK PRODUCED BY WILLIAM VINCE MICHAEL OHOVEN COSTUME DESIGNER CAROLINE BARON
BASED ON THE BOOK BY GERALD CLARKE SCREENPLAY BY DAN FUTTERMAN DIRECTED BY BENNETT MILLER

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AGES 17 AND UP
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The very emptiness of "Kansas," figured in the film's opening of wind-blown wheat, eventually becomes the emptiness from which Capote will suffer. Image courtesy of Sony Pictures.



Dust jacket on the first printing of *In Cold Blood*, 1965.

writer tells us in the film. Capote's relationship with Perry Smith, the tragic conflict between his feelings for the killer and the need to acknowledge Smith's terrible crime, further compromises his sanity. Ultimately, director Miller presents an effective tragic paradox in *Capote*, exploring the author's torn feelings over his taboo love of Smith that stand in conflict with his desire to find a proper ending to his book, where the killers must die for their crimes.

Infamous (2006), written and directed by Douglas McGrath, presents a less successful version of the same tragedy despite the box-office promise of its A-list stars, including Sandra Bullock, Sigourney Weaver, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Isabella Rossellini. The film fails not at the level of acting but in its direction, where the form, at one point a series of testimonials about Capote from his social circle, never fully realizes the filmmaker's intentions. Toby Jones presents a decidedly more flamboyant and overtly gay Capote than Hoffman, going so far as to intimately kiss Perry Smith in one scene. At times, the film has an almost whimsical feel despite its dire subject matter.

As in *Capote* (2005), *Infamous* (2006) makes good use of the lifelong friendship between Capote and Nelle Harper Lee (Sandra Bullock in *Infamous*; Catherine Keener in *Capote*), author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1961). Both films show how Lee played an instrumental role in helping the eccentric, gay Capote gain acceptance among Kansans and secure access to the killers. However, *Infamous* plays down any jealousy between the writers, a theme to which *Capote* alludes. Another major difference between these films is in their representations of Capote as a gay man. His homosexuality figures more prominently and openly in *Infamous*, which seems at times more about a taboo love never realized than about the murders, although the two are intertwined.

The place of "Kansas" in *Infamous* seems somewhat similar to its role in *Capote*, although it is presented with less cinematic appeal and symbolic importance in the later film. While cinematographer Adam Kimmel makes good use of "Kansas" to emphasize *Capote's* ideas, Bruno Delbonnel's cinematographic view of "Kansas" has less of a place in *Infamous*. Kansas as metaphor, however, figures prominently in *Infamous*, as in the message delivered by a Holcomb rancher: "What scares me is sometimes out of nowhere a bad wind blows up . . . and despite the weight that's holding you to the ground, when that wind comes, it picks you up light as a leaf and takes you where it wants. We're in control till we're not, then we're helpless." It seems no contemporary film about the state, acknowledging the anxiety of influence, can be without a proper wind reference.

It is also worth mentioning here the very different portrayals of the murderer, Perry Smith: by Clifton Collins, Jr. in *Capote*, and in *Infamous* by Daniel Craig, who became the newest James Bond in *Casino Royale* (2006). Collins presents a more brooding Smith, while Craig gives him a more violent edge. Both provide competent portrayals of an abandoned son whose parents were divorced alcoholics and whose mother was suicidal, although Craig's violent Smith, also portrayed as a wannabe country-western singer in *Infamous*, seems somewhat more complex, novel, and haunting. Both portrayals recall the brilliant, edgy performance of Robert Blake, which neither Collins nor Craig comes near, although all three actors bring to the screen the menacing nature of a complex killer, part violent psychopath and part misunderstood artist.

