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# The Cinematic Presence of Kansas and the West

## Film Reviews

*edited and introduced by Thomas Prasch*

In no fewer than three mainstream Hollywood releases of the last half of 2000—Cameron Crowe’s *Almost Famous*, Neil Bute’s *Nurse Betty*, and the Coen brothers’ *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*—Kansas figured in the movies’ conceptual maps.

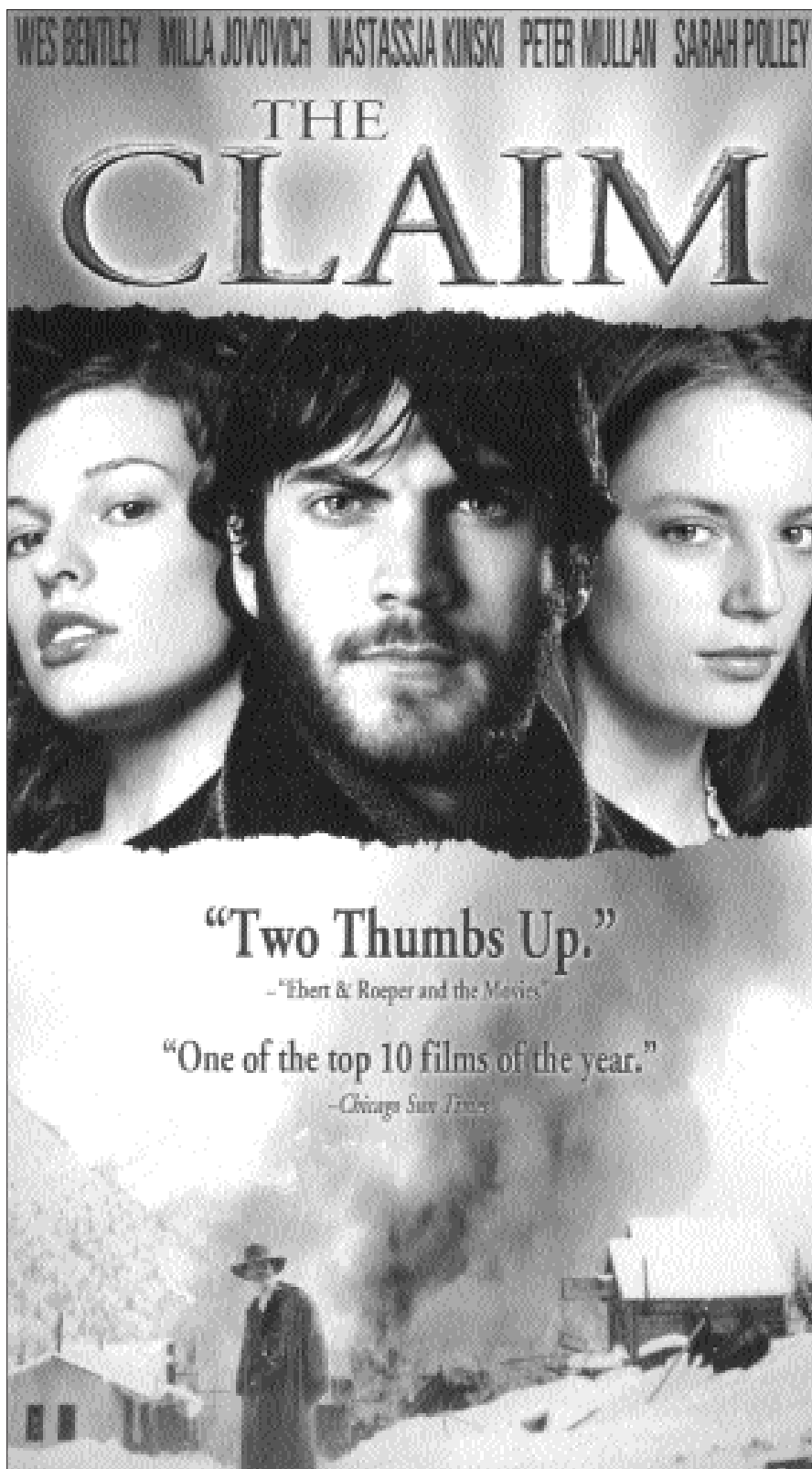
In Crowe’s nostalgic fictionalized recounting of his own adventures as a teen reporter covering a rock band’s tour for *Rolling Stone* in 1973, it happens to be in Topeka that the acid-tripping rock star experiences his epiphany (something about being a “golden god”) before plunging into the apartment complex’s swimming pool. While the scene may leave Kansas viewers shaking their heads (a Topeka apartment complex with a swimming pool?), New York’s *Village Voice* reviewer J. Hoberman interprets the scene as signifying the changing times the film seeks to capture (as he blithely disregards Kansas geography): “Another sign of the times—the Orgy has penetrated deepest Kansas.”<sup>1</sup> If neither filmmaker nor reviewer gets Kansas right, they both nevertheless reflect versions of one of the most familiar filmic tropes about Kansas. As James H. Nottage and Floyd R. Thomas Jr. wrote in *Kansas History* a number of years ago, “Many movies and television programs have used Kansas locations to typify the Midwest and small-town America.”<sup>2</sup> Almost twenty years later, Kansas still remains for filmmakers the embodiment of middle America, the nation’s metaphorical as well as literal center.

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Thomas Prasch earned his Ph.D. from Indiana University in 1995, and currently he is an assistant professor of history at Washburn University. He has provided regular film review sections for the *American Historical Review*.

1. *Village Voice* (New York), September 13–19, 2000.

2. “‘There’s No Place Like Home’: Symbols and Images of Kansas,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 8 (Autumn 1985): 154.



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A more complex invocation of Kansas can be found in Neil Bute's *Nurse Betty*. The life of Betty, a waitress in fictional Fair Oaks, Kansas, is brutally disrupted by the murder of her car-dealer husband in the family living room; she witnesses the killing as an interruption of her favorite soap opera. The movie begins with this evocation of violence and danger breaking into the security of midwestern domesticity, a Kansas trope that echoes the film classic *In Cold Blood* (1967). But that is just the beginning. In her post-traumatic psychological crisis, Betty erases the reality from her mind, replacing it with a fantasy based on the soap opera's hospital setting. She sets off (with the killers in pursuit) for Los Angeles to become "Nurse Betty" in the hospital she presumes to be real, not just a Hollywood set. But her fantasized journey also has roots in Kansas film lore: in *The Wizard of Oz*, slyly referenced through a range of metaphors from the Yellow Brick Road she journeys on to the Emerald City of Hollywood where she finds her destiny. Citing both *In Cold Blood* and *The Wizard of Oz*, *Nurse Betty* thus plays off the two most fixed positions in the representational field of filmed Kansas.

It is Oz that echoes through *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, too, most overtly in the careful evocation of Dorothy's three less-than-intrepid companions (in *O, Brother*, the film's three escaped convicts) approaching the castle of the wicked witch (or, in this case, a Ku Klux Klan rally, which, the film suggests, is pretty much the same thing) and seizing the uniforms (robes) of a trio of passing guards to penetrate the inner sanctum and save their friend (Dorothy, or the bluesman Tommy Johnson, depending on the film). If the Klan rally rapidly devolves into a Busby Berkeley-style production number, the careful viewer, alerted by the deliberate homage of the Klan scene, can detect a range of references to *The Wizard of Oz*, from declarations of the need to find a wizard to rewards for the film's picaresque heroes that suggest the Wizard's grants to the lion, scarecrow, and tinman. The film's territory is quite explicitly not Kansas—it is set in the Depression South, and retells, or claims to retell, the story of Homer's *Odyssey*—but a web of references to *The Wizard* automatically brings Kansas into play. According to Thomas Fox Averill, "The people of contemporary Kansas are intricately, ambivalently, and inevitably linked to Oz."<sup>3</sup> And it works the other way, too: to invoke

3. "Oz and Kansas Culture," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 12 (Spring 1989): 2.

Oz is to bring to mind as well its black-and-white flip side of Kansas.

None of these films can even vaguely be taken as explorations of Kansas history. But they nevertheless suggest a surprising fact: that, even if Kansas is not as routinely a part of the symbolic structure of Hollywood imagemakers as, say, New York City or Los Angeles, it is nevertheless firmly situated in their emblematic universe. To a large extent, the representational range of Kansas imagery in film remains rooted in the same stereotypical images noted by Nottage and Thomas back in 1985: the real space (flat, windy, colorless) that underpins the imaginary realm of Oz; the locus for midwesternness, with all the values constellated around that notion; and the western frontier, with its deeply entrenched dichotomies of good guys and bad, its associations with freedom and violence. An examination of this complex of Kansas stereotypes suggests, however, that they are themselves grounded in the historical transitions through which Kansas has passed.

**K**ansas settlement began against the background of sectional conflict that focused on the contested future of slavery in America, and Bleeding Kansas provided a foretaste of the Civil War to come. In the continued settlement of the West, Kansas, crisscrossed by the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails, homesteaded, and battled over by incoming settlers and indigenous Native Americans, played a central role. A range of immigrant groups—Mennonites, latecomers from Europe's fringes, freed slave Exodusters, Mexican migrant workers—have complicated the pattern of settlement (and, increasingly in recent years, have enriched historical, literary, and film images of Kansas). As part of America's agrarian heartland, Kansans experienced the vicissitudes of farming, such as the depression-era Dust Bowl that so shaped film's version of Dorothy's Kansas (even if it cannot have been part of Baum's vision). And, over recent decades, changing demographic and economic patterns have altered Kansas, the decline of the small town and the family farm balanced by the growth of agribusiness and increasingly diversified urban centers. All this—however implicit, however flattened by the process of stereotyping—figures in the Kansas image we see on our movie screens. If the history behind the images remains little more than shadows in the recent films previously mentioned, the survey offered here of significant historical films released over the past five

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years that treat Kansas themes (plus one film classic revisited) makes it clear that Hollywood has been far from indifferent to the varied territories of Kansas history.

