“Facing This Vast Hardness”:
The Plains Landscape and the People Shaped by It in Recent Kansas/Plains Film

edited and introduced by Thomas Prasch

But the great fact was the land itself which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes. It was from facing this vast hardness that the boy’s mouth had become so bitter; because he felt that men were too weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness” (Willa Cather, O Pioneers! [1913], p. 15): so the young boy Emil, looking out at twilight from the wagon that bears him back to his homestead, sees the prairie landscape with which his family, like all the pioneers scattered in its vastness, must grapple. And in that contest between humanity and land, the land often triumphed, driving would-be settlers off, or into madness. Indeed, madness haunts the pages of Cather’s tale, from the quirks of “Crazy Ivar” to the insanity that leads Frank Shabata down the road to murder and prison.

“Prairie madness”: the idea haunts the literature and memoirs of the early Great Plains settlers, returns with a vengeance during the Dust Bowl 1930s, and surfaces with striking regularity even in recent writing of and about the plains. It is a familiar enough trope to figure in survey histories, such as Daniel Boorstin’s The Americans: The Democratic Experience (1973), where it is discussed in the context of the Homestead Act (pp. 120–25). The disorder figures regularly in histories, literary criticism, and even histories of psychiatry about the plains. In his appreciation of Cather’s novel, Nathaniel Rich quotes E. V. Smalley’s remark in 1893: “An alarming amount of insanity occurs in the new prairie states among farmers and their wives” (“American Dreams: ‘O Pioneers!’ by Willa Cather” [2013], at thedailybeast.com). As Paul Gruchow wrote in Journal of a Prairie Year (1985): “Madness was the cancer of the settlement era on the prairie. Either you faced the isolated endlessness with a sense of inevitability, or you collapsed under the strain” (p. 103). Some see the disorder vanishing with the coming of highways, more comprehensive settlement, and modern media. But for others it never disappears. Gruchow was writing as much about his own prairie experience as he was of the early settlers, really, and as recently as 2011, when New Yorker Meghan Daum transplanted to the West, she could still write: “You can’t live through a rural Nebraska winter without succumbing to at least a little of the ‘prairie madness’ the early homesteaders battled” (“Lincoln, Nebraska: Home on the Prairie,” Smithsonian Magazine [November 2011], at Smithsonian.com). Daum did not stay.

I found myself thinking of Cather’s prairie-maddened characters while watching The Homesman (2014), one of the films reviewed in this year’s selection of cinema about Kansas and the Great Plains. The action of the film is set in motion when three settler wives go mad. But I find myself returning to Cather now, to introduce this section, because of the overwhelming predominance of such imagery and storylines in this year’s selection. “You have, there’s a million ways to die in the west,” the character Albert notes, explaining the title of the movie he is in (A Million Ways to Die in the West, 2014), and he lists at least the more prominent ones: “Famine, disease, gun fights … wild animals.”

Thomas Prasch, a professor and chair of the Department of History at Washburn University, received his PhD from Indiana University. For almost a decade he served as contributing editor responsible for film reviews for the American Historical Review, and he has edited Kansas History’s biennial film review section since 2001.
Here, as in many of this year’s films, the plains figure regularly as bleak, harsh, foreboding, endless, and untameable; here, the men and women who seek to make their lives upon it more often than not break down, lose out, or perish.

A direct line connects the “prairie madness” of Cather and her contemporaries with the Kansas of The Wizard of Oz (1939): black and white to Oz’s vivid color, flat and bleak, tornado-swept. This is the first year since these biannual film reviews began appearing in 2001 that we do not have some new variation on Oz to review. (Although the Wicked Witch of the West has figured in a plot arc of the fairy-tale composite television series Once upon a Time, we will wait for a more substantive revisiting, perhaps until the long-promised adaptation of Wicked actually makes it to the screen.) But if no significant new exploration of Oz has appeared in the last couple years, the wasteland Kansas landscape of Victor Fleming’s adaptation continues to haunt new films about the territory, as reviewers Thomas Averill, Cynthia Miller, and Katherine Karlin point out. Perhaps it is no accident that a number of this year’s films are in black and white.

And in turn a direct line connects the colorless flatlands of Dorothy’s life to the blasted landscapes of, for example, Dave Janetta and Poe Ballantine in Love & Terror on the Howling Plains of Nowhere (2014)—the title is a bit of a giveaway in that case—or Alexander Payne’s Nebraska (2013). “There’s some sort of weird energy here, man, and I don’t know if it’s necessarily good,” one of the people interviewed in Janetta’s film tells him, suggesting some evil undercurrent to the place. Or when not overtly evil, the landscape might figure simply as empty and hopeless. Kate, in Nebraska, demands at one point: “What do you want to do now? Bust into a silo and steal some corn?” It hardly seems a viable option. Nor does the future look much better or more hopeful, if we are to believe the crystal ball of Christopher Nolan’s Interstellar (2014). Because much of that movie takes place closer to Jupiter than to Kansas, we will not be reviewing it here. Still, it is worth noting that the necessity of looming extermination of human populations on earth, emblematically represented by the parched post-climate-change prairie, drives space exploration in Nolan’s vision of the future. The film’s first half hour is spiked with the recollections of Dust Bowl survivors to underline the point about how little we have learned from past mistakes.

Even in The Homesman, it should be noted, it is not the plains themselves, however vast and menacing, which are entirely at fault; abusive husbands and oppressive society contribute to the women’s madness. And human action often, in other prairie visions, makes the drear more dire. It is, after all, human misuse of the land that creates the environmental crisis predicted in Interstellar and dealt with in the present tense in a constellation of short films about water issues reviewed here. War—specifically, that Civil War-era border war that made Bleeding Kansas bloody—features in Dark Command (1940) and Road to Valhalla; racism figures in Jimmy P. (2013) and Jayhawkers (2014); murder centers the stories of Love & Terror and Rabid Love (2013); personal tragedy, in the form of drunk driving, informs The Sublime and Beautiful (2014); the economic dislocation and depopulation of the heartland in Nebraska only minimally can be blamed on the land.
itself. Still, even when human action propels the stories here, more often than not, the landscape of the plains shapes these tragic trajectories.

We begin our survey, as always, with a classic film: this year, *Dark Command*, in which John Wayne rescues Lawrence from Quantrill's raiders. Long-term readers of *Kansas History* will know well why we sought John Tibbetts for this review: he surveyed the cinematic history of Quantrill's raid for the journal at the time of Ang Lee's *Ride with the Devil*, in “The Movie Adventures of William Clarke Quantrill” (Autumn 1999). An associate professor of film studies at the University of Kansas, Tibbetts has most recently published *Peter Weir: Interviews* (2014) and, with James Welsh, *Douglas Fairbanks and the American Century* (2014). A previous contributor to these reviews as well, he now also blogs about current film at http://johnctibbetts.blogspot.com.

Following our classic film with the movie that figures earliest in the chronology of plains history, we turn to *The Homesman*, in which the decidedly odd couple of Tommy Lee Jones and Hillary Swank guide the trio of madwomen back across the Nebraska plains to civilization and safety. Vanessa Steinroetter, assistant professor of English at Washburn University, who teaches courses on the literature of the American West and Kansas film, reviews the film for us. Currently researching literary representations of women living on the Great Plains, she has published essays and book chapters on the literature of the Civil War, Walt Whitman, and the German reception of nineteenth-century American literature. *Road to Valhalla*, the third of Ken Sturgeon’s documentaries about the Kansas–Missouri conflict, brings us back to Quantrill, among other Civil War conflicts in the region. Nicole Etcheson, Alexander M. Bracken Professor of History at Ball State University, reviews the film for us. Etcheson defined our understanding of the border conflicts that led to the Civil War in *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (2004). She has since penned *A Generation at War: The Civil War Era in a Northern Community* (2011). *Kansas History* readers know Etcheson’s work well; she has not only contributed to previous selections of film reviews and regularly reviewed books for the journal, but published a number of articles in these pages, most recently (with Emmett Redd) “‘Sound on the Goose’: A Search for the Answer to an Age-Old Question” (Autumn 2009).

In the noirish Western *Wichita* (2014), the city’s Old Cowtown Museum provides the location for the filmmakers’ 1882 tale in which a drifter, a fugitive, and a bounty hunter come together during the town’s cattle runs. That makes Keith Wondra an obvious choice as a reviewer: a native Wichitan, and a photographer as well as a historian, Wondra wrote his Wichita State University master’s thesis about the site (“Where the Old West Comes to Life: The Story of Old Cowtown Museum,” 2014). Wondra has authored several books on Wichita’s history and historic photographs of the city, including (with Jay Price) *Wichita: 1930–2000* (2013) and *From the Land of Andalusia to the Wheat Fields of Kansas: A History of Wichita’s Historic Orpheum City* (2011); his newest, *Botanica: The Wichita Gardens* is due out in June. The conventions of the Western get broadly, and crudely, lampooned in Seth Macfarlane’s *A Million Ways to Die in the West*. Bruce R. Kahler brings his expertise on the Western film genre to bear in his review of the movie. Kahler, long-time professor of history and Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Bethany College, will be known to *Kansas History* readers for his article “John A. Martin: Soldier State Visionary” (Spring 2011), as well as for book and film reviews.