While the cinematic appeal of the stories of *In Cold Blood* and Truman Capote's tragic life might seem somewhat

exhausted now, Capote's book will continue to be read for its masterful treatment of its subject and its role in the creation of the nonfiction novel. *Capote* (2005) will be admired for its cinematic complexity and solid acting performances, while *Infamous* (2006), a weaker adaptation, may not withstand the test of time. The place of Kansas, however, will always have a necessary symbolic role in any treatment of the book. The random nature of these brutal crimes violated the myth of the heartland. In the very compromising of this myth, these works suggest, everybody seems to have lost something, to have become victimized. Such is the tragedy that Capote understood and effectively conveyed; the revelation may have destroyed him, but it will always be remembered.

Philip Heldrich

University of Washington, Tacoma

"June 8, 1966": The Topeka Tornado. Directed, produced, written by Jim Kelly for KTWU-TV; Dave Kendall, Executive Producer. 2006; color and black and white; 60 minutes.

On June 8, 1966, a tornado ripped through Topeka, Kansas, staying on the ground from Burnett's Mound at the southwest edge of town through downtown and on to the northeast quadrant, dissipating only when it crossed the Kansas River. Sixteen people died; hundreds were injured. The same storm found another victim in Leavenworth County. Property damage ran to the millions, with ten thousand cars and two thousand homes completely destroyed. The Topeka landscape was scarred, as were the people who had survived a tornado that was later classified as F5 (the highest intensity).

For the fortieth anniversary of this historical event, Jim Kelly produced and directed *"June 8, 1966": The Topeka Tornado* for local PBS channel KTWU. Other media, the daily newspaper, and local commercial television stations recognized the anniversary, but the KTWU documentary goes beyond the simple recollection of a traumatic event to bring together all aspects of this pivotal moment in Topeka history.

Now available on DVD, *June 8* is a fine addition to local history. The director brought together vintage tornado

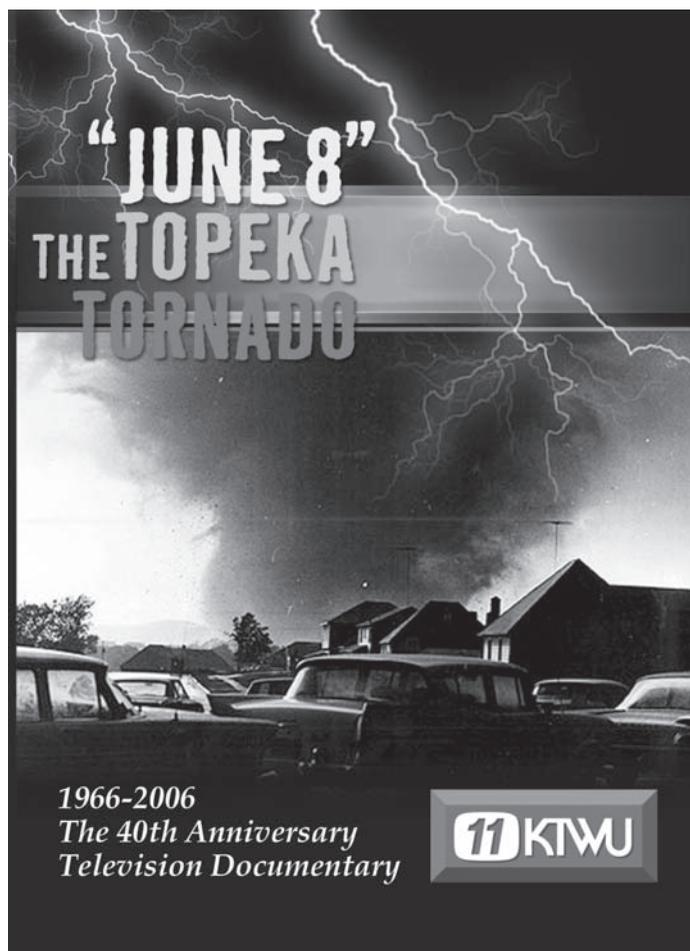


Image courtesy of KTWU-TV.

photographs from all over the country. He produced a montage of voices: survivors, weather forecasters, disaster volunteers, politicians, historians, and even academics who study tornadoes. He found footage of the tornado taken by John Ward, who was interrupted by the storm on his way to shoot scenes of his son's baseball game and instead shot a home movie of the huge black funnel as it came down Burnett's Mound. Kelly splices in the television coverage that played on local television channel WIBW, featuring Bill Kurtis, then a law student at Washburn University, whose famous words, "For god's sake, take cover," launched his career as the prominent broadcaster he has become. To evoke the Topeka of 1966, the director borrows from a Chamber of Commerce film, *You Asked About Topeka*. The only thing that detracts from quality viewing might be the constant, slightly hokey graphic of a tiny tornado swirling its way across the screen.