The crucible of Bleeding Kansas, where the battle lines of the looming Civil War were mapped onto territorial claims and where tactics of guerrilla warfare and partisan attacks on civilian populations were bloodily explored, has long held an attraction for Hollywood filmmakers. William Clarke Quantrill's ransacking of Lawrence probably stands as the emblematic episode in the conflict and one that has regularly attracted filmmakers. Readers of *Kansas History* will recall John Tibbetts's recent survey of film treatments of the episode.<sup>4</sup> In the following review section, Bruce Mac-tavish focuses on the most recent of Quantrill's film incarnations in Ang Lee's *Ride with the Devil* (1999). And, if Quantrill best symbolizes the proslavery forces that figured in Kansas's struggles over slavery, John Brown dominates the emblematic representations of the abolitionists. Timothy Westcott critiques Robert Kenner's recent documentary about Brown's place in this struggle, *John Brown's Holy War* (2000).

Nothing has more attracted filmmakers in the Kansas past, however, than the territory of the West. Indeed, the western is as old as film itself—William "Buffalo Bill" Cody and Annie Oakley were recreating bits from Cody's Wild West Show before the camera as early as 1894—and the Internet Movie Database now lists 6,447 western films and television shows ([www.us.imdb.com](http://www.us.imdb.com)). Feeding on conventions already established by dime novels, music-hall entertainments, and traveling shows like the Wild West Show, filmmakers had fixed the basic terms of the genre by early in the century, in such works as *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) and *Broncho Billy* (1910).<sup>5</sup> And if there are cowboys, there must be Indians: the dovetailed history of the western and Native American representations on film can be traced, as Michael Hilger has shown in *The American In-*

4. John C. Tibbetts, "Riding with the Devil: The Movie Adventures of William Clarke Quantrill," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 22 (Autumn 1999): 182–99.

5. For histories of the genre, see, for example, Jon Tuska, *The Filming of the West* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), or George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, *The West: From Silents to the Seventies*, rev. ed. (New York: Grossman, 1973). For connections between the film western and other mass-media forms, a useful survey is Jim Hitt, *The American West from Fiction (1823–1976) into Film (1909–1986)* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1990).

*dian in Film* (1986), back to westerns as early as *Kit Carson and the Pioneer* (1903).

The western emerges as a genre at an interesting juncture in American history, almost immediately after Frederick Jackson Turner's famous declaration at the Columbian Exhibition in 1893 that the frontier was closed. Those early westerns can thus be seen as efforts to interpret a just-finished episode in American history, with the completion of coast-to-coast settlement (and the attendant unsettlement of Indian populations) called for by Manifest Destiny. In the context of assessing this recent past, the western functioned to define the character of America itself.

But the western clearly would prove to be a strikingly resilient genre, even more popular than such familiar film types as the vampire. Like the vampire, the western refuses to die. Like the vampire, its traits and powers change with each new incarnation, the genre shapeshifting to reflect new conditions and new historical perspectives.

Recent westerns have, for instance, embraced the opening up of the West to newly important groups of historical actors, interacting with increasing complexity against a more diverse social framework; in this sense, these westerns have embraced the "New West" of such historians as Patricia Nelson Limerick. These tendencies are clear in the inclusion of women and blacks in the new filmic picture of the West; among reviews here, Joyce Thierer's treatment of Rod Hardy's *Buffalo Girls* (1995) and Brad Lookingbill's assessment of Charles Haid's *Buffalo Soldiers* (1997) cover such trends. At the same time, traditional western heroes and storylines have been reworked to fit contemporary perspectives, as with the decidedly antiheroic take on a familiar western figure offered in Walter Hill's *Wild Bill* (1995), evaluated here by Ron McCoy. A wider perspective on current trends in the western is offered by John Tibbetts in his survey of recent releases in the genre.

But Kansas history does not end with the closing of the frontier. Although decidedly less popular than the earlier phases of the Kansas past, recent history also has provided a subject for film. No example better illustrates this than the film classic with which this selection of reviews opens: Richard Brooks's film version of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1967). As Philip Heldrich makes clear in his revisiting of the work, the film crystallized the image of the American heartland and created a still-horrifying metaphor for the dangers that threatened it. Other re-

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cent films treating the post-frontier era underline the diversity of Kansas history in multiple ways. In *Half Past Autumn*, a retrospective and biography of photographer, novelist, and filmmaker Gordon Parks reviewed here by Catherine Preston, the Kansas roots of a defining African American life are outlined. And Kevin Willmott's *Ninth Street* offers the distinctly different history of a dominantly African American and essentially urban community, although, as Thomas Fox Averill illustrates in his review, the film resonates with more established tropes of contemporary Kansas in transition.

In presenting reviews of films that concern themselves with the history of the state, *Kansas History* follows a broad trend in the historical discipline to take films—even fictional films—seriously as a form in which knowledge of history is promulgated. Film reviews have become a routine feature of such journals as the *American Historical Review* and the *Journal of American History*. Films are regularly discussed in *Perspectives*, the newsletter of the American Historical Association, and are the entire focus of such journals as *Film and History* or such listserv discussion networks as H-Net's H-Film, devoted to scholarly uses of the media.

Historians have begun to take films seriously, I would suggest, because they have had to do so, because of film's central place in the public arena of historical interpretation. As Robert Rosenstone has noted, we "live in a world deluged with images, one in which people increasingly receive their ideas about the past from motion pictures and television. . . . Today the chief source of historical knowledge for the bulk of the population—outside of the much despised textbook—must surely be the visual media, a set of institutions which lies almost wholly outside the control

of those of us who devote our lives to history."<sup>6</sup> By addressing film as a form of history, historians seek to reinsert themselves in this ongoing dialogue about the past (if not quite to retake control of how the past will be told).

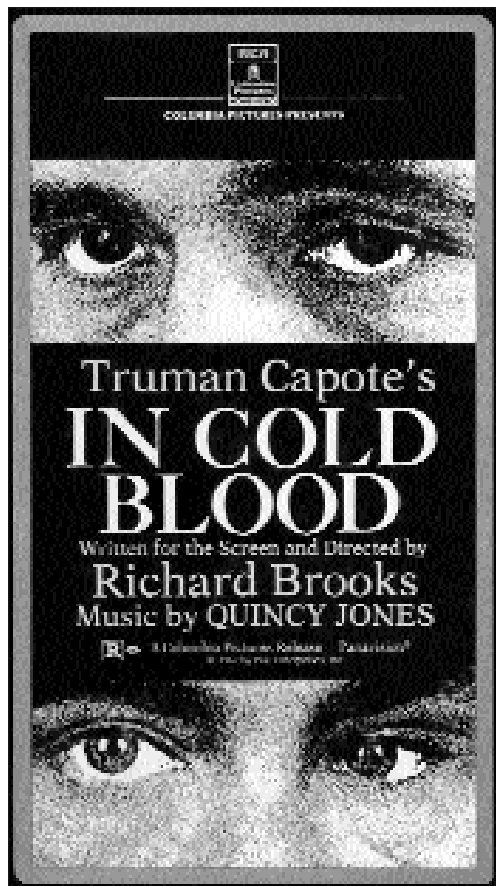
Making a contribution to understanding history in film, however, is not only a task of guarding the turf of history from Hollywood interlopers. As I have argued elsewhere, the task films present to the historian is twofold.<sup>7</sup> First and most obviously, the historian's central role is to offer corrective criticism of film versions of history: to insist, in short, that if films present history, they get their facts right. Second, however, the historian must learn to take film history on its own terms: to understand how film as a medium both opens up possibilities and exposes limitations in the visual representation and re-creation of the historical past; to appreciate, as Rosenstone's *Visions of the Past* so usefully explains, the devices of compression and invention necessarily employed by filmmakers in translating their vision of history to the screen; to examine the sorts of narratives imposed on historical subjects by Hollywood plotlines and the medium of film itself; even to recognize how, in today's world, film does not just tell history but makes it. This selection of recent films covering the history of Kansas and the West thus aims to accomplish both of the projects that are part of the historical discipline's encounter with film, criticizing film histories for the mistakes they make with our past but recognizing how film increasingly has come to shape our understanding of history.

6. Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 22–23.

7. Thomas Prasch, "Introduction," *American Historical Review* 100 (October 1995): 1190–93; *ibid.*, 101 (October 1996): 1139–41.

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*IN COLD BLOOD*. Produced, directed, and screenplay by Richard Brooks; based on a novel by Truman Capote. 1967; black-and-white; 134 minutes. Columbia Pictures.



Perhaps one of the most difficult types of filmmaking must be the film adaptation based on an already successful and well-known text. Such an adaptation, because of a book's recognition, opens itself up to countless comparisons and criticisms. However, the art of film adaptation lies less in fidelity to the original text and more in the creation of a unique perspective on that text. In few movies is the success of this particular art more evident than in Richard Brooks's adaptation of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965). Although the film captures much of the intention of Capote's original bestseller, it also takes a number of significant departures that have made Brooks's *In Cold Blood* a milestone of popular culture and Kansas history, solidifying Kansas's place as a significant cinematic symbol and remembered landscape.

Some thirty-four years since the film's release in December 1967, *In Cold Blood* remains fresh, unsettling, and audacious. The terror Brooks captures through both his extended focus on criminal psychology and the murder scene in the actual Clutter home is still amply troubling; few films today can capture the horrendous nature of violence without actually portraying most of it on screen. *In Cold Blood* remains significant as well because it speaks strongly about living in a chaotic, fractured, postmodern world where we can, like the Clutters, become victims of circumstance and chance at any moment and in any place, even in Kansas. A more enduring quality of the film, however, is its social criticism with respect to class disparity and racial difference. In the social upheaval of the late sixties, Brooks challenges us, surely more than Arthur Penn's romanticized *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), to think about how real economic and racial inequality can create criminal behavior capable of destroying peaceable, middle-class lives like those of the Clutters.

