Warner Brothers premiered Dodge City in the real Kansas town of that name on April 1, 1939. Activities included a parade, of course, that featured the film’s star Errol Flynn (mounted, right) and dozens of other cast members, along with tens of thousands of visitors and residents of the “Cowboy Capital.”
The Place of the Present in the Past:
Dichronicity in Recent Kansas/Plains Films

Edited and introduced by Thomas Prasch

Arranging the films in this year’s selection of reviews (coming to you an issue earlier than usual because of the special issue devoted to the sesquicentennial of the Chisholm Trail this summer) presented an interesting quandary. Usually, it is a simple enough procedure: start with the classic films, then go in chronological order. But where, in that case, did Kevin Flanagan’s review of *American Interior* belong?

On the one hand, the film was about John Evans, whose quixotic expedition in the 1790s to find the Welsh-speaking Indians that he was convinced lived in the American interior (there is this legend about the twelfth-century Welsh Prince Madoc, see) took him deep into the Great Plains, as far as Mandan territory in the Dakotas. On the other hand, it was just as much, or more, about the quixotic expedition of the contemporary Welsh rocker Gruff Rhys, retracing the route of his distant ancestor in a series of concerts and conversations that reflected as often on contemporary issues and circumstances as they did on the eighteenth century. So, does the review belong right after the classics or just before Tom Averill’s review of *Ozland*, this year’s dystopian futurist (and Baum-influenced) selection?

In the end, I picked the earlier position for Flanagan’s review, though either choice would have done as well. But the quandary reveals an interesting pattern in this year’s films: a deep dichronicity characterizes the selected works, a constant insistence upon speaking to the place of the present in films about the past. As Vanessa Steinroetter notes in her review of *Dawn of Day*, a documentary about the workings of the Underground Railroad in Kansas, narrator Richard Pitts’s “view of history as a current event thus forms an important undercurrent throughout the film, inviting viewers to draw connections between their own lives and those depicted in the documentary.” Contemporaries’ concerted concern with preserving the past, Isaias McCaffery notes, inflects short documentaries such as *Quindaro* or, only a shade less explicitly, *Volland Memories*. As reviewer Eric Anderson notes, preserving a people’s language, and all the cultural meanings that go with it, the theme of *Rising Voices/Hóthanojppi*, works similarly but with significantly more urgency, given the critical role of language in cultural survival.

In a film remake such as *The Magnificent Seven* (reviewed here by Bruce Kahler), the interplay between past and present is bound to surface, but it is there, too, in a film such as *Slow West* (reviewed here by Cynthia Miller), which remakes genre conventions rather than a specific film. The role of Frank Baum’s novel as a sort of model for living for the
wannabe survivors of the postapocalyptic future similarly looks to entanglements between pasts and futures. We can even see the pattern in the two Kevin Willmott films that Aram Goudsouzian reviews here. If Fast Break, the documentary about coach John McLendon’s breaking through racial barriers in basketball, keeps its roots firmly in a recounting of the past, The Profit, Willmott’s fictional film about the contemporary professional sports scene, provides a sort of before-and-after commentary, a sense of where these particular achievements would take us.

But such tendencies in film should not surprise us, since as historians we do it all the time. Sure, historians and historical filmmakers seek to avoid blatant anachronisms—the pioneer wearing a watch, or the turn-of-the-century hero speaking the slang of today—since such slips just suggest sloppy research. Historians are also wary of teleological accounts of history, narratives that work backward from outcomes to explain historical events. Although the most common example of such an error might well be the Sonderweg theory, the “it-all-leads-to-Hitler” approach to German history so effectively dismantled by David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley (The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany, 1984), we can certainly think of more local variations. By examining Bleeding Kansas too much through the lens of post–Civil War outcomes, for example, we might well miss the efforts of some Kansas settlers to craft a constitution that made Kansas both a free state and one free of blacks. Still, every historian knows that our present place influences our thinking about the past, that the questions we ask about the past inevitably reflect present interests and concerns. That is why history changes, why we can continue to write new work about past periods rather than take it all as settled and done. This year’s group of historical filmmakers just seems more attuned to this dynamic feature of history, more self-conscious about their relationship with the past.

As always, we begin with a classic film; this year, however, we are adding an additional classic paired with its modern remake. The straight classic is Bonnie and Clyde, first released fifty years ago this year amid much controversy over its violence and glamorization of criminality. Matt Cecil, who reviews it for us, provides a broader perspective by moving beyond the film and its story to consider the Bonnie and Clyde tale in a comparative framework, examining how the FBI’s public-relations machine presented other criminals in the period. Cecil, dean of the College of Arts and Humanities at Minnesota State University, Mankato, has authored three books on Hoover’s FBI: Hoover’s FBI and the Fourth Estate: The Campaign to Control the Press and the Bureau’s Image (2014), Branding Hoover’s FBI: How the Boss’s PR Men Sold the Bureau to America (2016), and The Ballad of Ben and Stella Mae: Great Plains Outlaws Who Became FBI Public Enemies Nos. 1 and 2 (2016). The classic/remake pairing is The Magnificent Seven (1960) and its remake from last year, reviewed by Bruce Kahler, to whom we have turned to before for reviews of Westerns (he reviewed A Million Ways to Die in the West [2014] in our last installment of reviews, summer 2015). Readers of Kansas History can also look forward to Kahler’s take on classic films about the Chisholm Trail in the upcoming summer issue. Kahler was a longtime distinguished professor of humanities at Bethany College and is currently at work on an illustrated history of the Art Department at Southeast Missouri State University.

With legendary roots in the era before white contact, The Daughter of Dawn provides the start of our chronological sequence. We could almost call it a classic, except that practically no one has seen it. An all-Indian silent film, it had a very limited release in 1920 but has now been rediscovered and restored under the aegis of the Oklahoma Historical Society. We called on Kerry Wynn, associate professor of history at Washburn University, to do the review. This past year, she published an essay, “Civilizing the White Man: American Indian Elites Define Citizenship in Oklahoma,” in the collection Representing Citizenship, edited by Richard Marbeck. Readers of Kansas History may recall her review of Wounded Knee in 2011 and Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee in 2009; apparently, she is the person to turn to when Wounded Knee comes up. She in turn called on Washburn student Chris Bowers to coauthor the review. Bowers has both married into and been researching the Comanche, who will be the focus for his capstone research project.

As mentioned above, American Interior gets slotted next into our sequence. Reviewer Kevin Flanagan teaches in the Film Studies and English programs at the University of Pittsburgh, and Kansas History readers may recall his 2015 review of Blake Robbins’s film The Sublime and the Beautiful from our last round of reviews. He recently contributed essays and liner notes to Ken Russell: The Great Composers, a DVD/Blu-ray set published by the British Film Institute, and edited a special issue of Widescreen Journal on video-game adaptation.