Etiquette slide from 1912 asking theatergoers not to add their own dialog to silent films. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.
The postwar years in Kansas provide the setting for two of our films. With prairie madness in our history, perhaps it should be no surprise that Kansas had a prime place in the history of American psychotherapy, with Topeka’s Menninger Clinic. In *Jimmy P.: Psychotherapy of a Plains Indian*, French director Arnaud Desplechin unearths a fascinating story of the Menninger Clinic’s treatment of a Native American veteran. David Posthumus, assistant professor of Anthropology and Native American Studies at the University of South Dakota, reviews the film for us. This spring Posthumus defended his dissertation, “Transmitting Sacred Knowledge: Aspects of Historical and Contemporary Oglala Lakota Belief and Ritual,” at Indiana University, where he continues to serve as research associate at the American Indian Studies Research Institute. He was a major contributor to the new, complete edition of John G. Neihardt’s classic *Black Elk Speaks* (2014), has essays in press on Sioux–Arikara relations and on the cultural significance of the bison to the Lakota, and is currently working on a volume of the *Franz Boas Papers: Documentary Edition*. Kevin Willmott, whose films have often provided material for our reviews, turns to the Kansas career of basketball legend Wilt Chamberlain in his latest movie, *Jayhawkers*. *Kansas History* readers who remember Aram Goudsouzian’s essay in these pages, “‘Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?’: The Kansas Years of Wilt the Stilt” (Autumn 2005), will know why we chose him to review the film. Professor and chair of the history department at the University of Memphis, Goudsouzian has also authored works on Sidney Poitier and another basketball star, Bill Russell; his most recent book is *Down to the Crossroads: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Meredith March against Fear* (2014).

Much more recent history is limned in *Love & Terror on the Howling Plains of Nowhere*, a strikingly unusual and visually rich documentary about an unsolved murder, or perhaps just a suicide, in Chadron, Nebraska, in 2006. Isaias McCaffery, our reviewer (and one we used for our 2013 film selection as well), teaches history at Independence Community College. His research interests include immigrant and ethnic history and women’s work, and his published volumes include a *Guide to Plautdietsch* (the low German dialect spoken by Kansas’s Mennonite settlers), a collection of Mennonite proverbs, and a bilingual edition of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s Swiss letters (all 2008). Recent history and current concerns coalesce in a series of short documentaries on water issues in Kansas. Those films are reviewed for us by Theresa Young, whose master’s thesis at Kansas State University, “Living Tools: An Environmental History of Afforestation and the Shifting Image of Trees” (2013), probes the deeper history of water issues in the state. Young is currently working with the Washburn University archives at Mabee Library and is an adjunct professor for the Department of History there. Recent films about Kansas and the Great Plains have also featured a number of movies that, although not historical in character, provide rich explorations of current lives in the region in ways that resonate with historical issues. Thus *Nebraska*, while telling the story of one deluded old man’s quixotic quest for riches, darkly illuminates the empty lives of people in the emptying cities of the plains. Thomas Fox Averill, the film’s reviewer and professor of creative writing at Washburn University, will be well known to *Kansas History* readers for both his previous film reviews and his many contributions on Kansas literature, the image of Kansas, and the legacies of *The Wizard of Oz*. His most recent essays for the journal are “Kansas Literature and Race” (Autumn 2013) and “Flyover Country:
Send Me Work (1940; black and white; 94 minutes).

Dark Command. Directed by Raoul Walsh; screenplay by Grover Jones, Lionel Houser, and F. Hugh Herbert, based on W. R. Burnett’s novel; produced by Sol C. Siegel. 1940; black and white; 94 minutes.

Far from being a footnote to the history of the Civil War, the infamous guerrilla raid by William Clarke Quantrill on Lawrence in the summer of 1863 has long fascinated, even perplexed, historians, novelists, playwrights, and filmmakers alike. Dark Command (1940) is a case in point.

W. R. Burnett, from whose The Dark Command: A Kansas Iliad (1938) the film was adapted, renamed Quantrill “Polk Cantrell” and the town of Lawrence “Provost, Kansas,” describing it as a “vast collection of wooden houses strung along wide but dusty streets [where] the morning sun beat pitilessly down on the almost treeless streets and plaza; the people looked ill-dressed and rather dejected, and even the dogs seemed to slink” (p. 107). In the novel, Cantrell is not a school teacher but a politician, an intelligent but thoroughly ruthless sociopath who avoids ideological sides in the border-wars struggle. “[It’s] every man for himself,” Cantrell declares to his friend Johnny Seton. “The Missourians rush the border and burn the Free-Soilers’ towns, and when they go back, the Free-Soilers take after them and burn their towns” (p. 44). The local citizenry regard Cantrell’s guerrillas as “demons” and Cantrell himself as “Old Nick.” A lawyer pronounces him a dangerous man: “He’s a man of no principles whatever. . . . He likes chaos. It’s his natural element” (pp. 113–14). Cantrell also affects a certain outsized style and appearance: “He had on a big white flat-crowned hat and the uniform coat of a Confederate officer. There was a red sash under his gun-belt, and his chest was covered with medals and gold braid. Enormous epaulettes made his shoulders look broader than they were” (p. 341).

In the film adaptation, Johnny Seton is renamed “Bob” Seton (John Wayne) and Polk Cantrell becomes “Will Cantrell” (Walter Pidgeon), an idealistic school teacher in Lawrence whose motivations in donning Confederate gray arise from the frustration of losing both the Lawrence sheriff’s election and the affections of his girlfriend Mary (Claire Trevor) to his rival, Seton, a Texan with mildly free-state sympathies. “I’m through with books and teaching,” whines Cantrell. “I’ll burn every book in this house. . . . First chance I have to be somebody, I get beaten out of it by an ignorant cowhand who can’t even write his name. I can write my name, and I’m going to write it across this territory in letters of fire and blood.” And later, after leading a campaign of terror against his enemies, he tells his estranged girlfriend: “I regret nothing I’ve done and I’ll do it again. I’ll plunder a dozen states...

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Thomas Prasch
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to get you and keep you.” He abandons any pretense of ideological loyalties in a remarkable speech to his raiders, delivered at the outbreak of the Civil War: “This will not be a war of short duration, as some people think. It will be as deadly and as fiercely fought as any civil war in history. Now, you men have thrown your loyalty to me; and your loyalty will be amply rewarded. You’re not fighting for the North, and you’re not fighting for the South. But you’re fighting to take what’s coming to you. . . . We’re going to live off the fat of the land; and what we don’t want, we’ll burn.”

In capturing the essential lawlessness and amorality of Burnett’s character of Cantrell, the filmmakers have, perhaps in spite of themselves, hit close to the mark of Quantrill’s violently opportunistic nature. Dark Command is also the only one of many Quantrill’s violently opportunist nature. Dark Command is also the only one of many Quantrill films that touches on his activities as a schoolteacher. Even though he never taught in Lawrence, he was indeed a teacher in other places and purportedly a good one. However, he had no great love for the profession. He was too restless and the pay was too low.

As for Quantrill’s raid, Dark Command radically alters history. Unlike in Burnett’s book (or the real world), this Hollywood version has Cantrell’s guerrillas meeting stiff resistance from a heavily armed citizenry. Meanwhile, as the raiders and defenders exchange fusillades, Cantrell goes off in search of Mary. He finds instead the severe, black-clad figure of his own mother (Marjorie Main in her pre-“Ma and Pa Kettle” days). Rifle in hand, she has come to exterminate him like some vile pestilence. “I borned a dirty, murdering snake that’s broke my heart to see it crawlin’ along,” she rages. “I curse the day I had you.” But before she can fire, Seton comes forward to deliver the fatal shot. “You’re at the end of the road,” she whispers to the dying Cantrell, “and the Devil’s beside you, waitin.’” This never happened, of course. Quantrill never saw his mother after a visit to Canal Dover, Ohio, in 1856. Their relationship was one of mutual affection—hardly the deadly antagonism depicted in Dark Command—and she claimed to know nothing about the years of his later notoriety.

All the while the protagonists face off, no one is apparently unduly alarmed that Lawrence is burning to the ground. Viewing the devastation, Seton chirps, “We got a saying down in Texas that it takes a good fire to burn down the weeds. It lets the flowers grow.” This ending is a signal departure not only from history but from Burnett’s original novel, wherein Cantrell’s raiders meet little resistance in Lawrence. They mow down the sleeping soldiers, shoot the defenseless citizenry, and loot and burn the town: “All concerted firing had ceased. From time to time a ragged volley sounded in a distant part of town, and there was faint, sporadic yelling, but the worst was over. Smoke was rolling up over the town, higher and higher, blotting out the sun. Ashes were falling all around. The downtown section was practically destroyed” (p. 355). Quantrill then flees the rescuing cavalry only to be killed later by his nemesis, Seton.