Property damage from the tornado ran to the millions, with ten thousand cars and two thousand homes completely destroyed. The Topeka landscape was scarred, as were the people who had survived a tornado that was later classified as F5 (the highest intensity).

June 8 is primarily a narrative of the several hours leading up to and the weeks following the disaster. But its strength lies in its cutaways to ancillary, but important issues, themes, and related history. For example, we learn the legend of Burnett's Mound (and that the mound had previously been named Webster's Peak, Shunganunga Mound, and Burnett's Peak). We are inoculated (as Topeka was) with the power of tornado folklore. We learn the history of weather forecasting, of the warning system and how it worked. We discover that Topeka foreswore bureaucracy in the disaster's aftermath, and for two weeks the mayor simply took charge. People came together to form what one researcher calls "ephemeral institutions" to clean up, and to comfort, feed, and house survivors, creating a briefly warm, almost utopian environment, which gave the city renewed confidence in itself. We see Topeka as a model studied by outsiders interested in advance warning and disaster response. We even learn that the Topeka tornado changed the 1886 doctrine of the "southwest corner," which professed that the southwest corner of a structure was the safest place to take shelter. Joe Eagleman, of the University of Kansas, charted storm debris, researched where people had taken shelter, and decided the southwest corner was actually the most dangerous location. Northeast, he declared, was safest, and, after much resistance, his theory became accepted.

When *June 8* discusses the tornado's impact, both immediately and over the past forty years, the documentary (perhaps forgivably) spends lengthy minutes on the devastation and recovery of Washburn University, which houses KTWU. Still, the transition was remarkable, and the disaster perhaps fortuitous. As Menninger psychologist Irwin Rosen points out, "For every pencil they lost, they got back a computer." Dr. Rosen also points out that every citizen experienced the tornado, and the responses were widely varied.

This last insight helps point out the strength of *June 8*, with its multiple perspectives, points of view, voices, remembrances, and analyses. The documentary is community history. The new DVD further emphasizes the communal recreation. Extras include: the full-length promotional film, *You Asked About Topeka*; a fuller interview with Bill Kurtis; more from Dr. Jay Antle, a history professor who studies tornadoes and tornado folklore; a sidebar on the very first tornado warning ever issued (in Oklahoma); a "music video" with a Topeka tornado song and film of its creation

by KTWU's own Lee Wright; and, finally, a link to the website created by the station before and during the making of the documentary. The website, <http://ktwu.washburn.edu/productions/tornado/stories.htm>, includes links to a Photo Gallery, to Personal Stories, to Washburn University Devastation and Recovery, and to Disaster Preparation. The best part of the website is the overview, and the space it provides for anyone to add a personal story about living through the tornado. Some of these are humorous, many quite well written, and the site becomes the kind of community history that more documentaries should make available.

June 8 is not sensationalized, but it is sensational, with great footage, photography, voices, analysis, and extras. Director Jim Kelly, one of the team that brings us *Sunflower Journeys* (KTWU's "Stories of the People of Kansas"), has become very adept at doing real history.

Tom Averill
Washburn University

The Kansas Governor. Directed by Lyall Ford; written and produced by Bob Beatty. 2005; color; 56 minutes. Distributed by Washburn University and the Center for Kansas Studies.