Brooks's insistence on filming in black-and-white, often on location in Kansas, and Quincy Jones's original music stand out as *In Cold Blood*'s most striking and enduring aesthetic attributes. The film—which used the Clutter home, the actual courtroom, seven of the twelve original jurors, the same hangman, and Nancy Clutter's horse—seems infused with a blending of fact and fiction, just as did Capote's "nonfiction novel." Jones's music is likewise powerful, strongly emphasizing the film's linear fragmentation and its characters' discordant lives. Jones provides a memorable, menacing jazz with horn shrieks, bass moans, and arrhythmic percussion. Such jazz plays an especially important role in the initial scenes, establishing the criminal, socially marginal personalities of Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. Smith, played exceptionally by Robert Blake, comes across as a detached, unbalanced, homosexual drifter, an unsteady and anxious half-Indian outsider. Hickock, played by Scott Wilson, is a degenerate, sexually charged hipster from a poor Kansas family, not unlike Dorothy's family in *The Wizard of Oz*. Jones's music has such a strong presence throughout the film that silence itself becomes significant, particularly in the Clutter murder scene and in the film's final moments during Smith's hang-

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ing; respectively, blowing wind and a heartbeat punctuate the solemnity of both moments as violations of human life, even of killers' lives forged, as the film suggests, in conditions of social and racial inequality.

The film's setting, too, is important for creating of Kansas a symbolic landscape relevant to the turmoil of the late sixties. In this stark place, society's insolvent and colored outsiders clash with the heartland's upstanding, hard-working citizens: "Welcome back to Kansas, buddy, the heart of America," Dick tells Perry at the film's onset, "the land of wheat, corn, Bibles, and [belch] natural gas." Brooks plays off Kansas history in the popular imagination, the land of John Brown and Carrie Nation, a land of racial conflict and religious fervor. Kansas also is a land of haves and have-nots, as Dick makes clear: "Doctors and lawyers, what do they care? Ever see a millionaire fry in the electric chair? Hell no. There's two kind of laws, honey, one for the rich and one for the poor." Even in Kansas, the film suggests, there is social disparity and its accompanying problems. A violation of Kansas becomes akin to a violation of home—Dorothy's, our nation's, and, literally, the Clutters'—a theme consistent with Capote's book. It is also not surprising that the criminals hide out in the wild lands of Mexico and are apprehended in Las Vegas, as such illicit places, conceptually outside the law, contrast heavily with the myth of Kansas as homeland—there's no place like it—in our cinematic and literary history.

Another departure the film takes from the text, the addition of the reporter, perhaps sheds the most light on the

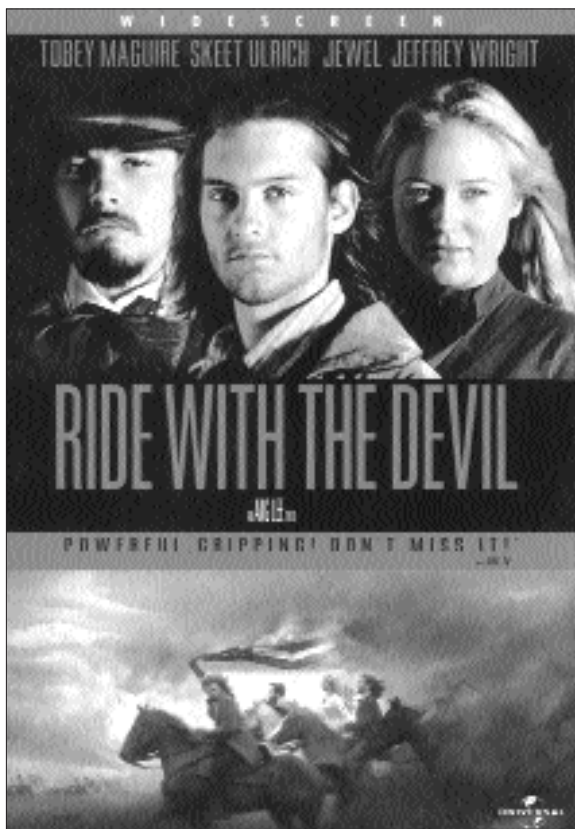
nature of both Capote's and Brooks's works and the lasting significance of each for Kansas and American history. When asked of his interest in the crime, the reporter responds: "A violent, unknown force destroys a decent, ordinary family. No clues. No logic. Makes us all feel frightened, vulnerable." Brooks's own words during filming to William Cotter Murray of the *New York Times* further defines the film as "Greek tragedy, American style . . . . If I thought this movie didn't have relevance to a general social problem, I wouldn't be making it."<sup>8</sup> In these murders, as both Brooks and Capote define them, we are all held partly responsible. In choosing not to confront the killers and their crime, we turn our backs on the social problems of racial difference and class disparity that gave rise to Smith and Hickock. For the late 1960s, and perhaps still now, Brooks serves up a biting social critique of postmodern American life. By the end of the film, as with Capote's bestseller, trouble in Kansas means trouble everywhere. Surely, if the heart ails, there can be no health in our nation's body.

*Philip Heldrich*  
Emporia State University

8. William Cotter Murray, *New York Times*, April 16, 1967, II, 15.

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*RIDE WITH THE DEVIL*. Produced by James Schamus, Ted Hope and Bob Colesberry; directed by Ang Lee; screenplay by James Schamus. 1999; color; 139 minutes. Universal Pictures.



**R**ide with the Devil, director Ang Lee's 1999 film, has received wide praise and critical acclaim (despite weak box-office returns). Critics have complimented Lee's provocative treatment of the lives of a handful of young people caught in the bloody Civil War struggles of the Missouri–Kansas border. *Ride with the Devil* is worthy of such praise, for there are many things to like about the film.

Lee captures the emotions of the many seasons of the border region: the fresh hopeful greens of early spring, the deep greens of summer, the haunting gray of late autumn, and the stark white of winter. Although some of the film's secondary characters have little depth, all the central figures—Jake Roedel, Daniel Holt, George Clyde, and Sue Lee—are complex and intriguing. The film's dialogue is realistic, and the Missouri accents are not overdone. Cos-

tumes and sets reflect laudable efforts to build a historically accurate film. Violence is realistically rendered, and the film reflects a post-Vietnam understanding of the senselessness and bloodiness of guerrilla warfare. Readers of *Kansas History* are likely to recall John C. Tibbetts's detailed analysis and appreciation of the film's treatment of William C. Quantrill's raid on Lawrence, Kansas, in 1863, in the context of a long history of films that were more careless in their treatment of the past.<sup>9</sup>

In the end, the film is less about the American Civil War and more an engaging and entertaining tale of young men and women struggling to find their places along the western fringe of nineteenth-century American society. Lee's exploration of the theme of America's lurch toward modernity and the forces that transformation exerted on the lives of people caught up in the process constitutes perhaps the film's most significant contribution. This dimension of the film reflects a continuation of the director's efforts to understand the American character (an exploration that also includes such earlier Lee films as *Ice Storm* [1997] and even *Wedding Banquet* [1993]). Such an approach also allows the incidents in the Border War to be viewed as part of an international process of consolidating nations and reorganizing systems of labor.

Jake Roedel, son of a poor German immigrant raised in Missouri, and Daniel Holt, a former slave riding in a pro-Southern gang, wrestle within a backdrop of war and violence to free themselves from the restraining bonds of their birth. Both long to be a part of a society in which one is defined by action, deed, and honor among friends rather than by birth or station. While Jake loves his father and is saddened by his death at the hands of the Union forces among whom he had taken refuge, Jake rejects his father's way of life and his pro-Union sympathies. Jake does not see his future as a farmer; rather he dreams of sailing off to explore exotic ports-of-call.

Holt's rejection of his station is more obvious. Slave society defined Holt as unfree and unequal because of the

9. Tibbetts, "Riding with the Devil."

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color of his skin and defined him as a being most useful behind a plow. While loyal to his white friends, Holt is bitterly aware of the consequences of slavery, which include his forced separation from his mother, who had been sold to a new master in Texas.

As Jake and Holt encounter and participate in a series of increasingly violent acts of guerrilla warfare, they become aware that they can never return to the lives they led before the war. The crucible of war has transformed both young men and destroyed the places and people they left behind. As their reading aloud of captured Union letters reveals, while the ragtag rebels recognized that they could not go home again, they remained transfixed by news of the common elements of farm and family life—good dirt and planting, gossip, and pretty young women—even when this news concerned the presumptive enemy. In much the same way, America of the late nineteenth century remained nostalgic for simpler times, even if that theme of being unable to return home again was a persistent one in the culture.

As *Ride with the Devil* correctly shows, the American Civil War was a transforming force. Lee's film dramatically portrays both its destructive and creative effects. An opportunity was missed, however, in the film's failure to revisit the target of Quantrill's raid. On the one hand, Lawrence was on the receiving end of one of the most atrocious acts of the Civil War. On the other hand, during the war, Lawrence's population boomed, citizens prospered, a free African American community was established, and an economic future began to emerge. The experiences of Jake, Holt, and Lawrence mirror the paradoxical consequences of the war for the nation as a whole, with the demolition of past forms of life and the invention of new ones existing side by side. Lee's film provides an engaging way for audiences to consider the consequences of the American Civil War and the forces at work in the lives of nineteenth-century Americans. Such contributions deserve high praise.

*Bruce Mactavish*  
Washburn University

**JOHN BROWN'S HOLY WAR.** Produced and directed by Robert Kenner. 2000; black-and-white and color; 90 minutes. The American Experience, PBS.