History repeated itself when Dark Command was given its world premiere in Lawrence. Fifteen thousand citizens gathered in the South Park along with the film’s featured players (including John Wayne, Gabby Hayes, Claire Trevor, and Walter Pidgeon) to see a reenactment of the raid and the burning of a replica of the Eldridge House (see Roscoe Born, “Stars Invade City,” University Daily Kansan, April 4, 1940, and Emory Frank Scott, “The Dark Command,” in One Hundred Years of Lawrence Theatres [1995] for details on the event; I am indebted to the Watkins Community Museum of History in Lawrence, Kansas, for access to these clippings). Such celebrations, like the annual remembrances of Quantrill’s raid in Lawrence, testify to the continued fascination of the event to successive generations of Kansans.

John C. Tibbetts
University of Kansas

The Homesman. Directed by Tommy Lee Jones; written by Tommy Lee Jones, Kieran Fitzgerald, and Wesley A. Oliver, based on the novel by Glendon Swarthout; produced by Luc Besson, Peter M. Brant, and Brian Kennedy. 2014; color; 122 minutes. Distributed by Roadside Attractions.

For his fourth and latest directorial endeavor, Tommy Lee Jones has chosen a story as strangely beautiful and mesmerizing as the wide, lonesome plains of its setting. Set in Nebraska Territory in the 1850s, The Homesman focuses on two compelling but flawed characters brought together by chance, who team up reluctantly for the duration of a hard, dangerous journey. One is independent, unmarried landowner and farmer Mary Bee Cuddy (Hillary Swank), who has been rejected repeatedly by potential suitors for her “plain” looks and “bossy” nature. The other is a shiftless, penniless drunk, George Briggs (Tommy Lee Jones). At the outset of the film, Cuddy agrees to escort three local women—all traumatized into near-catatonic or animalistic states by grief, poverty, domestic abuse, and other hardships of early pioneer life on the Great Plains—back east to the home of a minister and his wife in Iowa. None of the husbands of these women are willing to undertake the long journey, which leaves Cuddy, who sees it as a moral duty to help these women,
to play the role of the “homesman,” traditionally a man hired to guide disillusioned and desperate immigrants from western outposts to the safer cities of the East. Though willing to go on her own, Cuddy changes her mind after stumbling across Briggs, sitting on a horse with a noose around his neck and his hands tied after being discovered living as a squatter in another man’s house. Cuddy strikes a deal with Briggs, freeing him in return for his hired assistance in conducting the women to safety.

Much of the film focuses on the group’s journey. They embark on an arduous trek from Loup City to Hebron, Iowa, in a covered wagon, a dangerous—and at times grotesque—odyssey reminiscent of that of the Bundren family in William Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying (1930). The landscape is studded with the material traces of death, greed, and human violence. Long shots of the beautiful, stark landscape, in the tradition of neo-Westerns such as Meek’s Cutoff (2010), present a sharp contrast to the suffering inflicted by human beings on each other. When the group comes across the grave of an eleven-year-old girl that has been desecrated, her bones scattered about, even the stoic and practical Cuddy loses her composure, opting to stay behind and rebury the remains at all cost. Although it threatens to interrupt the progress of her journey, her action stands as a symbolic act of defiant humanity and remembrance in a world marked by cruelty and indifference to the weak and vulnerable.

Tellingly, at the start of their journey, Briggs warns Cuddy not to seek out the company of other humans along the way. “You’re gonna meet three kinds of people out here,” he explains. “You’re gonna meet wagon trains that don’t want to see crazy people, you’re gonna meet traders that will surely rape you, and you’re gonna meet Indians who will kill you.” These words mark one of the main themes of the movie. Though set in an environment traditionally represented as pitting human beings against the land, Jones, like author Glendon Swarthout, on whose 1988 novel the movie is based, is more interested in the tragedies resulting from the competing human drives: for companionship, on the one hand, and for exploiting and hurting people, on the other.

Many reviewers of The Homesman have noted its preoccupation with the fate of ordinary women eking out a living with their families in the harsh environment of the mid-nineteenth-century frontier. Some have even labeled it a feminist Western, though the film does not offer enough of a unified message or political statement to justify the term. It does, however, through its gritty and even shocking realism succeed in revising romanticized images of life on the frontier in the tradition of Little House on the Prairie. The picture painted by the movie is bleak. The choices open to women are mapped out on one end of the spectrum by the financially successful, independent, but lonely Cuddy, and on the other by the abused, downtrodden, and
utterly dependent women who came out west with their husbands only to find despair and suffering. The lack of control over their lives and environment is poignantly illustrated by a scene in which the ghost of her dead mother appears to the distraught Gro Svendsen (Sonja Richter). Endlessly sweeping the dirt floor of the Svendsen house in an effort to rid the home of dirt, the mother strikingly represents a woman’s futile attempt to impose a narrative of domestic order and stability on a life marked by a husband’s despotism and an uncaring, harsh natural environment. The trope of the settler driven “mad” by a cruel, uncaring husband, or by the loss of children to disease or starvation, or by isolation, or by the poverty and disillusionment brought on by crop failures and mismanagement is well established in the literature of the Great Plains, though The Homesman is one of the few movies to make it a central plot element.

In casting the superb Hillary Swank in the role of Mary Bee Cuddy and himself in that of George Briggs, Jones has created two unforgettable characters who parallel Rooster Cogburn and Mattie Ross in True Grit (1969/2010) in their gruff, witty exchanges, but who go well beyond such comparisons. Though seemingly the stronger and more conventionally successful of the two, Cuddy is ultimately defeated by her unsatisfied yearning for human companionship, while the ruthless and selfish Briggs, who has run away from all forms of commitment in his life, survives. In the movie’s final scene, the drunk Briggs dances and sings on a raft ferrying him across a river at night. This anarchic scene is a fitting final comment of a movie that deliberately refrains from offering easy explanations or a master narrative. Both capable of criminal violence and kindness, Briggs vanishes into the night and an uncertain future, a man both noble and pathetic, ultimately neither hero nor anti-hero, but simply human.

Vanessa Steinroetter
Washburn University

The Road to Valhalla. Written and directed by Ken Spurgeon; produced by Shawn Bell and James A. Scheidel Jr. 2013; color; 95 minutes. Distributed by Lone Chimney Films.

The back cover of the DVD case clarifies that Valhalla was the “warrior’s heaven” in Norse mythology. The film’s introduction and conclusion take place in cemeteries where elderly veterans congregate for memorial services, scenes that apparently constitute the allusion to Valhalla which is never explained in the film itself. This is pretty typical of a documentary that is long on detail and short on context.

The Road to Valhalla (2013) is old-fashioned military and political history with minimal attention to the larger meaning of events. Historian Deb Goodrich Bisel opens the film by emphasizing Missouri’s importance to the war, but the filmmakers fail to expand on why this is so. They also pick up the war in 1861, with no background on the pre-war period. Through the course of the film, there are references to Bleeding Kansas and, by 1863, the “nine years of conflict along the border,” but the viewer had better already know about this, because it

Courtesy of Lone Chimney Films.
The format will be familiar to aficionados of the Burns oeuvre: folksy music, old photos, and newsreel footage. The camera pans over still images, actors read historical documents, and historians provide expert commentary. The filmmakers have also made extensive use of the newer technique of using scenes with re-enactors not just skirmishing across battlefields—although there is plenty of that—but dramatizing historic figures with dialogue. Tom Leahy looks a little too old for the twenty-something Quantrill, but Kirk Shapland is a suitably ferocious “Bloody Bill.” Tim Rues probably displays the greatest acting range as Kansas Senator James H. Lane, from histrionic exclamations of “Great God!” to the suicidal Lane of the war’s end. (As Goodrich Bisel says, Lane was a “drama queen.”) Often, however, the dramatic reenactments lack the urgency of the events they depict. After Quantrill’s raid on Lawrence, General Ewing walks calmly through a meadow, a scene not at all reflective of his agitated state of mind.

The Road to Valhalla may appeal to a specialized audience of military enthusiasts. Short segments might be useful in the classroom. But it seems unlikely to appeal to a wider audience, especially outside the Kansas–Missouri region.

Nicole Etcheson
Ball State University

Nicholas Barton’s Wichita—not to be confused with the 1955 film of the same title—tells the story of a drifter, a fugitive, and a bounty hunter who come together in and around Wichita in 1882. As the film progresses, the background of the main characters starts to unfold as they try to blend into the sleepy cow town, just then transforming into a growing agricultural center.