The *Kansas Governor* might be better titled, "Reflections of Six Kansas Governors." There is no real narrative, nor a plot. Nor is this some academic study. Rather, Washburn professor Bob Beatty, along with KSNT reporter Sarah Augusthy, has asked roughly the same set of questions of the surviving governors of Kansas, whose service ranges from 1961 (John Anderson) through the present (Kathleen Sebelius). The result is a fascinating array of reminiscences that will offer some new insights to even the closest students of Kansas political history. At the same time, viewers will learn little of overarching significance as the interviews flit from Anderson and Sebelius to Governors William Avery (1965–1967), John Carlin (1979–1987), Mike Hayden (1987–1991), and Bill Graves (1995–2003). The film focuses far more on style and shared experiences than on the substance of legislation, although the governors are acutely aware of their records.

The film's production values reflect the budgetary philosophy of Governor George Docking (1957–1961)—"austere, but adequate." The interviews were each shot in a sin-

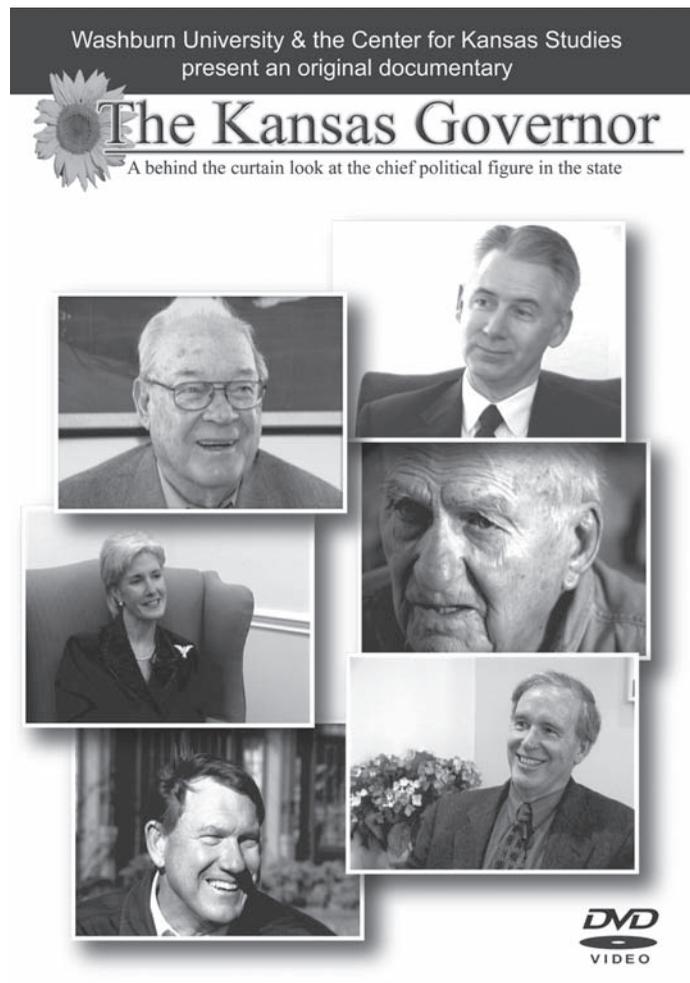
gle venue, although some extra footage and still photos do provide something of a break from the dominant headshot format. And the interviewers' questions are omitted in editing; in the end, the viewer is treated to four sets of related narratives, each about twelve minutes long. Beatty and Augusthy lead us through thematically organized sections: "Beginnings," "Getting There," "Style and Surprises," and "The Challenges."

The result is a mixed bag of political boilerplate, surprising observations, and comments that remind us that all governors face many similar problems, but that each is captive to his or her immediate political context. Thus, while Sebelius despairs of the intense partisan opposition from majority Republicans in the Kansas legislature (or at least some of them), both Graves and his Lieutenant Governor Sheila Frahm see intra-party divisions in the GOP as proving especially nettlesome. Still, there is little context provided to suggest that many of Graves's conservative Republican tormentors were the same as those who now bedevil his successor.