The real-life fur trader Hugh Glass followed John Evans into the plains in the 1820s, and The Revenant offers
Western Film and Television.
Sue Matheson’s forthcoming
Wichita State’s Local and Community History Program.
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film review sections, and among the essay collections she
at Emerson College, has been regularly featured in these
Miller’s capable hands for review. Miller, who teaches in
the Institute of Liberal Arts and Interdisciplinary Studies
is due out in spring 2018.
As noted previously, Vanessa Steinroetter, assistant
professor of English at Washburn University, provides
our review of Dawn of Day, the documentary on the
Underground Railroad in Kansas. She will be familiar to
readers of Kansas History for her essay “Walt Whitman
in the Early Kansas Press” (Autumn 2016) as well as for
her review of The Homesman in our 2015 selection of film
reviews. Her article “Daughters of a Reading People:
Representations of African American Girlhood and
Female Literacy in the Christian Recorder” will appear
in the forthcoming volume Saving the World: Girlhood and
Evangelicalism in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature, edited
by Robin Cadwallader and Allison Giffen.
It has been a rich several years for new Westerns;
indeed, there have been too many for us to attend to in
these pages. We have bypassed a variety of choices—
Jane Got a Gun, The Duel, The Hateful Eight, and Forsaken
among them—to focus on the most interesting of recent
contributions to the genre, Slow West, putting it in Cynthia
Miller’s capable hands for review. Miller, who teaches in
the Institute of Liberal Arts and Interdisciplinary Studies
at Emerson College, has been regularly featured in these
film review sections, and among the essay collections she
has edited with A. Bowdoin Van Riper and contributed to
are Undead in the West (2012), Undead in the West II: They Just
Keep Coming (2013), and International Westerns: Relocating
the Frontier (2013). She has also contributed essays to Lee
Broughton’s Critical Perspectives on the Western (2016) and
Sue Matheson’s forthcoming Iconography and Archetypes in
Western Film and Television.
For a review of Dust, Blood and Fire, Austin Snell’s
independent film set in turn-of-the-twentieth-century
southeast Kansas, we turned to Jay Price, professor and
chair of Wichita State University’s Department of History,
who in turn suggested a group review by members of
Wichita State’s Local and Community History Program.
Seth Bate, Autumn Lawson, Dave Norris, and Jay
Price all had a hand in reviewing the film. For a group of
documentaries partially funded by the Kansas
Humanities Council and one fictional short film, we called
on Isaiah McCaffery, professor of history at Independence
Community College, who has contributed to previous
film sections, most recently with the review of Love and
Terror on the Howling Plains of Nowhere in our last selection.
A favorite nugget of “He did what?” history from
the annals of Kansas, the tale of “goat-gland doctor”
John Romulus Brinkley, gets an imaginatively conceived
animated retelling in Nuts! Eric Juhnke, whose Quacks and
Crusaders: The Fabulous Careers of John Brinkley, Norman
Baker, and Harry Hoxsey (2002) also covered that territory,
seemed best suited to review the film. Juhnke is professor
and chair of history at Briar Cliff University and has also contributed several book reviews to Kansas History.
Kevin Willmott has followed up his film Jayhawkers
(2014) with two new basketball-themed films, and since
Aram Goudsouzian, professor and chair of history at the
University of Memphis, did such good work reviewing
Jayhawkers for us in 2015, we thought it only right to let
him take on these near sequels. Longtime readers of
Kansas History may recall his article “‘Can Basketball
Survive Chamberlain?’: The Kansas Years of Wilt the Stilt”
(Autumn 2005), Goudsouzian has also authored works on
Sidney Poitier and another basketball star, Bill Russell; his
most recent books are Down to the Crossroads: Civil Rights,
Black Power, and the Meredith March against Fear (2014) and
(with Karnig Parnian) Goodbye Antoura: A Memoir of the
Reviewing David Kendall’s documentary Tallgrass
Prairie Preserve: A Flint Hills Love Story, at once an exercise
in landscape appreciation and an account of the creation of a preservation site, is William Sheldon, who teaches
English at Hutchinson Community College. He is the
author of two books of poetry, Retrieving Old Bones (2002)
and Rain Comes Riding (2011), as well as a chapbook,
Into Distant Grass (2009). Retrieving Old Bones “was a”
Kansas City Star Noteworthy Book for 2002 and is listed
as one of the Great Plains Alliance’s Great Books of the
Great Plains. Our review of Rising Voices/Hőthanyíipi,
the documentary about preserving the Lakota language,
is provided by Eric P. Anderson, a professor in Haskell
University’s Indigenous and American Indian Studies
Program. Anderson holds a doctorate from the University
of Kansas in American history, specializing in American
Indian cultures and the history of the American West, and
is an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation.
His major research focus is on American Indian education, and he is currently at work on a book about the history of Haskell Institute as well as textbook projects in American Indian studies and Native American history.

For *Called to Walls*, a visually rich documentary about recent Kansas-based muralists and their work, we called on Stephanie Lanter, whom readers may recall for her review of *Earthworks*, a film about Stan Herd’s art, in 2013. Lanter, assistant professor of ceramics at Emporia State University, is an internationally exhibited and award-winning sculptor. And finally, for our review of *Ozland*, we turn to the man who has been keeping us updated on Oz variations since these film reviews began in 2001, Thomas Fox Averill, professor of English and Writer in Residence at Washburn University, where he and Steinroetter are in fact teaching a course on Oz’s legacy in film and literature. Averill’s most recent novel is *A Carol Dickens Christmas* (2015), and he has the unusual distinction in this selection of both reviewing and being reviewed, since one of the shorts covered in McCaffery’s review is adapted from an Averill short story.

Thomas Prasch  
Washburn University

*Bonnie and Clyde.* Directed by Arthur Penn; screenplay by David Newman and Robert Benton (and Robert Towne, uncredited); produced by Warren Beatty. 1967; color; 111 minutes. Distributed by Warner Brothers/Seven Arts.

In a 1967 review of *Bonnie and Clyde*, the famed *New York Times* reviewer Bosley Crowther described the film as a “cheap piece of bald-faced slapstick comedy that treats the hideous depredations of that sleazy, moronic pair as though they were as full of fun and frolics as the jazz-age cutups in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*” (*New York Times*, August 14, 1967). Crowther, one of the most influential film critics of his time, worried that the glamorized movie account of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow might obscure the brutal reality of the murderous husband and wife who robbed a dozen banks and killed nine police officers and several others during their criminal rampage between 1931 and 1935.

Kansas’s own version of Bonnie and Clyde, Ben and Stella Mae Dickson, were Topeka natives who robbed two South Dakota banks and became FBI “Public Enemies” numbers 1 and 2 in 1938 and 1939. The FBI actively compared the Dicksons to Bonnie and Clyde, suggesting that Ben and Stella were similarly murderous and desperate criminals. Just as Clyde Barrow was no Warren Beatty and Bonnie Parker was hardly Faye Dunaway, the Dicksons were far from the murderous outlaws created by FBI press releases. The popularity of both stories demonstrates the public’s continuing fascination with the midwestern outlaws of the 1930s.