At the film’s outset, we see the fugitive, Ben (Blake Webb), in handcuffs and shackles, dragging another bloody, barely living man past a thread of barbed wire to the shelter of some trees. As he is trying to get free of his restraints, he makes a single-syllable demand: “Where?” “Wichita,” the dying man finally tells him. We next encounter the drifter, Jesse (Justin France). While reading under a tree he runs into Mary (Reylynn Caster) and Samantha (Karina Wolfe), the two daughters of a widower struggling to make a living on a farm outside of the city. Whereas Mary, the youngest, likes Jesse from the start, it takes Samantha most of the movie to warm to him. Jesse befriends Ruth (Beth Wise), a recently widowed neighbor, doing various chores on her farm. Meanwhile, Deacon Miller (Kenneth Mitchell) leaves a church service to head to Wichita; he is also, it turns out,
a marshal, searching for Ben, or at least for the bounty on his head.

In Wichita, portrayed in the film as a prosperous if provincial prairie town, Ben gets himself unshackled and begins his search for the partner who has absconded with the loot from earlier train and bank heists (we suspect that it might be the newly arrived drifter he is searching for), and Miller begins to ask questions as well. Meanwhile, Jesse uncovers a gambling syndicate that centers on the debonair, gangsterish Victor (Delno Ebie), to whom Mary and Samantha’s father is deeply in debt. The father prostitutes his own daughter Samantha to keep his creditors at bay, and it appears he intends to offer his younger child up as well. Jesse urges Samantha to flee, taking Mary with her. Meanwhile, Wichita law officer Wyatt Earp (Mark Anderson) catches Ben, putting him in jail for transfer to Texas by Deacon/ Marshall Miller. When Ben escapes again and heads off in search of Jesse, the varied strands of plot converge around the questions of lost money, crime in the growing city, and Ben’s missing wife.

Wichita during its cattle-town years was torn by battles between farmers and cowboys. With the cattle trade, as historian Jay Price has shown, Wichita flourished and became a town of impressive multi-story buildings in fashionable Victorian styles (“Cowboy Boosterism: Old Cowtown Museum and the Image of Wichita, Kansas,” Kansas History 24 [Winter 2001–2002]). The booming cattle trade brought a need in Wichita for structures, such as depots and stockyards, to support the growing cow town. Saloons, brothels, and gambling establishments were also built for the cowboys, most across the Arkansas River in Delano. By isolating much of the vice in Delano, the image of Wichita as a moral, upstanding community could remain intact.

By 1874 Wichitans were getting tired of the rowdy, lawless image that came with the cattle trade. Even Marshall Murdock’s Wichita City Eagle, which had initially supported the cattle trade, started to question its continued importance to Wichita. On December 2, 1875, the paper published an extended article, “Wichita: The Metropolis of the ‘Happy Valley,’” which looked back without regret at the vanished cow town days of a couple years before:

At that time the streets were thronged with Texas cow boys, with huge spurs on their heels, and howitzers strapped upon their backs. Every other door opened into a saloon. The first thing heard in

the morning and the last thing at night was the unceasing music at the saloons and gambling houses. The town was headquarters for harlots for two hundred miles around. Fighting, shooting, and even killing were not infrequent. . . . Gamblers were more numerous than respectable men. Those were the days of the cattle trade in its glory. Then the name of Wichita was a synonymous with crime. . . . But these days are gone happily for Wichita, never to return. The demoralizing and debasing effects of the cattle trade will never be felt here again.

The cattle trade formally ended in Wichita in 1876 with the moving of quarantine lines west, leading to the rise of Dodge City as the “Queen of Cow Towns.” The film
alludes to the shift: Wyatt Earp leaves Wichita behind when summoned to Dodge City.

After the cattle trade ended, Wichita became a regional agricultural center while promoting itself through boosterism. During the 1880s, the time frame of the movie, Wichita was a bustling city, one of the fastest growing in the nation. The boom ended in 1888, and Wichita went into a decline that lasted into the next century. Overall, Barton does an excellent job of portraying Wichita during the 1880s, making it more realistic than the 1955 film of the same title. Released fifty years apart, both *Wichita* movies portray different aspects of Wichita’s early history and the myths that go along with them.

*Keith Wondra*
Wichita, Kansas

**A Million Ways to Die in the West.** Directed by Seth MacFarlane; screenplay by Seth MacFarlane, Alec Sulkin, and Wellesley Wild; produced by Scott Stuber, Seth MacFarlane, and Jason Clark. 2014; color; 116 minutes. Distributed by Universal Studios.

Despite a general perception among American filmgoers that the Western rode into the sunset decades ago, there really is no shortage of viewing material to sustain even the most enthusiastic of buffs. Major feature films, such as *Open Range* (2003) or the remake of *True Grit* (2010), may be few and far between, but are also of generally high quality. Made-for-TV movies, most notably TNT’s *Lonesome Dove* (1989), have added significantly to the genre, and there is also a steady flow of straight-to-DVD films. Perhaps most importantly, the many re-issues of classic oaters by Warner Bros. and other studios make virtually every Western ever made readily accessible. There is no denying, however, that the genre has a rather low profile in the highly competitive, blockbuster-obsessed film industry, making it rather surprising that anyone would spend the money and take the time to make fun of it. By my recollection, the last parody of the Western was Jackie Chan’s film *Shanghai Noon* (2000).

Enter Seth MacFarlane, creator of the animated TV comedy *Family Guy* and of *Ted* (2012), a box-office phenomenon that starred a cynical, wise-cracking teddy bear (voiced by MacFarlane) and that grossed over $200 million in American theaters. With that magnitude of a success under his belt, MacFarlane decided to strap on a holster and try his hand at a parody subgenre that dates back at least as far as Fatty Arbuckle’s *Out West* (1918) and that climaxxed with *Blazing Saddles* (1974), Mel Brooks’s explosive send up of Western film clichés. Although *A Million Ways to Die in the West* will probably not be revered in the future as one of the high points in this heritage, it makes an admirable
attempt at overturning for comedic effect many of the conventional characters and actions that define the Western and make the genre so enjoyable.

MacFarlane’s crew strove to recreate the look and sound of classic Westerns. With scenes of Monument Valley, a lush orchestral soundtrack, and a theme song performed by Alan Jackson, we are swept back into the popcorn rialtos of the 1940s and 1950s. The purpose, however, is to establish a sharp contrast between the formulaic setting and the unexpected behaviors and anachronistic sensibilities of the characters. Albert (MacFarlane) is a sheep farmer in cattle country, but instead of the heroic individualist we expect, he is a weak-willed whiner, incredulous about the “general depressing awfulness of the West.” Anna (Charlize Theron), the farthest thing from the usual romantic female lead, is actually the wife of the villain, but her love for Albert is awakened by their shared hatred of the frontier. Wiser to the ways of the West, she needs to roll his cigarette for him and teach him how to shoot a gun. Notable among the other stock characters is the warm-hearted prostitute (Sarah Silverman), who enthusiastically plies her trade yet invokes Christian principles to put off her eager and still virginal boyfriend until their wedding day.

Of course our players are engaged in familiar events, albeit all in very unfamiliar ways. Three showdowns have nothing to do with high tension and skilled gunplay but rather fast talking, diarrhea, and snake-venom poisoning, respectively. The bar fight is a brutal and deadly affair meant only to emphasize how cowardly our hero is. Whereas for John Ford the barn dance symbolized communal values, for MacFarlane it is merely an exhibition of “weird stiff traditional frontier dancing.”

A Million Ways was a modest critical and commercial success, but one still wonders why MacFarlane made the film. His reputation has been built on appealing to a generation now in its twenties and thirties and largely unfamiliar with the Western. This young audience will get plenty of the gross-out brand of humor they expect from him, and I suppose it could be argued that a crude frontier environment is not an inappropriate setting for that. Certainly 1880s New Mexico is a relatively safe location for the constant dropping of f-bombs. But, if it is movie violence MacFarlane really wants to spoof, why not mock modern urban action films like the recent John Wick (2014), whose excessive gunplay and high death toll have all the dramatic purpose of a video game?

MacFarlane has made some interesting contributions to the Western parody, nevertheless. His meticulous creation of a “moustachery” adds a genuinely humorous dimension to the notion that the small town was an outpost of civilization on the frontier. The theme of drug usage as a source of courage and as a way to gain advantage over one’s enemies expands the character of the anti-hero so important to modern Westerns. Most importantly, A Million Ways reminds us that the Western is still very much alive and that its familiar conventions continue to be worthy of mining for entertainment value.

Bruce R. Kahler
Cape Girardeau, Missouri


As a cultural anthropologist interested in psychological approaches to the intersections of culture and identity whose research focuses on Plains American Indians, my interest was naturally piqued by the themes explored in the film Jimmy P.: Psychotherapy of a Plains Indian (2013). The film stars Benicio del Toro as Jimmy Picard, a Siksika (South Peigan or Montana Blackfeet) Native American and World War II veteran suffering from an array of symptoms—deilitating headaches, catatonic episodes, bouts of blindness, and intermittent auditory and visual hallucinations—with no apparent physiological cause. Mathieu Amalric costars as Georges Devereux (1908–1985), a Hungarian Jewish émigré (first to France, then to America) and anthropologist with a strong interest in psychoanalysis. (He would, in fact, train as a psychoanalyst after his encounter with Picard.) Today Devereux is widely considered the founder of ethnopsychiatry.