Some snippets may provide historically important information, as when Hayden notes that, despite coming from a farming family, he never thought he was cut out for an agricultural life. And Graves states that he began to think concretely about running for governor on election day 1990, four full years before he won the office. The reminiscences of Anderson and Avery hark back to a different Kansas political era of two-year terms for governor. Anderson sees his re-election as confirmation that the electorate approved of his first term, while Avery, who lost his bid for re-election, accurately notes that he accomplished a good deal in a single term.

All the governors talk about the status of serving as Kansas governor; all had previously served in elective office, but none felt completely prepared for the prominence accorded the chief executive. And in their distinctive ways, all appear to have enjoyed their stay in the statehouse. Some of the most pleasurable moments in the film come courtesy of Governors Anderson (age eighty-eight in 2005) and Avery (age ninety-four), whose sharp wits remain on display. Indeed, the film reminds me of a 2002 roundtable at the University of Kansas, where Anderson and (especially) Avery could have probably been re-elected in the wake of their clear-headed comments on Kansas taxes and spending.

In the end, Beatty and his collaborators, including his father Jim Beatty (who provides a lively clarinet score),



The result of these interviews is a mixed bag of political boilerplate, surprising observations, and comments that remind us that all governors face many similar problems, but that each is captive to his or her immediate political context. Image courtesy of Washburn University and the Center for Kansas Studies.

have crafted a valuable historic document. We do not learn too much about the governorship as a political institution, but we do come to a greater understanding of how these six individuals approached their term in office, what made them tick, and what they learned from the process. They are a refreshing and upbeat bunch, and the film left me with a bit more hope than one ordinarily feels after devoting an hour to the consideration of Kansas politics. More efforts like this would certainly be welcome, for scholars and the public alike.

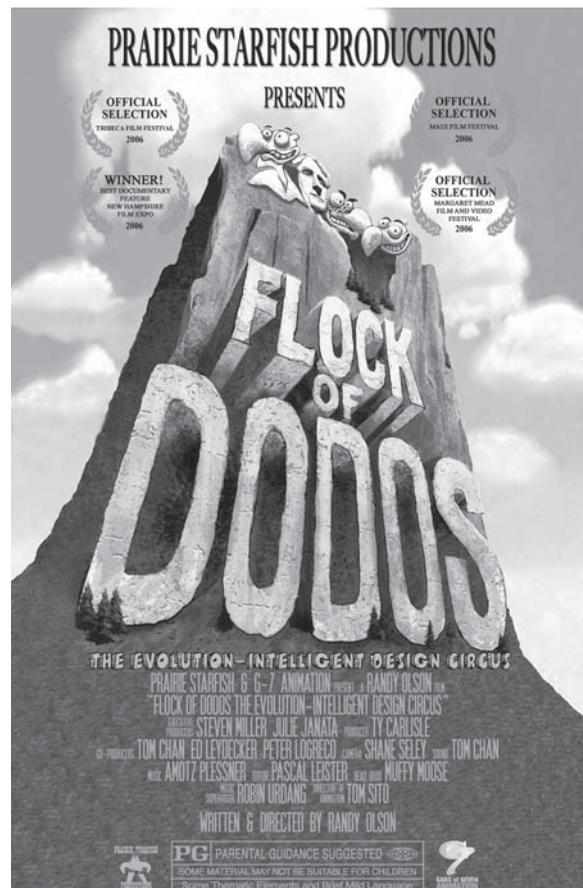
Burdett A. Loomis
University of Kansas

Flock of Dodos: The Evolution—Intelligent Design Circus. Directed and written by Randy Olson; produced by Ty Carlisle; Co-Producers Tom Chan, Ed Leydecker, and Peter Logreco. 2005; color; 85 minutes. Distributed by Prairie Starfish Productions.

Beginning in 1999, the state of Kansas found itself a target of national and even international ridicule after a conservative majority on the State Board of Education rejected a set of state educational standards because the requirements included lessons on evolution. That move touched off several years of seesawing between conservatives and moderates on the board and, more broadly, made Kansas a symbolic battleground for the national struggle over teaching evolution in the public schools. The ensuing publicity has not been kind.