Robert Kenner's production *John Brown's Holy War* reincarnates the eastern martyrdom propaganda in which Brown figures as the archetype of the martyr for the antislavery cause, espoused by James Redpath in such works as *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown* (1860). What Redpath accomplished in the mid-nineteenth century in written words, Kenner has revived for our times, employing a combination of photographic images, theatrical reenactment, and "talking-head" experts to reinforce his argument.

Kenner advances the thesis that John Brown was the "father of American terrorism" and, as such, a catalyst for the mid-twentieth-century civil rights movement. Kenner traces the path Brown took from an initially nonviolent movement to his embrace of violence as the means to his

end. The essence of the production's historical discussion is the contention that Brown either must have been a madman or martyr, a murderer or a hero, but this dichotomistic interpretation distorts Brown's true and legitimate position in American history.

Kenner provides an admirable profile of Brown's early life, illuminating the religious, social, and economic trials that influenced his subsequent behavior. The production relates descriptive information, sustained by historical discussions, pertaining to Brown and his family's daily existence in the Western Reserve.

*John Brown's Holy War* is, for all its flaws, a visually rich treatment of historical events. Kenner interweaves color and black-and-white photographs to supplement the narration and interviews. He further brings the Brown story

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to life by employing reenactors as a means to underline the significance of the most important events.

Brown's justifications for his behavior, the documentary suggests, were rooted in the Calvinist religious beliefs in which he was raised. In Calvinist theology, a person is always answerable to God, and daily existence is thus a trial. The historians interviewed fortified Brown's self-justifications with their own observations from his religious and political biography: that Owen Brown—John's father—hated slavery; that young Brown at age twelve had observed a slave whipped; that he questioned his belief in the Lord's justice after his mother's death; that he considered the Fugitive Slave Act (1850) undemocratic; and that he considered himself a messenger of God.

Although these incidents are significant in Brown's life, two violent national events provided the crisis that prompted his subsequent unlawful and murderous behavior: the killing of abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy (1837) and the caning of Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner (1856). While attending Lovejoy's funeral, Brown publicly pledged: "Here before God, in the presence of these witnesses, I consecrate my life to the destruction of slavery." Shortly after receiving news of Sumner's caning, Brown, in imitation of Jesus Christ's wandering in the wilderness, traveled into the Kansas woods and contemplated his course of retribution. Brown's retaliation was the blood-thirsty massacres at Pottawatomie Creek. Kenner's portrayal of the massacres provides the occasion for the most lengthy discussion (approximately fifteen minutes) of Brown's activities in Kansas Territory.

Kenner mentions that Brown had been, while residing in Hudson, Ohio, a stationmaster on the "underground railroad." Unfortunately, this is the production's only reference to Brown's association with the movement. Western historians know that the underground railroad remained a primary concern and focus for action for Brown when he came to the West. His association with such notable western abolitionist figures as James Montgomery, Augustus and John Wattles, John Ritchie, Dr. Ira Blanchard, Josiah Grinnell, Allen Mayhew, Martin Stowell, James Lane, and Reverend John Todd, and Brown's assistance to escaping

persons of color in the West, are omitted from the documentary. Kenner also ignores Brown's murderous raid into Missouri in December 1858 to steal slave property, as well as numerous other sojourns outside the state.

Kenner and the historians he interviews disregard the all important issue that Brown's activities—for example, in violating the Denver–Montgomery treaty—invited federal and local retribution, a possibility that worried Kansas freestaters, free-soilers, and integrationists. Furthermore, the historians sidestep a discussion of Brown's rejection of the innovative strategy James Montgomery and others had come to embrace: integrating persons of color into local Kansas communities. By the time Brown finally departed from Kansas, his foundation of local territorial support for continued guerrilla warfare had eroded. As Brown had done all through his life when he found himself not in total command, he fled.

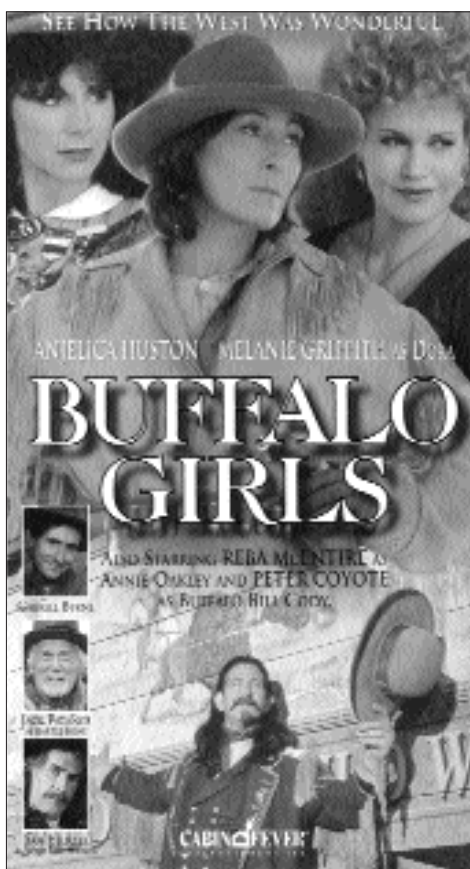
Kenner bases his "father of American terrorism" label primarily on Brown's raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in 1859, a singularly disastrous failure (although a vein of discussion asserts that the raid in fact succeeded, predicated on Brown's overarching aim of ensuring his own martyrdom). The terrorist label would be stronger and better supported historically if it were associated with Brown's western activities. Kenner's production location credits do not include one western site, and he mentions archival material from only three western locations (the Kansas State Historical Society, the Kansas Collection at the University of Kansas Libraries, and the Missouri Historical Society).

The documentary also features no expert discussions from western historians. The most regularly featured authority on western matters is Russell Banks, author of *Cloudsplitter* (New York: HarperFlamingo, 1998), a novel about Brown's life and times as told by his son Owen. Unfortunately, Kenner's eastern bias denies viewers a true and complete history of John Brown.

*Timothy C. Westcott*  
Park University

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**BUFFALO GIRLS.** Produced by Sandra Saxon Brice and Suzanne Coston; directed by Rod Hardy; teleplay by Cynthia Whitcomb, based on a novel by Larry McMurtry. 1995; color; 180 minutes. CBS Entertainment Productions; distributed by Astra Cinema.



**B**uffalo Girls, a made-for-television miniseries later released on video, is the story of Wild West legend Martha “Calamity Jane” Cannary, based on Larry McMurtry’s book by the same name. The film is an even more delightful romp than the book: the teleplay, which incorporates the best of the novel, focuses on themes of change and friendship. But, says this historian, playing the role of the curmudgeon, while both film and book satisfactorily cover grand themes, both also take great liberty with the details of history. Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist McMurtry, also author of the book on which the *Lonesome Dove* miniseries (directed by Simon Wincer, 1989) was based, told the *New York Times Book Review* that he did no research

for *Buffalo Girls*.<sup>10</sup> After all, everyone knows about Calamity Jane. Most of what we know about her, however, comes from her own telling of her exploits to reporters, who went on to exaggerate her no-doubt already exaggerated adventures in newspapers and dime novels. Had McMurtry been writing in the late 1800s, his work probably would have been serialized in Beadle’s Half Dime Library, as was Edward L. Wheeler’s *Deadwood Dick on Deck; or Calamity Jane, The Heroine of Whoop-Up* (1885). Dime novels could be counted on to provide the reader with exciting stories of trappers, cowboys, prostitutes, and Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show in the exotic Wild West.

McMurtry, like the dime novelists of a century before, stirs fictional encounters into real historic events to create the West as we want it to have been. Both book and film shape legend rather than explicate history. For instance, in *Buffalo Girls*, Calamity Jane (real person) and No Ears (McMurtry’s creation) ride up to see George Armstrong Custer’s defeat at Little Big Horn. Sitting Bull (real person) then heads his horse toward them, taking aim at Calamity. He is foiled by No Ears, who steps between the two. Amazingly, storyteller Calamity Jane never claimed to have witnessed Custer’s demise, and Sitting Bull, a spiritual leader rather than a warrior, was in camp making spirit medicine during the battle.

“So what?” we may ask. “After all, you can hardly talk about the passing of the West without giving Custer a little stage time, and, since Jane is our narrator, it works best if she was there.” Putting Jane where she was not is a minor infraction. Blurring the distinction between a warrior and a medicine man, however, tells an untruth not just about one person, but a whole people. Making light of history on film is especially cruel because visual images are powerful creators of memory. If that memory is distorted, then our understanding of each other and of how we came to be who we are also is distorted. In the experience of this reviewer, most people do not have enough knowledge of historical fact to be able to understand McMurtry’s work

10. *New York Times Book Review*, October 7, 1990, 3.

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as legend-making. They expect, instead, for McMurtry to deliver an interesting lesson in history.

Calamity Jane has been treated on film before, at least twenty-five times. Best known is *Calamity Jane* (directed by David Butler, 1953), the Academy Award-winning musical starring Doris Day, with Howard Keel as Wild Bill. Even though Day crooned about her secret love and the real Calamity Jane was said to have “brayed like a mule,” it is a fun work. Historically speaking, the made-for-television biography *Calamity Jane* (directed by James Goldstone, 1984), with Jane Alexander in the title role, is far more satisfying than either McMurtry’s version or the Doris Day vehicle. Ellen Barkin also provides a realistic portrayal of Calamity Jane, to Jeff Bridges’s Wild Bill Hickok, in *Wild Bill* (directed by Walter Hill, 1995).