Over time, the 1967 version of *Bonnie and Clyde* has come to be viewed as a landmark film, emerging as it did when the Hollywood Production Code, with its stark limits on violence and sexuality, had lost its bite. Director Arthur Penn, whose prior credits included *The Miracle Worker* (1962), created a film that offered ferocious (for the time) violence and substantial overt sexuality in its portrayal of the couple. Beatty and Dunaway were sex symbols of their generation, and the film offered a preview of what crime films would become over the ensuing decades. The Production Code was scrapped the year after *Bonnie and Clyde*’s release in favor of the Motion Picture Association of 50 Kansas History.
of America’s letter-coded rating system. From the film’s production style (violent scenes that featured fast editing and slow motion) to the clothing styles of its stars, Bonnie and Clyde was an important and influential film. It opened the door for the violent and sexualized crime motion pictures that have become commonplace in the twenty-first century.

Critics at the time of its release also saw the film as an allegory for the antiestablishment feelings of the late 1960s. Penn may not have provided an accurate view of the exploits of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, they argued, but the director’s view reflected a questioning of assumptions about right and wrong. It represented a “modern” take on the infallibility of government and on a system that disempowered those at the bottom of the economic ladder. When critics and letter writers criticized Crowther’s dismissive take on the film and offered antiestablishment explanations of its glamorized view of crime, however, he answered: “By this same line of reckoning, one could build up a theme of sympathy and sadness on the thought that the system was the enemy of a character named Lee Harvey Oswald who had a penchant to fire high powered rifles at moving targets, or that the irony of Hitler’s terror was that he was so confused by his early rejection that he didn’t realize the awfulness of the violence he caused” (New York Times, September 3, 1967).

Bonnie and Clyde was, never mind Crowther’s concerns about its cultural impact, a work of fiction produced by artists in a commercialized context. The recasting of Ben and Stella Mae Dickson into Bonnie and Clyde redux, however, was the construction of public-relations officials in the nation’s most powerful and important law enforcement agency. The reality of Ben and Stella was far from the image produced by the FBI in thousands of news releases and authorized retellings. Ben Dickson was the son of a respected Topeka High School teacher. He first found himself in trouble with the law as a teenager, when he was accused of a cab robbery under questionable circumstances. He was well read and carried books with him during his time as a fugitive. He wrote poems and seemed desperate to find a way out of the situation in which his poor choices had landed him. If Ben was hardly Clyde Barrow, Stella Mae was even less like Bonnie Parker. Stella was a pretty teen but hardly the “gun moll” that the bureau’s publicists created in their news releases and authorized stories about the pair. Prior to her arrest, newspaper reports—reflecting the FBI’s demonization of her—routinely described Stella as the most feared gun moll since Bonnie Parker. Yet several of the reporters who saw her after her arrest wrote about the contrast between the FBI’s portrayal and the reality of sixteen-year-old Stella Mae Dickson. “Stella Mae looked more like a schoolgirl than a gun moll awaiting the proceedings of the court on charges of bank robbery including the taking of hostages, a capital offense,” a reporter noted. “She is a small girl, short and not very heavy and wore a small black hat set back on her blonde hair, which made her appear no older than the 16 years she claims” (Sioux Falls Argus Leader [S.D.], May 19, 1939).

The FBI’s reconstruction of Ben and Stella as a late-1930s Bonnie and Clyde was purposeful and served public-relations purposes, advancing the bureau’s preferred story of itself. The Bureau continued to peddle its fictional account of the Dicksons’ “Bonnie and Clyde” exploits until the late 1960s. Although they were produced for very different purposes and audiences, the FBI’s use of the Dicksons as a public-relations prop and the success of the film Bonnie and Clyde as a statement of antiestablishment sentiment in 1967 both demonstrate the public’s continued fascination with the midwestern outlaws of the 1930s.

Matthew Cecil
Minnesota State University, Mankato

The Magnificent Seven. Directed by John Sturges; screenplay by William Roberts; produced by John Sturges. 1960; color; 128 minutes. Distributed by the Mirisch Company.


The subject at the heart of the Magnificent Seven “idea”—the basic plot that originated in Akira Kurosawa’s Seven Samurai (1954), inspired the 1960 film version directed by John Sturges and its numerous imitators, and is now revived in the 2016 version by Antoine Fuqua—is the nature of the mercenary, or “hired gun” in the parlance of the Western. What kind of men were these paid warriors? What was their motivation (beyond the obvious pecuniary incentive)? What relationship did they have to the people who employed them? And how did they perform in battle?

In the 1960 film, Calvera (Eli Wallach) and his gang have once again ravaged a small Mexican village, stealing
its food and killing a resentful farmer. This time, however, the peasants decide to fight back when the bandits return. A delegation of men travels north to an American town to buy weapons. There they are impressed by the courage and gun-handling skills of Chris (Yul Brynner) and Vin (Steve McQueen), the only men willing to make a stand against the local racists and drive a hearse with the body of an Indian to the local cemetery. When the meek farmers approach Chris about their problem, he suggests that, because of the expense and danger involved, they should not buy guns but hire “good” men to confront the Calvera gang. In other words, this is a job for professionals. Chris commits himself to what he considers a contractual agreement with the villagers.

Chris and Vin proceed to select four more gunfighters who are available and willing to take on the life-threatening task of protecting the village for a mere $20 ($160 today). The small amount of pay suggests that money does not really motivate the mercenaries. Harry (Brad Dexter) is driven by his dream of treasure in the Mexican hills, but we are meant to regard him as delusional. The motivation of the others is barely spoken. Since they are currently unemployed, helping Chris honor his commitment at least provides an opportunity to make use of their skills. The exception is the seventh and last man to join the group, Chico (Horst Buchholz). This “very young and very proud” Mexican is in awe of the gunfighters and desperately wants to prove himself worthy of their fellowship. He fails Chris’s little test of hand speed but doggedly follows the mercenaries to the village. Chris finally relents and admits him to the gang.

Recognizing that the farmers are incapable of defending themselves, or even of helping the mercenaries protect them, the Seven attempt to teach the peasants how to use their guns. They also organize them to build stone walls, dig trenches, and hang rope fences. Only the two Mexicans in the group develop personal relationships with the villagers. Bernardo (Charles Bronson), an Irish Mexican, becomes friendly with a few young boys and tells them that their fathers are the real heroes because they are loving and responsible family men. Chico falls in love with a young woman, deciding after the climactic battle to give up the glory of gunfighting and live in the village with her. The others are confirmed individualists, estranged from family and community by their violent profession.

In the first battle, the Seven are truly magnificent. They courageously stand their ground and kill several of the hoodlums with nary a scratch among themselves. But once again, the film proves a rule about these professionals by making an exception. Lee (Robert Vaughn) cowers in fear during the fight. Afterward, a feverish nightmare sequence shows us that he has lost his nerve. Chris and his crew make a serious tactical error when they all ride to the bandit camp to scare off the bandits’ horses because, in the meantime, Calvera and his men take over the village. Calvera forces the Seven to leave but then makes his own error, allowing them to keep their weapons. Victory in a second battle brings redemption for the Seven. Harry says they would be crazy to go back to the village and risk their lives again but then changes his mind and is killed. Lee overcomes his fear and regains his self-respect, but he is also killed, as are two others in the group.