Serving in France but never experiencing combat, Picard suffered a head injury when he fell from a moving truck. By 1948 Picard’s bizarre symptoms led his sister, Gayle, played by Native American actress Michelle Thrush (Cree), to seek help in Topeka, Kansas. There, the Winter Veterans Administration Hospital, working in association with the Menninger School of Psychiatry, had developed in the postwar years a specialization in dealing with psychiatric issues faced by the nation’s returning armed forces. When the clinic’s staff determined that Picard was in perfect physical health, director Karl Menninger realized his team was not prepared to provide the culturally centered and informed treatment necessary to address Picard’s issues. Menninger called on Devereux, then living in New York; he boarded the next train to Topeka to begin his ethnopsychiatric work with Picard, combining methods and insights from anthropology and psychotherapy.
The film, directed by French filmmaker Arnaud Desplechin and based on Devereux’s book *Reality and Dream: Psychotherapy of a Plains Indian* (1951), speaks to the centrality of culture in conceptions of health, wellness, and illness, and the implications of such a culturally grounded understanding for treatment. In the film, Picard and Devereux find common ground and a path to healing through the (psycho)analysis of dreams, unearthing long-buried repressions at the root of Picard’s psychosomatic problems. But it is Devereux’s previous experience as an anthropologist working with the Mojaves that provided the key to revealing and overcoming the ghosts and unresolved trauma of Picard’s past.

Devereux’s fieldwork among the Mojaves, a group indigenous to the Colorado River area in the Mojave Desert, consisted of five separate extended stays between 1932 and 1950. Although the Mojave are unrelated to the Siksika, the experience allowed him to interpret and unlock the latent meanings of the culturally constituted symbols of Picard’s dreams, and, more generally, the Siksika worldview. Dreams are incredibly important and meaningful in Blackfeet culture, as they are among many Native American tribes. Devereux combined insights from psychoanalysis with his knowledge of Native peoples and the central role of dreams in Siksika culture to develop an approach to Picard’s difficulties. In many American Indian cultures, health and wellness are reckoned in holistic terms, so psychological and spiritual healing are prerequisites to physical healing. The collaborative efforts of Picard and Devereux to work through the former’s psychological and developmental problems prove to be a fulfilling and life-affirming experience for both men, and Picard was eventually cured of his physical symptoms as well.

Some of the key themes that figure in in *Jimmy P.* are also explored in some classic works of American Indian fiction, such as N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977). In these works, too, Native American veterans battle psychological trauma or “soul sickness” and achieve understanding and healing through culturally established and sanctioned traditional methods. These are poignant themes that endure and might be considered a distinct genre of Native American storytelling.

At issue in *Jimmy P.*, and particularly relevant in terms of contemporary theory in anthropology and Native American studies, is the concept of historical trauma or intergenerational unresolved grief and emotional trauma. We can interpret Picard’s psychosomatic symptoms in terms of both individual and collective unresolved historical trauma. While Devereux’s harrowing experience as a Jew in France during World War II is left largely untold in the film, there is no doubt that he and Picard share a common experience of historical trauma. They also shared feelings of exclusion; both had experienced being a stranger or exiled, searching for a lost identity.

The complex relationship and kinship between Picard and Devereux are at the heart of *Jimmy P.*, as explored through language and psychoanalysis, the dream-based talking cure. While this renders the film undeniably talky, dragging here and there, both del Toro and Amalric give strong performances. To Desplechin’s credit, he refuses to cheapen the film.

*Courtesy of IFC Films.*
Facing This Vast Hardness

with a sensationalized psychotherapeutic breakthrough, opting instead to illustrate the constructive, practical results of psychotherapy, centered on self-knowledge and incremental psychological healing. Del Toro is not American Indian (although he worked closely with Blackfeet language coach Marvin Weatherwax in preparation for the film), but Desplechin casts a number of Native actors in the film, including Thrush, the late Misty Upham, Jennifer Podemski, and Gary Farmer. With its strong cast, anchored in the powerful performances of del Toro and Amalric, *Jimmy P.: Psychotherapy of a Plains Indian* will have you talking and leave you thinking.

David Posthumus
University of South Dakota


Perhaps the most powerful moment in *Jayhawkers* occurs when the poet Langston Hughes visits his boyhood home of Lawrence, Kansas, and delivers a recital of “I, Too, Sing America,” an affecting claim to genuine citizenship for African Americans, while the University of Kansas basketball team faces Southern Methodist University at the 1957 Midwest Regional in Dallas, Texas, and is pelted with debris and racial slurs. As director Kevin Willmott toggles back and forth between the two scenes, he captures just how the Jayhawks had become a sporting symbol of an interracial future, with all its ironies and contradictions, as embodied by the singular figure of Wilt Chamberlain.

Of course, these two scenes did not actually occur at the same time, but *Jayhawkers* is a feature-length narrative film, not a documentary tied to the archival record. Willmott captures the spirit of Chamberlain’s complicated tenure in Kansas. The supremely athletic seven-foot star arrived to enormous expectations: that he would both win NCAA championships and alter Lawrence’s racial landscape. He came excruciatingly close to delivering a national title, and he disrupted the city’s pattern of de facto racial segregation, but he left Kansas with a sense of disillusion.

A current player on the University of Kansas basketball team, Justin Wesley, portrays Chamberlain. Though he understandably lacks the experience of a professional actor, Wesley acquits himself well. His presence may be more restrained and less charismatic than the real historical figure, but he possesses the physicality and cool confidence of a star athlete, and he relates the ambivalence that Chamberlain felt throughout his time in Kansas as he encountered segregated restaurants,
casual racism, and unfair pressures. At one point, after a loss to Iowa State, Chamberlain describes his childhood in Philadelphia, and his teammate asks if he now considers Kansas his home. “Not when we lose,” he replies.

Chancellor Franklin Murphy envisions Chamberlain as a vehicle to compel desegregation in Lawrence, while prominent Kansas City blacks, such as newspaper editor Dowdal Davis and concert singer Etta Moten, want him to “stir things up a bit,” but Chamberlain insists that he is “not Jackie Robinson.” He achieves an “honorary whiteness” by getting served in restaurants, but he cannot effect a broader desegregation of Lawrence. Willmott effectively conveys this theme through the character of KU student and jazz musician Nathan Davis, played with conviction by Trai Byers. Davis serves not only as Chamberlain’s tour guide to black life in Kansas, but also as the film’s off-screen narrator and racial conscience.

More than Chamberlain, the main character in Jayhawkers is Forrest “Phog” Allen. The film opens in 1907 with Allen professing a desire to coach basketball even as he is discouraged by his mentor James Naismith, the inventor of the game. Though the script downplays Allen’s eccentricities, the actor Kip Niven conveys his folksy charm and passionate identification with his job. Allen employs a recruiting strategy that exaggerates Lawrence’s racial openness, tutors the freshman Chamberlain in the details of basketball, and lobbies to work beyond the state’s mandatory retirement age of seventy so that he can coach Chamberlain when he becomes eligible for the varsity team. But Chancellor Murphy sticks to the rule, and Allen becomes a tortured, somewhat pathetic figure who undermines his good-hearted successor, Dick Harp.

Willmott gives Jayhawkers a stylized feel. It is filmed in black and white, and the soundtrack is all jazz, even though Chamberlain actually played rock and roll on his short-lived radio show, Flip’er with Dipper. Basketball is notoriously difficult to convey on film, but Willmott draws inspiration from a photographic style of the time, spotlighting the players against a dark background, making it seem as if they are on stage. He keeps the on-court action brief until the dramatic presentation of the 1957 NCAA championship game, an excruciating triple-overtime loss to the University of North Carolina, a defeat that would haunt Chamberlain and first inspire his reputation as a “loser.”

Among the film’s various compressions and simplifications of the historical record is its suggestion that Chamberlain left the University of Kansas after this loss, even though he stayed for an anticlimactic junior season, when the Jayhawks failed to qualify for the NCAA tournament. No matter. Through the vehicle of a character-driven narrative feature, Jayhawkers artfully conveys the racial politics of sport in Kansas at the dawn of the civil rights era.

Aram Goudsouzian
University of Memphis

Love & Terror on the Howling Plains of Nowhere. Directed by Dave Janetta; screenplay by Dave Janetta and Poe Ballantine (Ed Hughes), based on the memoir by Ballantine [Ed Hughes]; produced by Ed Hughes and Dave Janetta. 2014; color; 143 minutes. Distributed by 32-20 Productions and by Dark Hollow Films; streaming at loveandterrorthemovie.com.

The darker aspects of life out on the wide expanses of the “great American desert” have long provided the grist for creative films, paintings, songs, and literature that explore the sadness generated by loneliness, the prolonged monotony of geographical isolation, economic hardship, and associated psychological depression. Like the empty green expanses of an Andrew Wyeth watercolor, these works render a conflicted and ambivalent judgment of the plains region that many of us call home. Vistas of parched tallgrass, silver-gray sagebrush, moaning wind, and blowing dust generate what Dave Jannetta’s film Love & Terror on the Howling Plains of Nowhere (2014) terms “a vortex of timelessness.” The thinning population of the prairie states coagulates into small outposts of human habitation, but after only a short drive in any direction the nighttime lights of the towns yield to haunting oceans of empty blackness, and the endless rippling grass stretches “all the way to Canada” and beyond.