In spite of my plea for greater realism and historical accuracy, I will say that, while Anjelica Huston does not at all resemble short, homely Calamity Jane, I enjoyed her energetic interpretation in this film. And Gabriel Byrne as Teddy Blue makes a credible cowboy/lover and foil for

Jane. It is refreshing to have a Sioux (Sitting Bull) actually played by a Sioux (Russell Means). “Businesswoman” Dora DuFron is played delightfully by Melanie Griffith. Floyd Red Crow Westerman pulls off the stereotypical omniscient Indian No Ears, and Jack Palance and Tracy Walter respectively and very believably play trappers Bartle Bone and Jim Ragg. I enjoyed Reba McIntire, although she remained for me Reba McIntire, not Annie Oakley; I kept waiting for her to sing. Likewise, Sam Elliot is always Sam Elliot, no matter whom he is playing (in this case, Wild Bill Hickok). Elliot did a better job in the Louis L’Amour vehicle *Conagher* (directed by Reynaldo Villalobos, 1991). Peter Coyote did well as Buffalo Bill Cody.

McMurtry’s intention, and that of the filmmakers, was to tell a good story. And that they did well. Just don’t think of it as history.

*Joyce Thierer*

Emporia State University and Ride Into History

**BUFFALO SOLDIERS.** Produced by Gordon Wolf; directed by Charles Haid; screenplay by Susan Rhinehart and Frank Military, from a story by Frank Military and Jonathan Klein. 1997, color; 95 minutes. Distributed by Turner Pictures.

**A**lthough heroic warriors have long been subjects of the Hollywood western, no film has adequately told the remarkable tale of the “buffalo soldiers.” Organized in 1866 as the first peacetime regiments for African Americans, the Ninth and Tenth Cavalries of the U.S. Army were given their sobriquet by Cheyenne and Kiowa observers who noted the similarity between their hair and that of the sacred beasts. Until the early 1890s black servicemen constituted 20 percent of all cavalry forces in the American West. Nevertheless, they were not visible on the big screen during the heyday of the western genre, not even in director John Ford’s famous cavalry trilogy.

Produced as a film for television, *Buffalo Soldiers* depicts a conventional story about a Tenth Cavalry campaign to

suppress an Indian uprising in 1880. What is refreshing in this story, then, is not the plot but the active roles played by African Americans. Sergeant Washington Wyatt, admirably played by actor and executive producer Danny Glover, reflects the true grit and the stoic determination commonly featured in celluloid mirrors. Although based in part upon actual events and persons, most of the characterizations and incidents are fictitious. The real Wyatt, for instance, served in the Ninth Cavalry, but he tragically died in Austin, Texas, at the hands of persons unknown before he reached his twenty-first birthday.

In addition to Glover, a talented cohort of actors makes the story of the buffalo soldiers come alive. Bob Gunton plays Colonel Benjamin Grierson, the regiment



commander and a veteran of the Civil War. Victorio, an Apache sachem, is played by Harrison Lowe, while Nana, an Apache shaman, is portrayed by Chesley Wilson. Contributing to the combat scenes were cavalry reenactors who powerfully recreate a thousand-mile chase that constituted a masterpiece of guerrilla warfare. The film's director, Charles Haid, previously received a Director's Guild award for his work on the popular television series *ER*. Haid made his feature film directing debut with *Iron Will* (1994), but he also produced the critically acclaimed film *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1995), an adaptation of Zane Grey's classic novel. Striving for authenticity, the director shot on location in Benson, Arizona, an hour outside of Tucson.

After a startling opening montage filled with dancing, scalping, and mayhem, the film illuminates the fatal environment of the New Mexico territory, or Apacheria. Fort Craig, an actual post located along the Rio Grande, is the point of departure for the Tenth Cavalry. The soldiers march through waterholes, canyons, and sagebrush dur-

ing their campaign to stop the uprising. The end comes with a dawn stand-off at Rattlesnake Springs between Victorio and Wyatt. Wyatt, who early in the film rescued a young Apache boy from certain death at the hands of Texas Rangers, prepares to destroy the spirited resistance by ordering H Troop to fire upon Victorio's band of women and children. At that moment, the rescued Apache boy steps forward, reminding the buffalo soldier of his peacekeeping mission. He releases the Apache band, who then escape across the border to Mexico. Symbolically, the soldiers return from the campaign as a band plays "The Battle Cry of Freedom." In his final report to his superiors at Fort Craig, Wyatt covers up his decision to spare the enemy. Although enlisted men are required to salute their officers, the scene closes with the men saluting Wyatt, who was not an officer, as a gesture of respect for his leadership.

Inexplicably, the film deviates in a number of ways from the known facts of the Apache wars. Prior to the Rattlesnake Springs incident, Colonel Grierson was not wounded in an attack. In fact, he continued on the march with H Troop and eventually drove Victorio out of his homeland. Moreover, Victorio never called upon black servicemen to reconsider their alliance with white officers. Wyatt and the buffalo soldiers expressed no solidarity with the Apache, nor did they allow the band to escape from their grasp. Indeed, Nana was captured by the cavalry but not until several weeks after Victorio was killed by Mexican forces across the border.

With the exception of Colonel Grierson, the white officers depicted in the telefilm disrespect the black servicemen and appear driven to nihilism. Even if some resented assignments with "colored" regiments, the record of correspondence indicates that they frequently defended their troops from unfair criticism and insisted upon impartial treatment for them. Although the filmmakers created John Horse, a half-black, half-Seminole scout who questions Wyatt's loyalty to the white officers, the absence of local Indian scouts guiding the U.S. Army is implausible. Perhaps a more reliable guide for the buffalo soldiers would have been rendered by the filmmakers had they drawn upon Thomas Dunlay's *Wolves for the Blue Soldiers: Indian Scouts and Auxiliary* (1982).

Without a doubt, the Ninth and Tenth Cavalries embodied the sable arm of imperialism in the American West. They fought against Crazy Horse and occupied Wounded

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Knee, and they helped capture the Apache renegade Geronimo as well as the Lincoln County outlaw Billy the Kid. In addition to peacekeeping missions, they explored and mapped vast territories and strung thousands of miles of telegraph lines. According to historian William Leckie's *Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of the Negro Cavalry in the West* (1967), African American soldiers displayed courage, skill,

endurance, and resilience through it all. Few regiments of the U.S. Army have matched the record of service evidenced by the buffalo soldiers. This film at least begins to tell their remarkable tale.

Brad D. Lookingbill  
Columbia College

**WILD BILL.** Produced by Gary Daigler, Lili Fini Zanuck, and Richard D. Zanuck; directed by Walter Hill; screenplay by Peter Dexter, Thomas Babe, and Walter Hill. 1995, color; 98 minutes. Distributed by MGM-UA.

**T**ime: America's centennial summer, 1876.  
Place: The cemetery at Deadwood, South Dakota, a rough-and-tumble gold-mining boomtown.

Several sturdy men unload a coffin from a horse-drawn hearse. It contains the body of James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickok, legendary Union scout, frontier lawman, and gunfighter, shot in the back of the head by Jack McCall as he sat at a poker table in No. 10 Saloon while clutching the aces and eights of the "deadman's hand." To the mournful strains of "Leaning on Jesus," Wild Bill embarks on his final journey.

Expatriate Brit and fictional Hickok companion Charley Prince (John Hurt), watching the funeral, shrewdly observes that there is a "rough justice to it, the way he met his end, after sending so many others to an early grave." A historically unrecognizable Calamity Jane (Ellen Barkin) stands next to Charley at graveside, and together they provide *Wild Bill* with a kind of high-plains Greek chorus.

This film, told through flashbacks and fast-forwards, is about Wild Bill Hickok as western legend in the unmaking. Suffering from glaucoma (doomed to blindness, does Wild Bill, finally, perhaps see things a little too clearly?), haunted by memories of the men he killed, plagued by recollections of a woman he loved, drinking too much, inhaling

the dreamy smoke of opium from "Chinese pipes," Wild Bill is clearly headed for the last big gunfight in the sky. A darkly dawning self-awareness debilitates Hickok, propelling him into self-destructive ways, the clutches of an obvious death wish, and the slinking, slithery presence of young Jack McCall who, as played by David Arquette, makes Lee Harvey Oswald look like a model citizen.

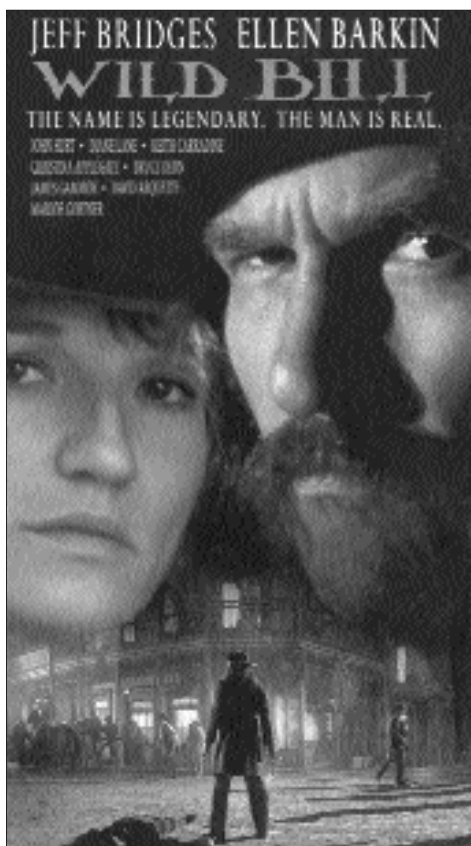
Most of this film's better lines go to Hurt's Charley Prince, and he chews on them as expertly as he might consume scenery on a London stage: "Being Wild Bill was a profession in its own right"; Jack McCall "lacked both a hero's calm and a coward's resolve to survive at any price." And, when Hickok and Charley arrive in Deadwood:

Charley: "This town, I really think, is like something out of the Bible."

Wild Bill: "What part of the Bible?"

Charley: "The part right before God gets angry."