Most reviewers of the new The Magnificent Seven found it unoriginal and consequently a lesser film. “Predictable,” “reheated,” and “stolidly traditional” are among the representative descriptions. Differences from the earlier movie are acknowledged but judged to be mere “tweaks” meant to appeal to the modern audience. A close and thoughtful examination of the hired guns in the film, however, reveals significant differences. John Sturges’s film may have acquired the patina of a “classic,” but Antoine Fuqua has crafted a superior entertainment.
Gone are the international and racial implications of the earlier version of the story. The conflict is now between a farming community and a land-hungry mining company owned by Bartholomew Bogue (Peter Sarsgaard), a crueler and far less accommodating villain than Calvera. Bogue has ruthlessly murdered the husband of Emma Cullen (Haley Bennett). Driven by a desire for revenge, Emma takes the initiative to take up a collection and offer it to Sam Chisolm (Denzel Washington), a warrant officer and licensed peace officer from Wichita. She stands up to those neighbors who question the wisdom of her arrangement, and she is also willing to use violence against Bogue’s men. Although Emma does not become one of the Seven, she is a substantial female character, something beyond the macho imagination of Sturges’s film.

Chisolm and his number two, Joshua Faraday (Chris Pratt), are given the opportunity to prove their cool brutality and prowess with guns. Their recruits are courageous and skilled in the use of weapons but, like the Lee character in the earlier version, Goodnight Robicheaux (Ethan Hawke) suffers through a crisis of confidence. A key difference in this retelling of the tale is a clearer account of motivations. We eventually learn that, like Emma, Chisolm seeks revenge against the mining company’s owner. Twelve years earlier, Bogue’s men had attacked a community of homesteaders in Lincoln, Kansas, raping Chisolm’s mother and killing his two sisters. Chisolm is also sympathetic to the plight of the community, however, saying that “these people deserve their lives back.” Another member of the Seven tells his companions that he is proud to fight among men he respects and in the service of others, a soldierly “for cause and comrades” motivation.

Once again, the mercenaries attempt to teach the townspeople how to defend themselves and to construct defenses. By shooting a few miners and taking over their camp, the Seven gain access to a large cache of explosives, which they later use most effectively. This time, there are no scenes of bonding with the community. The lighthearted and impetuous Chico character, who is given far too much time on camera in the earlier film, is mercifully eliminated. Nor do we see anything like the sentimental intraracial scenes between Bernardo and the village children.

Bogue recruits a small army and attempts to take back the town. On the verge of defeat, his men turn the tide by unveiling a Gatling gun that blasts apart buildings and bodies alike. But in his dying moments, Josh is able to blow up the powerful weapon with a stick of dynamite. All that is left is for Chisolm to wound Bogue and for Emma to kill him. The battle scenes in this new version of The Magnificent Seven are certainly bigger and bloodier, more than is necessary for the story. But they are embedded in a film that has more gorgeous scenery, stronger characters, and better acting than its predecessor. Rather than begrudge it such scenes of violence, we ought to embrace the fact that action (murder and mayhem included) is what movies, among all forms of art, do best.

Bruce R. Kahler
Cape Girardeau, Missouri
Just under a century ago, *The Daughter of Dawn*, a silent film with an all-Comanche/Kiowa cast, played for one night at the American Legion in Topeka. According to the *Topeka State Journal*, the screening was to be a major event, accompanied by a parade and dances by Kiowa and Comanche cast members traveling with the film and Potawatomi men and women from Mayetta (“Legion to Give a Movie,” May 14, 1921; “Legion to Show Picture,” May 16, 1921). Although the film and visit were apparently a great success, the circulation of *The Daughter of Dawn* was limited. After screenings in a few cities in 1920 and 1921, including a showing for President Woodrow Wilson at the White House on the night before Thanksgiving (“Aids in President’s Feast,” *Evening Star* [Washington, D.C.], November 21, 1920), the film was thought to be lost. Recently rediscovered and restored under the auspices of the Oklahoma Historical Society, it is available on DVD and streaming through Netflix. For those interested in the history of Kansas and the plains, *The Daughter of Dawn* provides a rare opportunity to view a film showcasing performances by men and women from two nations with great historical influence.

Norbert Myles, a Euro-American actor turned filmmaker, wrote and directed the film at the urging of R. E. Banks, a Texan who owned the Texas Film Company (see Leo Kelley, “*The Daughter of Dawn*: An Original Silent Film with an Oklahoma Indian Cast,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 78 [Fall 1999]: 291). The film follows a complicated courtship in a Kiowa village, as White Eagle seeks to marry the Daughter of Dawn. White Parker, son of the influential Comanche leader Quanah Parker, played White Eagle, and Esther LeBarre (Comanche), credited in the original film as Princess Peka, acted the role of the title character. White Eagle and the Daughter of Dawn are in love, but their happiness is threatened by Black Wolf (Jack Sankadota [Kiowa]), who intends to marry the Daughter of Dawn to gain political power. To complicate matters, Red Wing (Wanada Parker, Quanah Parker’s daughter) is in love with Black Wolf, but he pays no attention to her. Although it may seem an unnecessary complication, the addition of Red Wing adds depth to the story, as the viewing of this love quadrangle from her perspective and with her reactions elicits sympathy and another layer of emotion. The film is driven by the characters in the story and gives the viewer a specific version of a perceived universal tale of human emotion.

The broader context of the film is the search for buffalo and the competition for resources on the plains. Producer Banks claimed that the story was based “on an old Comanche legend, or at least it’s a legend from one of the tribes around there” (Kelley, “*The Daughter of Dawn*,” 291). The tale was set in the past, before the plains were overrun by the United States. In 1920, when the movie was filmed, Kiowas and Comanches lived on a reservation in Oklahoma, but in the period of the film, their territories would have ranged into what is now Kansas. Early in the film, there is a staged buffalo hunt, and later, Comanches under Chief Big Bear (played by Belo Cozad [Kiowa]) raid the Kiowas’ horses. The importance of buffalo and horses to life and community is a theme woven through the narrative.

Unlike later Hollywood films, in which stories were driven by a Euro-American narrative of U.S. history and non-Native actors frequently portrayed Native American characters, *The Daughter of Dawn* presents a story line focused on Kiowa and Comanche lives and employing Kiowa and Comanche actors. Actors provided their own clothing and tipis; one tipi featured in the background of important scenes displays artwork from famous Kiowa artists (see http://www.okhistory.org/research/daughterofdawn). As actors, the cast participated in dances that would have been frowned upon at the time by the Office (later Bureau) of Indian Affairs. The size of the cast and the setting within encampments means that
For contemporary viewers, The Daughter of Dawn provides an opportunity to watch a unique film with resonance for the history of film and the history of the plains. The score for the rerelease of the film, composed by David Yeagley (Comanche), is a welcome accompaniment, and its wide release through streaming media gives film fans immediate access to the film. The DVD version of the film, which includes several documentary segments about the film’s history, is available from the Oklahoma Historical Society.