Dramatic footage of huge brush fires, threatening wall-clouds, and giant hailstones may elicit a mixture of curiosity and repulsion from outsiders unfamiliar with the everyday experiences of “fly-over people.” Philadelphia filmmaker Jannetta follows in the footsteps of Truman Capote, another artist from the Atlantic seaboard who once ventured into big-sky country in search of grisly inspiration for his 1966 classic In Cold Blood. It is the gruesome and unexplained death by fire of Dr. Steve Haataja, a professor of theoretical mathematics, that provides the nexus for Love & Terror on the Howling Plains of Nowhere. This tragedy occurred amid the arid burned-over ridges surrounding the hamlet of Chadron, Nebraska, a small college town of 6,500 people where everyone knows everyone else and where there are “not a whole lot of secrets.”

Itinerant writer and cook Ed Hughes, who writes under the pen-name Poe Ballantine, found the stillness there to be so intense that periodically people “have
Facing This Vast Hardness

Hughes spent six years investigating Haataja’s bizarre death, ultimately publishing the memoir that inspired Jannetta’s film of the same name. The movie does not use the book as a script, but instead integrates interviews and creative local footage, weaving the accounts of Hughes, Haataja, and the townspeople of Chadron into a constantly shifting storyline that focuses on themes of social isolation, depression, and the challenges of autism. Periodically, quotations from Hughes’s memoir appear on the screen to subdivide the interview material.

Wandering since his late teens, Hughes authored four books and many essays while working in eighteen different restaurants (in as many small towns), hoping to achieve breakthrough recognition and success as a writer. Hughes, whose boy Tom was diagnosed with autism, realized that he and his son shared certain personality traits with the late Dr. Haataja. People on the autism spectrum may be intellectually gifted, but they struggle to make friends and forge lasting personal relationships. In addition to their social awkwardness, both Hughes and Haataja battled suicidal urges related to severe depression. The writer recalled that when he first arrived in Chadron in 2006, broke and without a car, he “just didn’t want to live anymore.”

The human relationships that were incubated in the small Nebraska community saved Hughes’s life, but there was no rescue for Haataja, who remained a shy enigma.

The discovery of a charred and skeletal body generated a flurry of rumors and theories, none of which has ever been proven. Jannetta records people who are convinced that a murder occurred, or perhaps a suicide, an assisted suicide, or even a hate crime if the quiet math genius was actually gay (nobody knows). While the circumstances of death remain unclear, the pain of living as a perpetual outsider unites all the main characters of the film. This includes Hughes’s Mexican wife Cristina, a dentist who loves her Nebraska family but feels trapped in an alien culture. Confined by rural small-town life, she dreams of returning to Mexico.

This interesting documentary contains beautiful cinematography, capturing the vastness of the prairie, the quirky personalities of small-town folks, the humor of the local police scanner, and the familiar wind-blasted architecture of the region. It must be remembered that the filmmaker sees Nebraska through the eyes of an
urban Pennsylvanian. Viewers will have to decide for themselves how much this colored his artistic voyage to “nowhere.”

Isaias J. McCaffery
Independence Community College

The Waters of Kansas, three short films: Cheyenne Bottoms. 2015; color; 20 minutes. Farming over the Ogallala. 2015; color; 20 minutes. Our Shrinking Reservoirs. 2015; color; 17 minutes. All by Sharon Ashworth for the Kansas Natural Resource Council; produced by Sharon Ashworth and Christine Scanlin Dobson, with help from Nathan Thomas and Through A Door Productions; Brad Johnson and Envinery Films; with funding from the Kansas Humanities Council. Online at knrc.weebly.com/ the-waters-of-kansas---documentary-films.html.

Shifting Course. Written and directed by Amanda Hashagen; produced by CreativeWorks Studio, with funding from the Kansas Humanities Council. 2015; color; 17 minutes. Online at the Kansas Humanities Council Short Films Gallery: kansashumanities.org/programs/ fliks-facilitated=film-discussions/short-films-gallery.

When the Well Runs Dry. Written and directed by Reuben Aaronson and Steve Lerner; produced by Steve Lerner, with assistance from NGOFilms and funding from the Kansas Humanities Council. 2015; color and black and white; 22 minutes. Contact at http:// stevelerner.net/site/.

The study of how humans shape their natural world and how it in turn shapes them is the textbook definition of environmental history. These changes over time can take multiple generations or, in the case of Kansas’s water supply, it can take merely one or two. The topic of a number of short films sponsored by the Kansas Humanities Council is water and how water as a natural resource is vital to the future not only of Kansas agriculture, wildlife, and reservoirs, but of its communities and families as well.

The first series of films under review is titled The Waters of Kansas, and each of Sharon Ashworth’s short films focuses on a different and distinctive body of water. Cheyenne Bottoms is the most informative of the three movies, in part because it does not presume the viewer already knows all of the details about how surface water and ground water are legislated. The episode, more in depth than the other two shorts, argues that the value of the wetlands, unlike that of the agricultural lands surrounding it, is not measurable in standard forms because preserving a refuge for migratory birds has a global significance. It begins by showing how early Euro-American settlers and their
cultural assumptions about the wetlands led to decades of doomed land-management schemes, drainage, and canal efforts. Ashworth shows the change over time in water-management tactics step by step, accompanying the account with wonderful aerial images. The film uses experts on western water law to explain how the shift in thinking by water and wildlife managers toward an ecologically diverse outlook brought them head to head with Barton county residents contesting their water rights, and how the ecologists won.

Farming over the Ogallala focuses on the high plains of Sheridan County. It begins with an abundance of facts and scientific data, but unfortunately gets caught up in the contest between profit and long-term sustainability in agriculture. The film leaves the viewer confused on the message the producers are trying to convey. Agriculturalists on both sides of the irrigation discussion express their views and opinions on environmental legislation and water laws, but because the aquifer is not visible, many residents question the benefit of further restrictions on agricultural use. Overall, the film is sympathetic towards farmers regulating water use themselves, but it could have used a more of an authoritative tone on the Ogallala Aquifer and relied less on the opinion of schoolchildren, farmers, and agricultural economists.

John Redmond Reservoir is one of the twenty-four federal water reserves in Kansas and the topic of the final film in the series. Our Shrinking Reservoirs wonderfully shows the observer how water is a finite resource and argues that man-made lakes should be considered part of the state’s infrastructure, not a part of nature. The film shows how a manufactured lake is prone to quick sediment infiltration, and officials estimate that Redmond will be more than fifty percent filled within ten years, thus reducing its storage capacity for rising floodwaters, its primary goal. The future of the state’s reservoirs is called into question many times in the movie, but the film stops short of sending a warning message or offering any viable solutions. Overall, the Waters in Kansas series is categorically educational and visually entertaining, but some scene transitions could benefit from a closer editing eye.

At the heart of Shifting Course is the quiet river town of Atchison, Kansas. Amanda Hashagen’s film investigates the dichotomy between a life in harmony with the Missouri River and the many attempts to control its occasional outpouring of rage. The movie traces the unique development of the area, which began as a Kanza Indian village, surviving off the abundance of natural resources for a century or more. It then highlights the town’s growth in the railroad heyday and wraps up by showing how the city is trying to reconnect with the river through park development and other programs. It argues that modern residents feel the river is a part of their community and highlights the need to realize the river is itself a natural resource, not merely there for commercial use. The employment of a long timeline and accompanying photographs lends depth to the story. Although the film is only seventeen minutes long, viewers should walk away with a sense of wonder about the town and the muddy Missouri River.

In the first four films, the topic of climate change and global warming is largely avoided and certainly never really discussed at great length. Only in the last film, When the Well Runs Dry, do Steve Lerner and Reuben Aaronson show how human actions, in combination with the environmental realities of Kansas, have resulted in a crisis-level situation, conveying the message in a masterful mix of music, audio clips, and haunting images. A radio program dedicated to the discussion of water issues in central Kansas supplies narration for the film. Marion County residents and experts voice their hydrological dilemmas and concerns on air, allowing the viewer to hear a multitude of first-hand realities farmers and ranchers struggle with in an area struck by prolonged drought. Most of the interviewees agree that climate change is real and fear another drop in the water table will put them out of business for good. The changes over time in the watershed health of the area are most visible in the discussion of withering creeks and ponds; image after image of dry streambeds haunt the viewer with the reality of global warming and overuse.

Water is an ever-shrinking resource in Kansas. Whether you can see the levels go down yourself or not, the reality is there in the hundreds of dry streams, ponds, and wells. Everyone should watch these five short films and use them in the classroom, the boardroom, and the living room. Through such efforts, Kansans can hope someday to help balance the water ledger in the state.