The scenes in the tumultuous Kansas cowtowns of Abilene and Hays are well done, and the oldtime West's grittiness permeates the film. The acting is generally good, with most parts taking on the aura of meaty character roles. Jeff Bridges's interpretation of Hickok is memorable, certainly much closer to the original than any other yet seen on the screen. Hurt as Charley Prince strikes the prop-



er balance between drifting off to the unseen background and crashing into the foreground. He is joined by the customarily grizzled performance of James Gammon as California Joe. Barkin as Calamity Jane overcomes her over-the-top entry, finishing up as an endearing but tragic figure (although one half expects to see a bottle of California Chardonnay perched precariously on the rim of what appears to be the hot tub in which she and Wild Bill bathe while discussing their relationship and life in general in decidedly modern terms).

The more I see *Wild Bill*, the more I like its texture. Still, a disjointed quality plagues this film, and it is hard not to wonder which bridging scenes got left on the cutting room floor. Perhaps too many cooks worked on the brew. The screenplay, written by director Walter Hill, Peter Dexter, and Thomas Babe—based partly on Dexter’s novel *Deadwood* and Babe’s play *Fathers and Sons*—is amazingly uneven. It drifts perilously close to self-parody, taking itself way too seriously, with a heavy-handed irony and weighty symbolism reminiscent of a Monty Python send-up of Ingmar Bergman.

As a historian, I have just about given up asking how historically accurate any film is.<sup>11</sup> Films about historic subjects tend not to be about the people, places, events, and concerns of the past at all. Instead, they are usually about the people, places, events, and concerns of the present conveyed through the vehicle of a perceived past. Although *Wild Bill* frequently is faithful to the historical realities of Hickok’s life, insofar as we know them, that is not the same as saying it is a historically accurate film. It is as historically accurate and historically inaccurate as *The Long Riders* (1980) and *Geronimo: An American Legend* (1993), director Walter Hill’s previous forays into the western genre. That said, *Wild Bill* is one of those films that many viewers will find grows on them. Kind of like a legend of the Old West.

*Ron McCoy*  
Emporia State University

11. For historical reality about the central character, see Joseph G. Rosa, *Wild Bill Hickok: The Man and His Myth* (Lawrence : University Press of Kansas, 1996).

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*SHANGHAI NOON*. Directed by Tom Dey; screenplay by Miles Millar and Alfred Gough; produced by Gary Barber, Roger Birnbaum, and Jonathan Glickman. 2000; color; 110 minutes. Distributed by Buena Vista Pictures.

*RAVENOUS*. Directed by Antonia Bird; screenplay by Ted Griffin; produced by Adam Fields and David Heyman. 1998; color; 99 minutes. Distributed by Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation and First National Exhibitors' Circuit, Inc.

*THE CLAIM*. Directed by Michael Winterbottom; screenplay by Frank Cottrell Boyce, based on the novel by Thomas Hardy; produced by Andrew Eaton. 2000; color; 120 minutes. Distributed by United Artists.

*THE NEWTON BOYS*. Directed by Richard Linklater; screenplay by Richard Linklater, Claude Stanush, and Clark Walker, based on the novel by Claude Stanush; produced by Anne Walker-McBay. 1998; color; 113 minutes. Distributed by Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

*THE HI-LO COUNTRY*. Directed by Stephen Frears; screenplay by Walon Green, based on the novel by Max Evans; produced by Tim Bevan, Barbara De Fina, Eric Fellner, and Martin Scorsese. 1998; color; 114 minutes. Distributed by Gramercy Pictures.

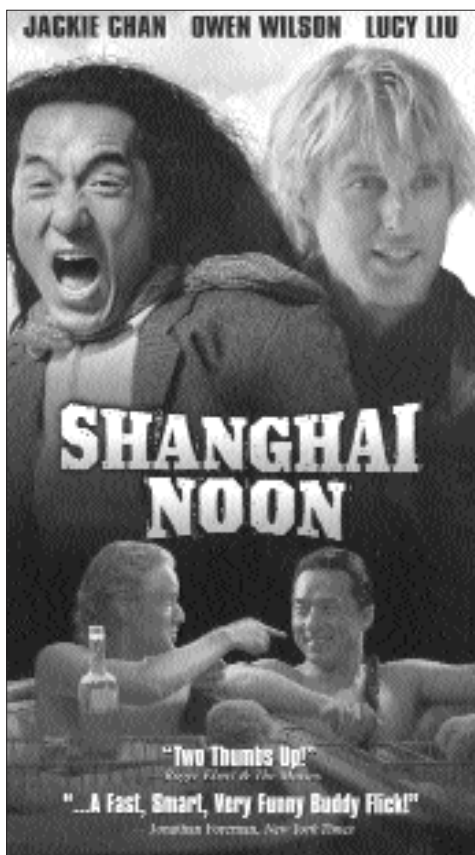
The western, despite sporadic reports of its death, continues to be a highly malleable form of entertainment that reflects ongoing shifts in contemporary societal and cultural concerns. A spate of recent films, including Tom Dey's *Shanghai Noon* (2000), Antonia Bird's *Ravenous* (1999), Michael Winterbottom's *The Claim* (2000), Richard Linklater's *The Newton Boys* (1998), and Stephen Frears's *The Hi-Lo Country* (1998), has repositioned accepted genre character types and interrogated hitherto conventional historical, ethnic, gender, and structural considerations.

*Shanghai Noon*, for example, concocts a multicultural mix of genre and ethnic types. Jackie Chan stars as Chon Wang and Owen Wilson as Roy O'Bannon in this blend of Asian martial arts and American frontier gunplay. Tossed like jackstraws onto the playing fields of the desert Southwest are a handful of Chinese imperial guardsman, a fugitive princess, several gun-totin' western cowpokes, and a tribe of Indians.

The action begins in 1881 in China's Forbidden City. When beautiful Princess Pei Pei (Lucy Liu) refuses to marry her groom-designate, she flees the country for America, where she is taken hostage. In response to a ransom note from her kidnappers in Carson City, Nevada, Chon Wang and three imperial guardsmen are dispatched to deliver the gold and fetch her back. Along the way, Chon is separated from his comrades and enjoys a dalliance with an Indian princess. Later, he teams up with a bank robber,

Roy O'Bannon, and the two unlikely comrades arrive in Carson City, where the princess has been impressed into the ranks of Chinese laborers building a railroad. Before Chon and Roy can extricate Pei Pei from the villainous railroad boss (also Chinese), they have to face down the town marshal and the remnants of Roy's former gang. Unexpectedly, the tribe of Indians whose princess Wang had charmed, comes to the rescue. After a terrific fight atop a bell tower, our unlikely heroes are victorious, and the princess decides to stay in America, declaring: "This is not the East, this is the West. The sun rises in the East, but it sets here in the West." The princess thus declares both her freedom from tradition and her determination to improve the lot of her countrymen. The boys, meanwhile, don sheriff's badges and chase bank robbers.

Jackie Chan's martial arts wizardry and nimble acrobatics apparently must now be counted among those accomplishments that "won the West." He escapes from a runaway train, outdoes the Indians with their own weapons (he ties a tomahawk to a rope and twirls it about with lethal effect), and defies gravity as he scrambles about the bell tower. The best gag in the film comes during the Indian sequence. Assuming they cannot understand him, he declaims his speech in a laborious manner. One Indian turns to his friend and mocks (in subtitle), "He thinks I can understand him if he speaks slower!" As the amiable sidekick, Owen Wilson has quite a surprise in store for us. Not



only is he in the habit of interrupting the action to philosophize about the poetry of the western landscape and meditate upon his own invincibility, he also discourses on the propriety of western names. For example, he mocks the name of his partner, Chon Wang ("John Wayne"), as unsuitable for a western hero; it is only at the very last minute, however, that he reveals his own name, Wyatt Earp.

By contrast to *Shanghai Noon's* generally light-hearted, slapstick celebration of the melting pot of the American West, *Ravenous* and *The Claim* deliver scathing indictments of the American ideal of Manifest Destiny. The particular agenda of *Ravenous* blends western settings, characters, and situations with more than a soupçon of Grand Guignol horror (*Hannibal* has nothing on it). The time is 1847. After barely surviving a massacre of his troops in the Mexican War, a cavalry officer named Boyd (Guy Pearce) is assigned to a remote garrison in the Sierra Nevadas to recuperate. His new post is a bleak, squalid place, lost in the snows, populated by only a handful of soldiers and two Indians. One day, near the end of the winter season, a stranger stag-

gers into the area, half dead from weeks of exposure. His name is Calhoun (Robert Carlyle), and he tells a terrible tale of cannibalism among the survivors of his foundered wagon train. He leads Boyd and a detachment of soldiers back to look for other survivors. Suddenly, Calhoun turns on his companions and eats them. Boyd escapes after shooting Calhoun at point-blank range.

Back at the post nobody believes Boyd's story. Imagine his consternation when, a few days later, Calhoun reappears at the post, very much alive, but now in the guise of the new commanding officer, Colonel Ives. As time goes by, the members of the garrison are killed, one by one, their bodies eviscerated and partially consumed. Boyd realizes that Calhoun/Ives is a "wendigo," a legendary creature that, like the vampire, has acquired invulnerability by feeding on human victims. Driven by an incessant hunger, he must continue to kill to survive. To his horror, Boyd realizes that he, too, may be turning into a wendigo. Was not he, also, driven to consume the flesh of his dead partner during the weeks he hid out from Calhoun? He must now fight the growing appetite for flesh that he feels stirring within him.

Finally, the garrison depleted, only Boyd and the cannibal are left alive. As Calhoun/Ives prepares a human stew in the kitchen, he delivers an ultimatum: either Boyd can eat human flesh and live on, like him, or he can refuse and die of his wounds. Heroically, Boyd resists. During a terrific battle they kill each other. In the film's epilogue a rescue party arrives at the fort. Amidst the carnage they find the stew. Hungrily, they sample the fare.