American Interior. Directed and edited by Dylan Goch; written and performed by Gruff Rhys; produced by Adam Partridge and Catryn Ramasut. 2014; black and white and color; 92 minutes. Distributed by Revolver Films.
River, spending time with Plains Indians in what is now Nebraska. He eventually reached the Dakotas and the Mandan people, whose agricultural lifestyle and genius for trade made them appear the most overtly Welsh of North American Indians. He spent months living among and learning from the various tribes he encountered but was saddened to learn that the Welsh connection was nothing more than a myth. He left the Dakotas, backtracking to the Mississippi and then traveling all the way to New Orleans, where he died at the young age of twenty-nine. As the film illustrates, his importance is less for the “failure” of his mission than for the excellent maps he generated of the previously undocumented Missouri River and its environs, which were used by the Lewis and Clark expedition a few years later.

American Interior is a peculiar mix of travel documentary and concert film. Its ambitions are psychogeographic: Rhys travels to locations of spiritual significance for Evans and the people he encountered, in the process trying to drum up the ghosts of a long-occluded past. At times, it feels like Led Zeppelin: The Song Remains the Same (1976) in its mixture of concert performance and rural pantomime, generating imagery that evokes the wistfulness and romanticism of the accompanying music. At other moments, it closely resembles (of all things) Hans-Jürgen Syberberg’s Hitler: A Film from Germany (1977) in its exploration of history via projection, representative objects, Brechtian shifts in format and method of display, and reliance on theatrical bric-a-brac to punctuate long sequences of travel. There is a curious parallel within American Interior itself with a short BBC television program, Prince Madoc and the Welsh Indians (1977) from the archaeological series Chronicle, in which quixotic professor Gwyn Williams followed the footsteps of Madoc with a determination comparable to that of Evans and Rhys. Rhys shows that program to audiences at his performances, and clips are included in the film.

American Interior is occasionally hard to follow because it does not present its road footage in strictly chronological terms, though an animated map generally keeps its audience apprised of progress. The film, like its host Rhys, jumps around quite a bit, sometimes overloading the viewer with information. Where it excels is in its ability to find intersections between the personal and the political. For instance, at one point, Rhys is doing a presentation for teenaged students from mainly American Indian backgrounds, and a spectating teacher points out one firm connection between the plights of the Welsh and the Native people in the Americas: just as the English officially suppressed the Welsh language in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so did the U.S. education system discourage the speaking and teaching of Native languages over the same period. This connection is made startlingly clear when Rhys talks to Cory Spotted Bear, one of only a handful of people who still speaks the Mandan language, and they have a conversation with Edwin Benson, presented as the last fluent speaker of Mandan. Rhys mentions that there are only about half a million native speakers of Welsh, but it is sobering to be introduced to a language that really might die within the next generation.

Ultimately, American Interior is a film about forging relationships and honoring the ingenuity of past cultures that are at risk. Appropriately, the coda to the film is an honorary parade for John Evans, presented in the Welsh countryside as a mixture of pagan ceremony and New Orleans funerary march. A brass band leads the doll of Evans to a commemorative shrine, installing him as something of a patron saint for Welsh wanderers and dreamers.

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The Revenant. Directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu; screenplay by Mark L. Smith and Alejandro González Iñárritu; produced by Steve Golin, Alejandro González Iñárritu, Arnon Milchan, Mary Parent, Keith Redmon, and James W. Skotchdepole. 2015; color; 156 minutes. Released by 20th Century Fox.

Director Alejandro González Iñárritu’s disturbing yet beautiful epic The Revenant delivers a powerful, chilling tale of loss, suffering, and revenge set in the American West of the 1820s. The film is loosely based on Michael Punke’s novel The Revenant: A Novel of Revenge (2002), which in turn retold the story in Nebraska poet John G. Neihardt’s epic poem Song of Hugh Glass (1915, part of his even more epic Cycle of the West). The film offers a modern take on the legend of Hugh Glass, a real-life fur trader from Wyoming who worked for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company in the early 1800s.

In the film, Glass, masterfully portrayed by Leonardo DiCaprio in one of his finest, most gripping performances to date, is an experienced tracker and marksman on a commercial expedition to establish a fur-trade base along the untamed upper Missouri River. With him
is Hawk (Forrest Goodluck), Glass’s half-Pawnee son and constant companion. Disaster strikes when the expedition is attacked by Arikara (Sahnish) Indians searching for the kidnapped daughter of a chief, Powaqa (Melaw Nakehk’o). Their attack opens with a gruesomely portrayed arrow through the throat of a hapless fur trader, and the assault is powerfully realized cinematically. Glass assists his comrades in making their escape, but they are forced to abandon pelts, robes, and supplies, making the long journey through the frozen wilderness to their base especially treacherous.

While in camp, Glass is scouting away from the crew when disaster strikes again. He is attacked by a ferocious grizzly sow protecting her cubs. It is one of the most impressive scenes in the film, indeed one of the most powerful, terrifying CGI scenes I have seen on film. You experience the grizzly attack as if you were the victim. It will raise the hair on your neck as you practically feel the breath of the massive beast on your face and wince as you hear the tearing lacerations and bones cracking under the beast’s immense power. The attack should have killed Glass, who is left battered and broken, barely alive, and unable to walk or move.

Enter the villain, who will make you so anxious and enraged that you will not be able to sit still as you seethe in your seat with anger. John Fitzgerald, portrayed by Tom Hardy in another masterful performance, is a character you will love to hate: intense, dark, aggressive, murderous, and fanatical. He has the same black, unfeeling eyes as the grizzly sow who shredded Glass’s fragile body. As the expedition must continue moving through uncharted territory full of hostile Arikaras out for vengeance, Fitzgerald, Hawk, and a young Jim Bridger (Will Poulter) are detailed to watch over Glass until he expires from his wounds, as they expect he will, and to give him a proper Christian burial. The detail is offered a handsome payment to be collected once the service is carried out. But Fitzgerald has other ideas. Unwilling to wait for Glass to die, he murders Hawk as the immobile Glass looks on in helpless rage. After disposing of the body, Fitzgerald reports to the impressionable Bridger that Hawk has fled and convinces him that they should leave Glass to save themselves and collect the compensation for their services. The maniacal Fitzgerald buries Glass alive and leaves him to die in a shallow grave.

But Fitzgerald fails to consider the power of vengeance and the human will to live. Glass rises from the dead (“revenant” means “one who returns after death or a long absence”), digging himself out of his grave, a dead man walking (or crawling, in this case). He drags himself for hundreds of miles across mountains, plains, and rivers in his quest for revenge. This tortuous journey makes up the bulk of the film.

The Revenant was stunningly shot on locations in Canada and Argentina. The imagery, like the major themes in the film, is beautiful yet intensely dark and brutal. It was a grueling shoot; some of the actors referred to it as “hell on earth,” and the film pushed its crew to the limits. The cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki shines as a true artist of dynamics, light and shade, tension, and resolution. The Revenant took home three Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Cinematography, and Best Actor, all well deserved.