Theresa Young
Washburn University


Road trip from beginning to end, Nebraska is a journey into the past, into a wasteland that includes family difficulties, economic hard times, promises broken, and the history of a forbidding place: the American Great Plains.
As the film opens, Woody Grant (Bruce Dern) is shuffling down the highway out of Billings, Montana, headed to Lincoln, where, a piece of paper in this pocket has told him, he can pick up his million dollars. Convinced that the award certificate he got from a magazine’s subscription offer will bring genuine money, Woody will not stop heading out for Lincoln, in spite of his advanced age and a mind befuddled by years of alcohol abuse.

His son, David Grant (Will Forte), asks him why he wants a million dollars. He wants an air compressor, he says, remembering a loaned compressor that was never returned. And, he says: “I always wanted a brand new truck.” And, “You boys. I want to give you something.” Woody asks David to drive him to Lincoln. David, who works trying to sell electronics in a depressed economy, argues, “I can’t just drop everything and drive to Nebraska.” “What else you got going on?” asks his father. In the landscape of this film, it turns out, nobody has much going on.

Stubborn father and resentful son start across a wide open landscape. Alexander Payne’s choice of black and white for the film accentuates the sameness of the scenery, the depressed look of buildings and towns, and the lack of hope and promise. The present, in this film, is already in the past.

Early in their odyssey, David takes Woody off the highway to see Mount Rushmore. Woody is critical of what he calls “a bunch of rocks.” He points out that Washington is the only one with clothes, that Lincoln has no ear. He calls it “unfinished.” This subtext of the unfinished—of the unsettled rather than settled West, of the false and failed promises, of words not worth the paper they are printed on—continues throughout Nebraska.

Woody’s wife, Kate (June Squibb), wants to put him in a “home.” The term seems ironic, as his actual home has little respect for them and little to offer, not even a peaceful resting place.

In Lincoln, David and Woody drive up to a nondescript, pre-fabricated building to find that Woody does not have a winning number. He is entitled to a free gift, and he chooses a hat that announces him as a Prize Winner. David asks the woman at the desk if this happens a lot. She admits it does and asks, “Does he have Alzheimer’s?” “He just believes stuff that he calls it “a bunch of rocks.” He points out that Washington is the only one with clothes, that Lincoln has no ear. He calls it “unfinished.” This subtext of the unfinished—of the unsettled rather than settled West, of the false and failed promises, of words not worth the paper they are printed on—continues throughout Nebraska.

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Too bad for Woody, but the film also suggests that the promise of the Great Plains is just “stuff” for a lot more people than Woody, from the Homestead Act forward. Perfect irony, then, that an old Great Plains man would end up at the end of his life with nothing but a cap and a slogan.

David buys a truck, and Woody is given a moment of respect, returning to Hawthorne to drive it down the main street, while David hides below the dashboard, letting people believe the old man won something. Pride here is reduced to sham. The scene recalls what Sinclair Lewis wrote in Main Street, his 1920 diatribe against the small town: “Main Street is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters.”
Yet this sham is also born of dignity and respect; *Nebraska* reclaims father to son in this tender, even triumphant moment. Still, sentiment does not overwhelm Nebraska’s clear-eyed look at the Great Plains: the realities of family, economic failures, and the broken promises of history.

*Thomas Fox Averill*

*Washburn University*


In this low-key, lo-fi character study, writer-director-lead actor Blake Robbins (known for roles in *The Office* and HBO’s cult show *Oz*) plays David Conrad, a man on the brink. The film opens with the rituals of family life; he and wife Kelly (Laura Kirk) share breakfast and get their daughters ready for school. David takes the dog out to do his business and then drives his girls to class. His life seems to be made up of predictable patterns: marking papers, huffing his way through a basketball game.

*The Sublime and Beautiful* quickly relays David’s flaws. Despite the obvious love he exudes as a family man, he is having an affair with student aide Katie (Anastasia Baranova). He gets out of attending a visit to his parents on the grounds that he is busy, when he really intends to see Katie sing. Katie and David are at a crossroads. She is soon heading to Los Angeles, presumably to start a career in music. David, despite his seeming dedication to Katie, is committed to remaining in Kansas as a professor, and in theory he is dedicated to his family.

David’s world is destroyed by an accident. On their way back from visiting David’s parents, Kelly and the kids are in a brutal car collision caused by a drunk driver. Kelly survives, with injuries, as does drunk driver Lee Westin (Armin Shimerman, of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* fame). Both children die. David drifts into a muted, somnambulistic depression.

*The Sublime and Beautiful* is about how a couple deals with—or, more appropriately, fails to adequately address—a tragedy. It keeps this focus by sticking closely to the experiences and choices of David and Kelly (though mainly David) as they experience loss. The breakdown of their marriage is conveyed through details such as their sudden unwillingness to make eye contact with one another, David’s increased drinking, and the way the camera shows their isolation from each other even when they inhabit the same frame. This is not a traditionally redemptive story. David seeks revenge on Westin, even threatening him with a shotgun. (Westin dies later that night, presumably through no direct fault.
Facing This Vast Hardness

of David’s.) David hits rock bottom after being thrown out of a strip club. The film does not end with closure, but instead offers some tentative steps. David makes contact with Jamie, Lee’s daughter, a connection that suggests (at film’s end) that he is ready to begin the long process of healing.

Robbins favors a hand-held camera that suggests intimate proximity. Closely-positioned set-ups focus on the facial expressions of the actors, with less attention to the spaces they inhabit. While this choice almost certainly has to do with budgetary restrictions (a quick shooting schedule and extensive location use make for potential logistical nightmares), it also gives some thematic specificity to the film. Despite “sublime” being in the title, this is not a film of overwhelming, superhuman largesse. Rather, it is a film in which the emotions that stem from a senseless tragedy break through the veneer of the everyday and leave their mark. It is mostly understated and trusts its actors enough to present ambiguous and conflicting feelings.

Despite its favoring of tight framing in which the actors loom large, The Sublime and Beautiful still makes extensive use of its Lawrence-area locations. The film uses the typical landscapes of Kansas—empty agricultural fields—in transition shots and occasionally to suggest loneliness. As the film is set around Christmas, the frosty fields provide the opposite feeling to the hearth and home fleetingly offered by the film’s opening sequence. Lawrence’s variety as a college town comes in handy, with familiar places like Lawrence Memorial Hospital and The Dusty Bookshelf complimenting the more anonymous locations.

Robbins and co-star Laura Kirk are frequent collaborators of Kansas University professor Kevin Willmott (who serves here as an Executive Producer). Like Willmott’s Bunker Hill (2008) and The Only Good Indian (2009), this is a Jayhawker film, through and through. That said, it is to Robbins’s credit that his film works entirely on its own, as a study in grief and loss, even if one does not have a connection to Kansas. Above all else, The Sublime and Beautiful is an honest film about flawed people who do not immediately find their salvation or piece of mind. It is a movie that fearlessly dwells on the messiness and fallout of tragedy.

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“Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.” Not since Dorothy Gale uttered those oft-quoted words in 1939 has that statement been as true as in the 2013 releases Dead Kansas and Rabid Love. The rural landscapes and heartland icons are the only familiar features of these two films, which bring the monstrous back to the Midwest.

Both films play with current fascinations with violence and the undead: Dead Kansas explores themes of anxiety and contagion in a zombie-plagued rural outpost of humanity where nearly all the women have succumbed to a virulent outbreak, while Rabid Love focuses on science gone awry in the hands of a reclusive madman who carries out biology-altering experiments in a bunker hidden deep in the woods.

Unlike Dorothy’s adventures in Oz, however, these two tales of terror and suspense do not affirm that “there’s no place like home” to which one can return, stronger and wiser, after braving the horrors of the unknown. Rather, in both, the security of home, family, and friends is an illusion. Beset by the horrors of altered humanity, the films’ characters struggle to reach “home,” but most never make it, and those that do find nothing remaining there to anchor them.

This lesson, along with numerous nods in homage to Dorothy’s journey, is at the forefront of Dead Kansas. Originally conceived as a five-part web series, the film spins a post-apocalyptic tale of a heartland overrun by “Rottens,” the survivors’ term for the zombie-like creatures that threaten to eradicate humanity. Products of contagion, the Rottens are shambling, decayed figures that attack the living, turning them into soulless killing machines.

As the Rottens spread chaos across the once-civilized landscape, other figures of anarchy also emerge to seize power. A ruthless gang led by the brutish Jebediah (Michael Camp) attempts to dominate the region, capturing Rottens for their own amusement, ruling by intimidation, and setting in motion a plan to kidnap and sell the one remaining female, Emma (Alexandria Lightford, Erin Miracle), the daughter of a local farmer (Aaron Guerrero). Jebediah tries to strong-arm the farmer, Glenn, into surrendering his daughter, but their confrontation ends when Rottens attack and kill Jebediah’s brother.