A weird, almost buoyant tone dominates these grisly proceedings. Robert Carlyle is sleek, dapper, and very creepy as the wendigo, and he delights in mocking Benjamin Franklin's maxim with his own variation: "You don't eat to live, you *live to eat*." He is smugly pleased with the prospect of holing up in the fort and waiting for the next wave of emigrants, trappers, and prospectors coming across the mountains. In effect, he is an apt metaphor for Manifest Destiny's drive for power and identity, a drive that becomes so consuming it destroys everything that stands in its way.

*The Claim* turns a jaundiced eye on the conventional celebratory agendas of patriotic railroad epics such as John Ford's *The Iron Horse* (1924) and Cecil B. DeMille's *Union Pacific* (1939). Transferring the characters and situations of Thomas Hardy's novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) to the Sierra Nevadas in the year 1867, it reveals the disas-

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trous consequences of the relentless push to gird the nation's boundaries by rail. To the mining settlement of Kingdom Come arrives a railroad survey crew led by an engineer named Dalglish (Wes Bentley). If the Central Pacific Railroad, running eastward from California, decides to take this route on the way to joining up with the Union Pacific Railroad coming westward, the town of Kingdom Come will flourish. If not, it may wither and die. Presiding over Kingdom Come is Dillon (Peter Mullan), the town's founder and its moral and legal authority, understandably anxious to court and flatter Dalglish.

Meanwhile, there are other arrivals: two strangers, a mother and her teenaged daughter, Helene and Hope. Their coming triggers a series of brief flashbacks that reveal Dillon and Helene's shared secret: years before, Helene, her new baby Hope, and her husband, Dillon, had sought shelter in a stranger's crude hut. Their host had offered to barter his gold claim for Helene. Because she and the baby had become an unwelcome burden, Dillon agreed to the exchange. Helene and Hope had disappeared; meanwhile, Dillon's claim had prospered, developing into the town of Kingdom Come.

Now, Helene has come back to Kingdom Come to die, having never divulged to her now-grown daughter that Dillon is her father. Dillon decides to marry Helene, even if in the process he has to abandon his longtime mistress (giving her the claim to his land down in the valley). Dalglish, meanwhile, realizes that the topography will force the railroad to bypass Kingdom Come, and he selects an alternate route across the valley. Most of the town decides to follow Dalglish and relocate in the valley, settling on the land now owned by Dillon's ex-mistress. Left behind, bereaved at Helene's death, and rejected by Hope (to whom he at last revealed himself), Dillon is a lonely figure stalking through an empty town. He sets the place ablaze and wanders out into the snowy wastes to freeze to death. The story ends as the new town of Lisboa springs up, literally overnight.

*The Claim* is an ambitious, large-scale chronicle of the sacrifices and betrayals that forged a nation. Individual human endeavors—Dillon's moral struggle and longing for redemption, Dalglish's turmoil over the choice of railway routes, Hope's search for a father, laying rails across the valley, tearing down one town and raising up another—must contend against the implacable forces of the vast, forbidding backdrop of snows, mountain passes, and deep

valleys, not to mention the inexorable economic forces that relentlessly push the railroad westward.

Richard Linklater's *The Newton Boys* (1998) and Stephen Frears' *The Hi-Lo Country* more modestly target their subject matter. Each appears at first glance to be a conventional take on outlawry and cattle ranching, redolent, respectively, of such earlier western classics as Walter Hill's *The Long Riders* (1980) and Elia Kazan's *Sea of Grass* (1947). Each contains a twist at the end, however, that bespeaks a postmodernist sensibility.

*The Newton Boys* chronicles the real-life adventures of the bank-robbing Newton gang as they tear across Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin in the years after World War I. The gang's leader is Willis Newton (Matthew McConaughey), just released from prison. No masks or fancy strategies for this gang: they just march into the bank at night, blow out the safe, and hightail it out of there. Their success tempts Willis to go straight, and he promises his girlfriend, Louise (Julianna Margulies), that he will give up the gang and go into the oil business. But, after several business failures, he returns to type and plans a "last hurrah" with the gang.

With the assistance of a crooked postal inspector, the gang plans to rob millions from a mail train. Although they get away with the swag, a series of misadventures, including the accidental shooting of one of the brothers by one of his own men, brings them down. The G-Men close in and apprehend the gang. After unsuccessful attempts to beat confessions out of the men, they cut a deal with Willis. In exchange for revealing the whereabouts of the hidden money, most of the blame will be thrust upon the hapless postal worker, and the Newtons will have to serve only a relatively short stretch in prison. Two of the brothers live on to a healthy old age.

It is not until after the expected scenes of robberies, roistering, and imprisonment that *The Newton Boys* takes an unexpected turn. In a deliriously postmodern confrontation between romance and reality, actual newsreel footage depicts the real Newton brothers, Willis and Joe, now old men, as they step out of history and legend to make an appearance on the *Johnny Carson Show*. With deadpan modesty, they recount their past crimes. Yesterday's glamorous "good bad men" have become today's quaint old gentlemen. Their exploits, no longer the stuff of legend, are at last a subject for a television talk show. No longer the quicksilver images of imagination, they are now

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mere commodities of media exploitation. The West indeed has been sliced and diced for boob-tube consumption.

*The Hi-Lo Country* (1998) is based on the novel of the same title by Max Evans (1961). Although set in the Southwest in the 1940s, it looks and feels like a tale of the Old West. The title refers to the Hi-Lo country of New Mexico, where a young cattle rancher, Pete (Billy Crudup), and his buddy, Big Boy (Woody Harrelson), revel in their youthful, roistering, cowboy ways, whooping it up on the range and in the bars. With the outbreak of World War II, both join the military (where, it is implied, they whoop it up some more). At war's end, they return to Hi-Lo country to resume their cowboy ways.

But things quickly grow more complicated. The territory is now dominated by cowboy tycoon Jim-Ed (Sam Elliott), who sat out the war and either has been buying up the smaller ranches of owners willing to sell or muscling in on those reluctant to cooperate. Pete and Big Boy resist Jim-Ed's blandishments to join him, and they sign on instead with a grizzled but honest old cowpoke, Hoover (James Gammon). Meanwhile, as professional rivalries simmer, romantic ones are brewing. Big Boy carries on an intense affair with Mona (Patricia Arquette), who just happens to be married to Jim-Ed's foreman. Worse, Pete also has been carrying the torch for her for some time, and the flame still blazes away. One night, Pete loses control and makes violent love to Mona. Later, he becomes concerned that Big Boy will come after him. Instead, Big Boy is killed, not by his rival in love, but by his younger brother (aptly

named Little Boy), who has been working for Jim-Ed. The incident capped a front-yard squabble between the brothers over the kid's laziness around the house and his failure to do necessary repair work. Despite the attempts by their mother to conceal Little Boy's guilt, Pete learns the truth and determines to wreak vengeance on him.

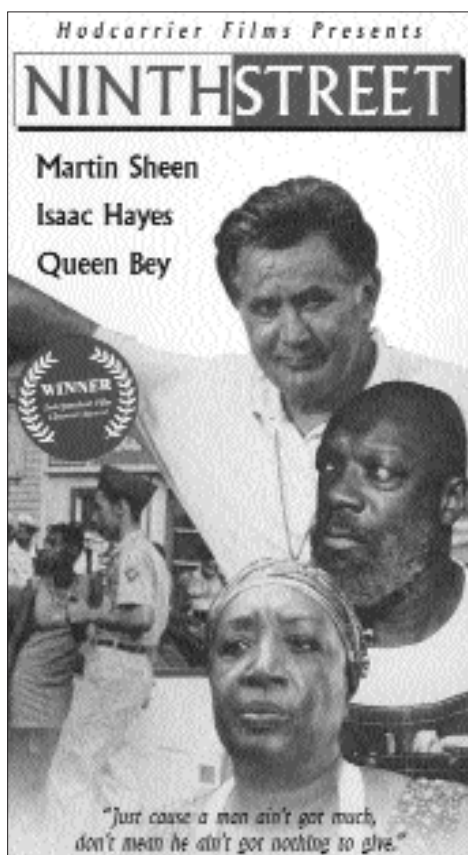
So far, *Hi-Lo Country* has the requisite ten-gallon hats, blazing six-guns, card games, and saloon standoffs. We know without equivocation that Big Boy is the rambunctious, big-hearted fellow and that Jim-Ed is the cold, slimy, bad guy with a wintry smile that could shut down Granny's hearth fire. There is the Wanton Woman and the Faithful Sweetheart, and the cowboys unerringly fall in love with the wrong one. Our expectations of a climactic shootout, however, are denied. At first, a showdown between Pete and Big Boy over Mona's affections seemed likely. With Big Boy's death, our expectations shift to a confrontation with Little Boy.

But no: in a denouement that must have sent western fans howling out of the theatres, Pete reconsiders his vow. Rather than tearing after Little Boy, he shrugs his shoulders, sells his ranch, and departs. The most hallowed element in all of western generic formulation, the shootout, has been rudely ignored and set aside. Compassion, not vengeance, now rules the range. At least Pete chooses the right direction for his departure: into the sunset.

*John C. Tibbetts*  
University of Kansas

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*NINTH STREET*. Produced by Kevin Willmott and Rick Cowan; directed by Timothy Rebman and Kevin Willmott; written by Kevin Willmott. 1998, black and white; 95 minutes. Distributed by Ideal Enterprises, Inc.



**N***inth Street* is a film of historical transition set in Junction City, Kansas, circa 1969. A small business district in Junction City that caters to Fort Riley with its joints, clubs, and prostitute-crowded street corners, the neighborhood of Ninth Street is in danger of losing its identity as a locally owned, tradition-rich neighborhood. Beyond Ninth, the United States is experiencing assassinations, a moon launch, and an escalated involvement in Vietnam. Urban renewal threatens black neighborhoods. And the hip, money-loving 1970s—with its born-again Christianity, political passivity, and the tinny sound of disco—is ready to overwhelm a black community once brought together by soul: food, music, and religion.