The Revenant is a tense, raw story, both thrilling and painful. Among its themes are humans pitting themselves against nature and an exploration of the dark, ambivalent side of humanity. Humans are portrayed as part of nature,
not above or separate from it, and utterly susceptible to its harsh, unforgiving tendencies. At an epic 156 minutes, the film itself can also be a bit unforgiving, at times straying away from the themes that drive it. The exquisite cinematography puts the moviegoer at the center of the action so that you feel it viscerally. The vivid landscapes are staggering and awe-inspiring: the viewer is exposed to the elements; participates in the terror and chaos of the Arikara attack on the fur traders’ camp; is bodily mauled by a grizzly bear; and feels Glass’s loss, hatred, pain, and hunger. The sheer power of The Revenant lingers long after the final credits have rolled.

The cherry on top of this visual sundae of epic proportions is DiCaprio’s stunning, Oscar-winning performance. He is all in from the first scene to the last, testing and stretching his abilities with truly wonderful results—a thrilling virtuoso performance filled with brute force and silent eloquence. He says a great deal about perseverance, fortitude, love, and suffering even though he hardly has any actual lines in the film aside from a few well-placed grunts and groans. The Glass character demands more of DiCaprio physically than any other role in his career, and for much of the film he is immobile and unable to speak. It is a breathtaking performance that will leave you shivering and wrung out like a sponge.

I am always happy to see films portraying this time period, topic, and region. I find the fur trade, Native Americans, and the unchartered upper Missouri region of the early 1800s endlessly fascinating. This was a dramatic time of adventure, tragedy, culture clash, and cultural exchange that certainly deserves more attention from contemporary Hollywood. In particular, I would love to see a film on the fur trade from the Native American perspective. Steven Spielberg, if you are reading this: imagine the possibilities. But, in all seriousness, The Revenant is a spine-tingling drama that explores the dark side of humanity, full of epic scenes and themes and even more epic cinematography and acting. Do not miss this fine film.

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The Underground Railroad has long captured the American popular imagination. From the antebellum era to the twenty-first century, the stories of the daring men and women who braved the escape from slavery to freedom, and of the conductors, station masters, and sympathizers who helped them, have made their way into American folklore, literature, and culture. Most recently, the success of Colson Whitehead’s brilliant novel The Underground Railroad (2016), winner of the 2016 National Book Award for fiction and a New York Times best seller, testifies to our continued interest in the subject more than 150 years after the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. And yet, as David Blight vividly illustrates in Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory (2004), this cultural fascination with the Underground Railroad—coupled with the relative scarcity of first-person accounts by fugitives—has tended to blur the boundaries between historical fact and legend. What do we really know about how the various branches of the Underground Railroad operated? What local sources can we enlist in helping us to reconstruct the historical reality of the Underground Railroad and of the men and women who participated in it?

Addressing these and other questions concerning the historical reality of the Underground Railroad in Wabaunsee County, Kansas, Rusty Earl’s documentary Dawn of Day: Stories from the Underground Railroad presents an important contribution to a research subject that is by its very nature of both local and national interest. Based on painstaking archival research, carefully selected primary sources, and interviews with historians, Dawn of Day brings to life the risks, challenges, and successes of the “unsung heroes,” as Earl puts it in an interview on the film’s website, whose collaboration made possible the escape of dozens of men and women to freedom.

Dawn of Day, which takes its name from the early settlers’ loose translation of “Wabaunsee” as “dawn of day,” presents a clear, informative, and interesting overview of key events and individuals on the western edge of the Underground Railroad in Wabaunsee County. From Captain William Mitchell and his sister Agnes, who fed and sheltered fugitives on their farm, to Charles Leonhardt, who led a train of horse-drawn wagons carrying runaway slaves on a two-month journey through Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa in 1860, the film ably portrays the efforts of Kansans determined to weaken the grip of slavery on the estimated 20,000 to 30,000 men and women held in bondage along the western border of Missouri. It also provides relevant background information on
Bleeding Kansas, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Fugitive Slave Act, and other historical events and influences that made northeast Kansas a hotbed of abolitionist activity in the 1850s and 1860s.

The Connecticut Kansas Colony, also known as the Beecher Bible and Rifle Colony, looms large in the film as well. Arriving from New Haven, Connecticut, in the spring of 1856 and inspired by their faith, this group of eastern transplants became deeply involved in local abolitionist activities, forming a militia that aided in the defense of Lawrence in 1856 and participating actively in the Underground Railroad in the following years. These and other story lines revolving around the conductors, station masters, and other operatives of the Underground Railroad form the film’s focus, complemented by a few accounts or other traces of the fugitives traversing this network of stations. Earl himself acknowledges the difficulty of finding the stories of those who escaped slavery. Given these limitations of the historical source material, one can hardly fault the filmmakers for their underrepresentation of voices of color, regrettable as it may be.

As a documentary film, Dawn of Day is a solid achievement, if perhaps a bit conventional in style. Using a format popularized by Ken Burns’s award-winning historical documentaries, Earl combines images of historical documents and photographs with stirring music and short scenes of reenactments (including a strong performance by a Kansas State University graduate student). The documentary also, however, relies on the personal note that its narrator brings to the film. Dawn of Day is narrated by Richard Pitts, director of the Wonder Workshop Children’s Museum in Manhattan, Kansas, who also appears in the film to interview educators, historians, and descendants of abolitionists. Toward the end of the documentary, Pitts relates the formative experience that led him, an African American man from New Jersey who relocated to Kansas in the 1980s, to research the historical accomplishments of African Americans, including the history of the Underground Railroad in northeast Kansas. Pitts’s view of history as a current event thus forms an important undercurrent throughout the film, inviting viewers to draw connections between their own lives and those depicted in the documentary. Dawn of Day also repeatedly raises the question of what twenty-first-century American children and adolescents can and should take away from the study of the Underground Railroad in Wabaunsee County. Further supporting the pedagogical uses of this film, the closing credits direct viewers to forthcoming lesson plans and other online resources on the film’s website.

Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of Dawn of Day is its ability to highlight how local events and actions are connected to questions of national importance. The narrator and various interviewees throughout the film emphasize the collaborative nature of the Underground Railroad in Wabaunsee County as well as the courage of individual men and women to stand up for what they believed to be morally right. It is a message that recalls a key theme from Whitehead’s recent novel. In the book, one of the conductors tells Cora, a runaway slave and the novel’s protagonist, that “the underground railroad is bigger than its operators—it’s all of you, too. The small spurs, the big trunk lines” (p. 267). Dawn of Day has done an excellent job of tracing some of these spurs and trunk lines on the western edge of the Underground Railroad, bringing to light the actions of unsung heroes who took action locally in order to effect national change.

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The Place of the Present in the Past
Slow West. Written and directed by John Maclean; produced by Iain Canning, Michael Fassbender, Rachel Gardner, Conor McCaughan, and Emile Sherman. 2015; color; 84 minutes. Distributed by A24 (U.S.).

For purists, John McClean’s Slow West is a flawed Western: the New Zealand landscape is somehow “off”; the characters are unsatisfying and the ties that bind them absurd; and the details . . . oh, yes . . . the devil is certainly in all of those overlooked, unexplained details.

And yet the film works.

Not only does it work as a motion picture, but it also works as a visually stunning, surrealist Western, contorting, commenting on, and conforming to the essence of the genre, if not those much-cherished details. McClean’s film is a vision of the West—a particular, perhaps “outsider” vision—that speaks to the hope and devastation for which the frontier is known yet does so in such a way that the nature of both must be continually reconsidered.