When a tornado veers across the farm, Glenn is bitten by a Rotten and amputates his forearm in an attempt to stem the transmission of the disease. Emma must...
now take the lead and save her father, avoiding both Jebediah’s minions and the Rottens along the way. The pair journeys to the fortress-like settlement of Shambles in search of help. Once a real carnival ground, Shambles is now populated by denizens of the sideshow, including a giant (Irwin Keyes), a midget (Ben Woolf), and a pitchfork-wielding African American in backcountry overalls (Joe McQueen) who serves as Emma’s guide down the road to find Dr. Emerson (Darryl Dick), her own version of Dorothy’s wizard.

Like Dorothy’s wizard, Dr. Emerson proves ineffective, needing her more than she needs him. He believes that her blood holds the key to a cure, but before he can press her for help Jebediah’s gang appears. They take Emma captive, intending to sell her to the highest bidder. Her newfound trio of friends unites to save her and return her to Shambles to find her father and bring him to Dr. Emerson to be cured. Alas, the group arrives too late. Glenn and the other inhabitants of Shambles have become infected and turned into Rottens. In one final, if unintentional, act of fatherly protection, Glenn bites Jebediah, saving Emma, who in turn ends her father’s plight with a bullet in the brain. As the group barely escapes the Rottens in a battered camper, Emma laments, “All I wanted was to go home, and now I don’t have a home to go to.”

*Rabid Love* further problematizes the stability of the heartland through a tale of sustained suspense. A quintet of friends embarks on one last vacation together at a hunting cabin. Drawing on audiences’ familiarity with classic horror tropes, the film signals at the outset that something is about to go terribly wrong but withholds the true nature of the evil about to befall the group. As the narrative winds its way toward the mystery, however, it crafts a careful commentary on rural culture and midwestern identity. At the film’s outset, the heartland locale is defined by images that speak of small-town America in the 1980s, from old-time filling stations to rotary-dial phones to expressions of community and neighborliness, banishing any doubt in contemporary viewers’ minds that this is a town that time forgot.

The five hapless young vacationers embody a range of complex identities and relationships with each other and the wider world. Heather (Hayley Derryberry), Julie (Jessica Sonneborn), and Summer (Hannah Landberg) all struggle visibly with rural adulthood—Do they pursue ambition or marry? Set their sights high or settle? Accede to their dreams or succumb to the small-town stifling?
control or act?—in a setting where the cultural capital of traditional gender roles is still high. Heather, despite her intellect, is openly applauded as “wife material,” while Summer accepts abuse as the price of her limited options and advises Heather that “you might as well get out of this crappy little town, before you get knocked up, like everybody else.” Julie, who pushes Heather toward graduate school, alternately acts out and reaches out to gain the attentions and acceptance of David (Brandon Stacy), the mysterious stranger in their midst. Their male counterparts grapple with their own issues of down-home identity. It is clear at the outset that John, Heather’s boyfriend, is a figure of upstanding moral character, while Adam (Josh Hammond), whose existence is defined by guns, beer, and trash talk, is his traditional redneck counterpart, a man only John seems to understand. Taken together, the group forms a microcosm of heartland identities that is further enhanced by the occasional presence of Julie’s cousin, the stereotypical small-town sheriff (Brian L. Reece).

The awkwardly abrasive David introduces and carries the tension in the story as the group gradually realizes that what locals feared was a predatory bear on the loose is actually something much more
deadly. As David’s true role as anarchic mad scientist is revealed, the narrative shifts from character study to horror. Incensed that his experiments in defense bioengineering were rejected by the government as “un-American” and “an un-honorable way to wage war,” he has injected John with a super-rabies serum designed to create an instinct-driven entity focused only on “food, fighting, and fornication.” The plan is to eradicate an enemy from within, creating chaos, terror, and widespread death.

As the drama between the vacationers and their tormentor slowly unfolds, they are eliminated, one by one, until only Heather, an injured Julie, and the increasingly rabid John remain. When Heather sets fire to David’s secret laboratory, John is all that is left of his work. In the final battle in the woods, love bests biology: John, summoning the last shreds of his humanity, kills his “creator” and, grasping the engagement ring that he had planned to give Heather, allows her to shoot him.

The relief that this brings, however, is short-lived. As the sheriff drives the two women back to town, Heather’s character delivers a new twist to the status of “final girl.” She, too, has been infected by David’s serum; before they can react, she mutilates her companions. The door of the police cruiser opens and Heather falls out, strings of bloody saliva pooling on the ground. She races across the fields, away from the car, away from home. While the triumph of horror’s “final girl” typically reaffirms traditional values, this one is corrupted into an agent of chaos, implying that the placid heartland will never be restored.

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Manhattan. Directed by Ryan Andrew Bruce and Bret Palmer; screenplay by Ryan Andrew Bruce and George Stavropoulos; produced by Ryan Andrew Bruce, Bret Palmer, and George Stavropoulos. 2013; black and white; 135 minutes. Distributed by Element 35 and mhkfilm.com; streaming at vimeo.com/ondemand/manhattan.

It’s a sticky thing, being a Woody Allen fan. In light of recent allegations, we read his early films for creepy prognostications. Even putting his personal life aside, Allen’s defenders must acknowledge the sterility of his later work; situations, characters, even jokes are cynically recycled. Entering his ninth decade, the director keeps turning out a film every year, but his prolificacy may come at the expense of originality. Nevertheless, the inventiveness of his golden period—which, I would argue, begins with Bananas (1971) and ends with Bullets over Broadway (1994), an extraordinary run for any artist—continues to thrill us and to find new audiences among young film fans.

Manhattan is a loving homage to Allen made by three Kansas State University graduates, all in their thirties—George Stavropoulos, Ryan Bruce, and Bret Palmer—who, in various configurations, share acting, writing, and direction credit for this film. The joke here, of course, is that the city of the title is Manhattan, Kansas. And just as Allen’s 1979 romantic comedy of the same name restored the image of cinematic New York, closing a decade of gritty dramas about crime and corruption, so does Manhattan endeavor to broaden the representation of Kansas beyond Wizard of the Oz clichés. “I hate that movie,” says Miles Adler, the Woodyesque protagonist played by Stavropoulos. “This place is anything but black and white.”

Yet the movie is in fact shot in black and white, like its namesake; the plot adheres closely to Allen’s model too, offering a dance for two men and three women (the question of inter-generational sex is approached here circumspectly and intelligently). The town is shown off in its limestone glory, and even cinematographer Gordon Willis’s iconic frame of Allen and Diane Keaton watching the sun rise over the East River is replicated here with a shot of two lovers gazing at the Konza Prairie. As the characters debate the relative power of the image versus language, Bruce and Palmer lean heavily on image, perhaps to a fault; the film features an abundance of wordless montage and dream sequences. But in a script full of jokes, the biggest laugh is a visual pun, as two buddies cap a day of stereotypically manly sports wearing knickers and argyles, tapping a croquet ball around Memorial Field as they discuss what women want.

The chief complaint against Allen, during his long and fruitful New York period, was that his outlook was too parochial. He failed to imagine life beyond his upper-class, intellectual milieu, let alone beyond the Hudson. He could not temper his infatuation with this society, whose nonstop jabber about Gustav Mahler and e e cummings, after a couple of decades, seemed to be trapped in a suffocating drop of elitist amber.

The Kansans of the new Manhattan jabber too: about the merits of Mark Rothko and F. Scott Fitzgerald, the solipsistic nature of art, the meaning of life, and the impermanence of love. In other words, they talk exactly like Woody Allen characters, minus the accents, and sometimes with spot-on parody. “My analyst says I’m suffering from post-monogamy stress disorder,” one character mutters. The film serves as a refreshing correction to Allen’s myopia: interesting people can and
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do live in the middle of the country. And Manhattan, Kansas, is a place where people go to gallery openings, dance recitals, and fancy restaurants, just as they do in New York. The population is cosmopolitan and diverse (more diverse than Allen’s New York, actually). There is even a hilarious cameo by Broadway playwright (and Kansas State alumnus) Nathan Louis Jackson to underscore the point.

In their eagerness to depict Kansas’s intellectual and artistic vitality, however, the filmmakers miss an opportunity to challenge Allen’s operational principle: that education, social status, and complexity of character develop in direct proportion to one another. The Manhattan of *Manhattan* resembles the Big Apple to the exclusion of what makes the Kansas town unique. We do see a few seconds of Miles riding a mechanical bull, and hear a quip from a barstool philosopher, but this cinematic Manhattan is all gown and no town. Yes, there are elegant dinner parties and debates about painting. There is also the rodeo, the Country Stampede, and the constant din of fusillade from Fort Riley. The kids at the bohemian bistro are as likely to be having a prayer meeting as an argument about poetry.

Yet what infuses *Manhattan* most of all is a sense of delight. Miles, a writer, tends to repeat words, turn them over, consider their meaning. There is delight in language and delight in cinema. This is a young man’s movie, about characters negotiating art, morality, brainy and independent women, and their place in the world. It reminds us why we loved Woody Allen in the first place.

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*Courtesy of Element 35.*