*Ninth Street* is a told story. The filmscript began as a play by Lawrence writer Kevin Willmott, who wanted to capture the place where he grew up, the Ninth Street where his own parents met. Bebo (Don Washington), a wino who watches over Ninth Street from a ratty sidewalk couch with his companion Huddie (Kevin Willmott), has a compelling voice. At the film's beginning, he tells the history of this one-block, black-owned center of sin, this haven for the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry—the buffalo soldiers—who would have nowhere else to go. Historic photographs of Ninth show a community cemented by music, dance, food, and cards. Bebo, an admitted failure at nearly everything—marriage, work, sobriety—is disaffected because nothing changed for blacks after World War II. He sees the Vietnam War as yet another enslavement: "Soldiers and whores are the same. In it for the money. The pimp's the U.S. Government."

Bebo and Huddie may be winos, but they stretch us with their smart "trash talk": "Talking trash, talking shit. Keeps us from going mad." When someone asks them just what they are doing, Bebo says: "We're looking, is all. If God wanted everyone to live like us, we'd be the only successful ones." The moon landing foreshadows a lunar Siberia for blacks, says Bebo, but he makes a simple toast: "To the white man who wants to go to the moon. May he stay there." And Bebo and Huddie feel sorry for the white man, always watching all his stuff: "You'd think he'd want to blink." The two are full of life, as is Ninth Street itself. "Just living gives you meaning," Bebo says towards the end of the film, and "there was life on Ninth Street."

There are also all the conflicts of life. In a religious subplot, Father Frank (Martin Sheen) is in trouble with his white parishioners for bringing his faith to the inhabitants of Ninth. He, too, is against the Vietnam War, and he believes in a nonviolent Jesus who befriended sinners. Another religious man, born-again black preacher Johnny, advocates change. As Ninth Street changes, he says, simply: "The street is going to die. The wages of sin is death. Let it die."

But the street is life for its oldest denizens. Matriarch among them is Mama Butler (Queen Bey), whose joint is full of music, food, love, and storytelling. She looks after a young prostitute, Carrie Mae (Nadine Griffith), who has a

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baby and has become involved in the power-hungry, thug-muscled gangster life of pimp Donnie Love (Byron Myrick). Love believes in nothing but “toughness.” Mama is pushing Carrie Mae away from “the life” and Love, since both offer nothing but death. As Huddie tells pimp Love: “Boy, best find you something that doesn’t die.” In a climactic scene, Mama is gunned down by a soldier just returned from Vietnam who pulls a gun on an Asian woman, gibbers in Vietnamese, then shoots Mama when she tries to disarm him. As Bebo says earlier in the film: “They know how to send them over there, but couldn’t know what to do with them when they come back.”

Over the protests of Bebo, Huddie, and Tippytoe (Isaac Hayes)—the proprietor of a Ninth Street cab company—Love buys Mama Butler’s place and prepares to renovate it into a new kind of club. Carrie Mae has left “the life.” Father Frank has been transferred for being where Jesus would have been, among the sinners. “Pop-bottle” Ruby (Kaycee Moore) has been carted away to Topeka State Hospital for destroying a television set she’s taken from a business; her son disappeared in Vietnam, and she thinks she sees him on the television news. Just after Mama Butler’s death, Bebo and Huddie sit on their couch eating the last of her bread and drinking their wine. For their communion, they reminisce about the days when the blues was

king, when such music was “about possibility.” They remember Eighteenth and Vine in Kansas City and their own youths on Ninth, when they sported fine clothes and pomaded hair.

Their communion resurrects nothing but memory. Ninth Street will die, as does Huddie: on his couch, surrounded by a night of soldiers, drinkers, gamblers, and prostitutes. In a final voiceover, Bebo recounts his move to California, his drying out, his healthy life for twenty more years. Ninth Street has fallen victim to urban renewal. This once vital community, the center of so much life, has become a parking lot.

*Ninth Street* resonates with the transitions faced by many Kansas communities. Towns are being depopulated, losing their vitality, seeing their oldest and best citizens die, floundering for lack of tradition, reminiscing about the richness of life they once embodied. *Ninth Street* faces this contemporary Kansas theme squarely, with wit, wisdom, and real emotion. Written by a Kansan, and filmed here as well, *Ninth Street* is a solid addition to Kansas cultural studies.

*Tom Averill*  
Washburn University

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*HALF PAST AUTUMN: THE LIFE AND WORKS OF GORDON PARKS.* Produced by Denzel Washington and St. Clair Bourne; directed by Craig Rice; written by Lou Potter. 2000, color; 90 minutes. Distributed by HBO.

“I was born dead—actually pronounced dead by the family doctor,” Parks relates at the beginning of the film, but the doctor’s assistant revived the infant by submerging him in freezing water. So began the life of Gordon Parks, photographer, musician, filmmaker, writer, and poet, on November 30, 1912, in Fort Scott, Kansas. He was the first black photographer to work for *Life* magazine and the first black filmmaker to be hired by a Hollywood studio to direct a feature film. He began his life on the Kansas prairie, and Kansas remained an “indelible part of his consciousness.” As he recounts in this film and in the novel he based on his boyhood experiences, *The Learning Tree* (1963), he learned his first lessons about the beauty of nature and the violence of racism in his native Kansas.

*Half Past Autumn* is a welcome addition to our historical knowledge of the cultural contributions of Gordon Parks. The film was made as a companion piece to the retrospective exhibit of his photographs and other art organized by the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., in 1998 (which continues to travel around the country). As a homage to Parks, the film includes many of his photographs, excerpts from his films, samples of his music, examples of his paintings, and readings from his writings. The film shows him engaged in the production of each of these mediums as well, and it includes interviews with him, his wives, his children, and those who worked with him. The most rewarding aspect of viewing *Half Past Autumn* is the realization that Gordon Parks was an amazingly versatile artist, an American Renaissance man. Most previous material about him has focused on his photography or his filmmaking. In this documentary, we have a discussion of the full range of artistic accomplishments during his life from various viewpoints, both professional and personal.

He was born to a poor farm family in Fort Scott, Kansas, the last of fifteen children. Parks took a hard route from his Kansas home to the big city. He was fifteen when his mother died, whereupon he was sent to St. Paul, Minnesota, to live with a sister, engaged in a fight with his brother-in-law, and ended up out in the cold, literally on

the street. As a young black man in those days, his opportunities were limited. He worked as a busboy, played semi-professional basketball, and worked as a railroad porter. During this time, he met his first wife and they had a child, Gordon Parks Jr.

The film relies primarily on his own remembrances, as he recalls for us through interviews and readings from his autobiography the high and low points of his long life in the arts and on the journalistic frontlines of race and poverty. As he tells it, he discovered photography at the movies, watching a newsreel that inspired him to buy a camera at a pawnshop. He began his career in camera work with an interest in fashion photography; although there is no discussion of why he was interested specifically in fashion, the rest of the film attests to his extensive abilities in practically any genre of photography and filmmaking.

Parks secured a grant from the Rosenwald Fund that freed him from financial worries for several years, and he decided to spend that time in apprenticeship to the photography unit of the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Although he never actually worked for the FSA, as the film claims, he did make what became one of his most famous images during this period: a portrait of Ella Watson, the cleaning woman, holding a broom and a mop and standing in front of the American flag. This episode is indicative of one of the shortcomings of “homage” films. In focusing on the accomplishments of the film’s central figure, historical facts often play second fiddle to the “great man” narrative.

After his time with the FSA, Parks went to work for Standard Oil, then to *Vogue* magazine, shooting fashion, and finally to *Life* magazine. *Life* had no black photographers at the time, and they utilized him on stories to which white photographers could not gain access: Harlem poverty and gang crime, the civil-rights movement, Black Panthers, and the Nation of Islam. He was rewarded with a coveted assignment in Paris after only two years with the magazine.

In Paris, he also pursued writing music, and in the early 1950s a concerto he wrote premiered in Venice. *Half Past Autumn* shows us rehearsals of the concert and plays Parks’s music throughout the film to provide aural back-

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drops for his images. It was at this time that his first marriage broke up; he would marry twice more. His wives are interviewed as well as his children about the difficulties of life with a famous, world-traveling husband and father. He also frankly discusses the hardships of those years.

In the early 1960s he wrote *The Learning Tree*, and in 1969 he was asked by Warner Brothers to direct the film version of that novel, the first black man to make a feature film in Hollywood. During this time he also was working on photographic stories for *Life* about poverty and discrimination in the South and the Black Panther movement on the West Coast. As a photographer for *Life* in the 1950s and 1960s, his images influenced how white America saw racial struggle and the difficulties of black life. He photographed white people in the South who were aware of his power, and his life was threatened on more than one occasion. He comments in the film that a particularly difficult feature he photographed and wrote for *Life*, "How it feels to be black" (1968), together with the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. that same year, brought him perilously close to race hatred. But Parks's response was to go on working in the mode in which he was most accom-

plished: "I saw that the camera could be a weapon against poverty, against racism, against all sorts of social wrongs." He made *Shaft* (1972), as he readily admits, to establish himself as a director who could make different kinds of films and to make money. But he also realized the power of cinema and that he was giving black youth a hero of their own. Other films he made sought to bring black history and heroes to a popular audience, as in *Leadbelly* (1976) and *Solomon Northrup's Odyssey* (1984).

*Half Past Autumn* is an insightful and appreciative film about a world-renowned photographer, filmmaker, musician, and writer. Parks comments at the end of the film: "I've lived in so many skins, it's impossible for one skin to claim me." In these times of identity politics, that sort of humanistic remark is surprisingly refreshing. Although most of his photographs and films attest to the injustices of racial and class discrimination, his life's work as an artist is a transcendent witness to the possibilities of the human spirit.

Catherine L. Preston  
University of Kansas