One would expect Randy Olson to join the chorus of mockery with his documentary about the conflict, *Flock of Dodos*. The Kansas native is, after all, a trained biologist who studied with the celebrated paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould at Harvard University. Olson clearly cannot resist having a little fun with the subject: the documentary is full of cheeky animation, and jaunty banjo music swells in the background whenever the film crew journeys to another anti-evolutionist meeting. But the film's style belies its serious purpose: to illuminate the local dimensions of the national debate over religion and science.

Flock of Dodos treats the first round of the Kansas anti-evolution struggle, in 1999, only briefly. Olson's major focus is more on the second round of debate, in 2004–2005, when the anti-evolutionists' strategy shifted from trying to bar evolution from the classroom to attempting to insert "Intelligent Design" (ID) alongside Darwinism in the curriculum. Proponents of ID, such as Missouri attorney John Calvert, believe that life on earth is too well ordered and too complex to be the product of undirected evolution; just as a human designer is clearly responsible for Mt. Rushmore or functional mousetraps, so an unspecified "designer" must be responsible for such wondrous structures as the eye or the bacterial flagellum. Although this supernatural "designer" ends up looking quite a bit like the God of Genesis, ID supporters have hoped that the scientific coating on their theory would allow it to slide around the wall of separation between church and state.



The filmmaker clearly cannot resist having a little fun with the subject, but the film's style belies its serious purpose: to illuminate the local dimensions of the national debate over religion and science. Image courtesy of Prairie Starfish Productions.

If they could not supplant Darwinism, they could at least push the schools to, as their catchphrase suggests, "teach the controversy" between ID and evolution. Mainstream scientists deny that a controversy exists: ID has produced no original research for peer-reviewed journals, while evolutionary theory has structured inquiry into biology, paleontology, and a host of other academic disciplines for more than a century. Nevertheless, the state board held hearings about the "controversy," providing a pulpit for ID that the scientific community conspicuously boycotted and creating the "circus" that Olson refers to in his film's subtitle. In the next election, control of the board duly seesawed back to the moderates.

At the same time, a federal judge in Dover, Pennsylvania, John E. Jones, forcefully rejected an attempt by the local school board to adopt an ID textbook and "teach the con-

troversy.” Intelligent Design, he maintained in his October 2004 decision, was simply a disguise for creation science, which the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1987 *Edwards v. Aguillard* decision had ruled was itself a disguise for an unconstitutional establishment of religion.

As the Dover case suggests, *Flock of Dodos* is not exclusively a local story. One of the film’s strengths is the way it weaves the Kansas case into the broader context of the evolution debate. Well-funded national groups, especially the Discovery Institute in Seattle, Washington, furnish “talking points” and political strategies for local activists, and in fact are largely responsible for coaxing latent anti-evolution sentiment among many Christians into a public crusade. In Kansas, at least, their strategy has been aided by the state’s democratic peculiarities, such as the local election of State Board of Education members. As with elections for local school boards, these contests usually elicit minimal voter turnout, so that small but committed interest groups, such as those inspired by Discovery Institute materials and coordinated by conservative churches, can exercise influence

disproportionate to the number of supporters they represent. In contrast, scientists have been far less successful in educating the public about their own approach. In a series of interviews with ID supporters and their opponents, Olson offers a valuable glimpse of the personalities behind these warring camps.

Only a pair of mistakes mars the film’s historical accuracy: it incorrectly portrays the debate between T. H. Huxley and Bishop Samuel Wilberforce in 1860 as a ringing triumph for evolution, and it makes the same error in recounting the outcome of the Scopes trial in 1925. Both outcomes were decidedly more ambiguous than conventional accounts suggest. Olson’s larger point—that most evolutionists believed until recently that the anti-evolutionist impulse had been safely quashed—is well taken, but the viewer must trust that the filmmaker has taken greater care with other statements of fact.

Jeffrey P. Moran
University of Kansas