The film tells the story of Jay Cavendish (Kodi Smit-McPhee), a Scottish boy, no more than sixteen, who has traveled to America in search of his lost love, Rose Ross (Caren Pistorius). Early in the story, the foolhardiness of his quest is readily apparent as Jay—pale, naive, and armed only with the strength of his convictions—is accosted by Indian hunters. He is rescued from the unsavory characters by Silas Selleck (Michael Fassbender), a bounty hunter who quickly establishes himself as equally dangerous, though more palatable. The young Jay employs Silas to escort him safely through the wilderness, and the pair set off.

Their journey is punctuated not only by chance encounters of the frontier—bandits, hustlers, and desperate pioneers—but also by flashbacks to Scotland that tell the tale of love and tragedy that delivered Jay to the West. Scenes of playful flirting and unrequited love between Jay and Rose culminate in a tragic accident in which Rose’s father, John Ross (Rory McCann), accidentally kills Jay’s uncle, the haughty Lord Cavendish (Alex Macqueen), during a heated class-based argument over the young pair’s apparent romance (Rose’s affection for Jay is, in reality, more like that of a sibling than a lover). Ross and his daughter flee to America with a price on their heads for murder, and young Jay follows his heart, traveling west to find his true love.

The path followed by Jay and Silas is fraught with peril—less from Native Americans than from the sorts of mercenary whites who animate countless tales of Western adventure—and the lines between good and evil are blurred to the point of erasure. When a desperate young woman holds Jay at gunpoint in a trading post, Silas shoots her in the back, only to find her orphaned children waiting outside. A traveling writer, with class sensibilities that mirror Jay’s own, steals the young man’s horse and gear as he sleeps. Meanwhile Silas, the archetypal loner, develops a fondness for his charge.

Along with Jay, news of the bounty on Rose and her father (dead or alive) has also followed them to the West, and Silas’s former gang patiently follows his trail, seeking to claim it, while bounty hunter Victor the Hawk (Edwin Wright), disguised as a priest, moves stealthily ahead and arrives first at the Ross homestead. After a single bullet to the head kills John Ross, all converge in the final confrontation. With a cry of “Kill that house!” the mercenaries lay siege to the dwelling where Rose and her protector (and perhaps lover), the young warrior

Courtesy of A24.
Kotori (Kalani Queypo), have taken refuge and now must defend themselves with the help of Jay and Silas. When the air is finally silent again, only Rose and Silas remain standing; a mortally wounded Jay, shot in error by Rose, gasps his final breaths as she realizes his identity. When Silas tells Rose that Jay loved her “with all his heart,” Rose ruefully replies that his heart “was in the wrong place.” The tale ends in the once again peaceful future, with order restored. Silas has remained with Rose, rebuilt the Ross homestead, and, together with the orphaned children from the trading post, created a family. While he failed to save young Jay, he observes, in voiceover narration, that Jay saved him.

Throughout the film, director McClean trades historical, social, and geographical accuracy for an expansive surrealist commentary on the essence of the West and the figures who animate it. Jay’s quest, both alone and with Silas, is at times trancelike, and the characters he encounters seem plucked from other places and times, whether as signposts of the human condition or harbingers of doom. Native Americans pass on foot, silent and ghostlike, as Jay rides into the wilderness, slowly enters what appears to be a mist in the woods—adding a sense of haunting to the scene—and later emerges, covered with ash from their burned-out village. In the middle of the desolate landscape, three Congolese men appear beside the trail, singing. Jay pauses his trek to listen, trades a surreal line or two with them, in French, about the nature of love and life, and moves on. Later, he and Silas, in an absinthe-induced slumber, share a dream of the future: Silas’s future with Rose.

Subtle yet intense, each of these moments disrupts the typical frontier narrative and illustrates the fact that the reality of the West is, indeed, a contested thing. The power of the Populists had peaked by the century’s end and was beginning to decline as labor radicals agitated for more aggressive responses to capitalism and industrialism. Snell illustrates the clear class divisions between the wealth at the top and the poverty at the bottom in his three-act drama, told by tracing the plight of a young, baby-faced transient worker of Irish descent, Francis Moore (played by Matt Briden). Moore is the ostensible hero, trying to find redemption from the days when he “stuck by the meaner ones” in an orphanage and kept his mouth shut. Moore opens with the chilling line “God isn’t going to save any of us. We’re going to have to save ourselves.” The inner turmoil between saving oneself and yet not standing by in the face of injustice plagues Moore throughout the film.

Moore finds himself in the employ of the wealthy coalmine owner William Fischer (played by Shawn Nyberg) and his hard-nosed “master of the house,” Henry George Clay (Walt Boyd). Soon after starting at the mine, he finds himself struggling to relate to his fellow workers, themselves divided over how to deal with their lot. Some attempt to make the best of their situation; others take a more activist response. Moore is introduced to Pietro Benedetti (Jim Ramos), a charismatic crusader for workers’ rights who also owns the saloon and brothel that absorb most of the local miners’ earnings. “It is the class that corrupts,” he shouts. Benedetti’s crusade against the wealthy business class inspires Moore and his fellow miner Arturo Rizzi (Alex Krumins) to take up arms against their wage oppressors. The Fischers, however, experience their own challenges, losing their daughter to illness.

An encounter between the mine owners and workers sets in motion a series of violent events that force Moore to decide whether resistance is noble or counterproductive and whether accepting a situation is cowardly or prudent. Biden’s expressive eyes capture his character’s struggle to “do the right thing.” Meanwhile, individuals who at first seem unsavory end up displaying a humanity that the supposedly more “noble” characters do not possess. In several cases, individuals who are the most powerless or marginalized prove the most sympathetic, including...
Sara Harrison (played by Karen Hastings) and Clarence Turner (Dané Shobe), but both face uncertain futures: she as a miner’s widow, he as an African American and likely target for lynching. Scenes between Moore and the sympathetic rancher Catherine Bellamy (Gwendolyn Fischer) are perhaps the most real and heartfelt moments of the film.

Snell sets enough of a mood to bring his script to life, but the amateur character of the film is apparent. Strong performances from Hastings, Fischer, and Shobe contrast with those of other actors, who simply recite lines with little emotion. Immigrant characters have no accents. Certain sequences feel long and slow, leaving the viewer to wonder whether the pace is an intentional effort to create an “indie” feel or the result of unsophisticated editing. A fight scene in the finale is unconvincing, the sound editing is uneven, and the epilogue is inexplicably in black and white.

This movie is dark in both theme and cinematography. It starts out disjointed, without a lot of character development, and it features several subplots that seem to have nothing in common until quite late in the story. References to the overthrow of the Hawai’ian monarchy and the Spanish-American War date events to the late 1890s, and Kansas viewers might logically presume the setting to be southeastern Kansas, a region that was becoming a center of socialist thought at the time. However, Snell does not provide an exact location and could have spent more time rooting socialist and labor perspectives in the unsafe and harsh working conditions faced by the miners and perhaps less time on Moore’s virginity. The mine owners appear as sympathetic victims of circumstance rather than oppressors, while Benedetti and Rizzi seem selfish vigilantes. This leaves the viewer confused about whether Dust, Blood and Fire is intended to be a prolabor or a probusiness film. Or perhaps it is simply a coming-of-age story gone very, very wrong.

The complicated nature of labor unrest at the turn of the century has been the root of classics such as Paul Thomas Anderson’s There Will Be Blood (2007) and John Sayles’s Matewan (1987). For the novice history buff, Dust, Blood and Fire provides an entertaining experience, but the deeper issues of the relations between mine owners and laborers in southeast Kansas at the end of the Populist era would probably be apparent only to those who come to the film having already studied the topic.

Near the conclusion of his panoramic history of the sunflower state, Craig Miner observed what he called the “forces of homogenization at work” alongside the “acids of modernity” (Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854–2000 [2002], pp. 403, 407). Rural-to-urban migration, changing economics, and the pressures of cultural conformity all work to undermine the survival of local identities. Even when negativity or malice is absent, modern society often ignores or trivializes the experiences and traditions of those who stand apart from the expanding metropolitan centers where most Americans—and eight out of ten Kansans—now reside. Four new Kansas Humanities Council documentaries explore the theme of identity, as does a short fictional piece produced by an independent Kansas film studio.
Our Charley: Charles Curtis, “A Boy Forced to Choose” is a historical examination of the life of Charles Curtis, a mixed-blood Kansa Indian who was elected vice president of the United States in 1928. As a child, Curtis lived with his maternal relatives and spoke their language (as well as French). All this changed in 1873, when Charley was sent to the home of his white grandparents in Topeka, evading removal to an Oklahoma reservation (where disease destroyed half the Kaw nation by 1880). Narrated by modern-day Kansa people, the film exposes the awful choice that thousands of Americans still face: Should I conceal or suppress a stigmatized identity for social and economic advancement? Eventually, Curtis would say that he was “glad he had forgotten the Kaw language,” doubtless a claim intended to please Anglo ears. The filmmakers suggest a more painful reality.

Volland Memories: The Kratzer Films tells the story of a vibrant Flint Hills cattle town through the lens of merchant/postmaster Otto Kratzer’s camera. Thousands of still photographs and hours of amateur video (ca. 1905–1970) were compiled by a man with a remarkable artist’s eye for composition. The community grew and evolved as cattle drives, the railroad, and eventually the diesel truck transformed the way herds were pastured in Wabaunsee County. In a nice blend of interviews, longtime Volland residents remember an era of “happy people” who were “not in a hurry” until the local stockyards closed in the 1960s and “the town became quiet.” The film depicts people who were dignified, self-reliant, and at ease with themselves, their surroundings, and each other.

With the Grain: Conservation and Community in Miami County Kansas focuses on another rural Kansas locality doing battle with forces that threaten to replace natural landscapes and folkways with suburban sprawl. Miami County lies at the edge of the greater Kansas City area, where bulldozers progressively claim fertile cropland, native prairie, and hardwood forest because “everybody wants a place in the country.” This film depicts a coalition of old settlers and newcomers who hope to preserve the rural character of life in Miami County while catering to the needs of urban neighbors. By adopting sustainable “diverse farming” techniques, young entrepreneurs such as Josh Brown hope to provide chemical-free foods for the people of Kansas City while earning a living, maintaining a strong community, and protecting the environment. Rather than resisting change, they envision a plan for sustainable agriculture that maintains “a good place to live.”

The film Quindaro examines yet another unique Kansas community endangered by economic decline, depopulation, and apathetic urban neighbors with destructive agendas. Located in northwest Wyandotte County, Quindaro began as a river boom town, a free-soil colony, and a haven for runaway slaves, eventually featuring the first black college west of the Mississippi. After its promising early years, Western University closed in 1943; the town was bifurcated by Interstate 635; and an attempt was made to locate a garbage landfill over part of the historic town site. At present, hopes for revitalization focus in part on the unique history that archaeological excavation has revealed, which might form the basis of a national park venue. Ironically, the presence of I-635 may assist in arguing for the viability of such a plan.

The Musical Genius of Moscow, Kansas, adapted from a story by Thomas Fox Averill, is a fictional account of a child prodigy with a remarkable singing voice. Raised by her mother and stepfather in little Moscow, Kansas, Hermione is a local celebrity whose life is nearly disrupted by the unexpected appearance of her biological father, Herman. After touring Europe as a pianist, this arrogant man comes to offer the child fame in great music halls and cathedrals overseas. Not surprisingly, in the end, idyllic small-town Kansas prevails while nasty Herman eschews rural tranquility and the people he scorns as “simpletons” and “morons.” Solid performances and adept camera work stand out here.

Each little film exposes a worthy and enjoyable trove of Kansas culture that may well inspire further investigation.

Isaias McCaffery
Independence Community College

The Place of the Present in the Past 63


Dr. John Brinkley’s extraordinary life was made for the movies. The Milford, Kansas, maverick starred in medicine, radio, and politics during the 1920s and 1930s. Brinkley’s Kansas station (KFKB), and later his Mexican border blaster (XERA), aired homespun entertainment, unconventional medical advice, and free advertising for his goat-gland practice and multiple bids to become Kansas governor. Critics chased Brinkley from Kansas to Texas to Arkansas. Still, he attracted a bevy of patients, which enabled the rags-to-riches doctor to line his pockets and live like a Hollywood celebrity, complete with a “Dr. Brinkley”–monogrammed mansion, yacht, and Cadillac. Before his death in 1942, Brinkley even dabbled in moviemaking, producing a silent film on gland transplantation as well as a series of home movies chronicling his family’s opulent lifestyle.

Now the infamous doctor stars again in Penny Lane’s engaging documentary *Nuts!* A nonfiction filmmaker and professor of art and art history at Colgate University, Lane received multiple awards for her 2013 documentary, *Our Nixon*. Released at Sundance in 2016, *Nuts!* has earned Lane recognition again for its slick editing of primary sources, including 16-mm film footage, photographs, sound recordings, and newspaper headlines. Lane’s film also utilizes several Brinkley scholars who share their insights on screen. However, it is her use of animation, accentuating the cartoon nature of Brinkley’s career, that makes *Nuts!* unique. In an ironic twist, Lane’s caricature of Brinkley also humanizes the doctor, allowing viewers to see him in action, thought, and dialogue (whether historically accurate or not).

Throughout the film, Lane sacrifices historical authenticity for cinematic effect. Mirroring Pope Brock’s biography, *Charlatan: America’s Most Dangerous Huckster, the Man Who Pursued Him, and the Age of Flimflam* (2008), Lane highlights Brinkley’s long-standing battle with the antiquack crusader Morris Fishbein, editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. *Nuts!* however, fools viewers by presenting Brinkley as a trailblazing humanitarian unfairly persecuted by his sinister nemesis. The film’s untrustworthy narrator is in on the ruse, treating Brinkley’s paid biography, Clement Woods’s *The Life of a Man: A Biography of John R. Brinkley* (1934), as gospel and proclaiming the embattled doctor an “inspired leader.” Lane also alters the historical record by Photo-shopping fake newspaper headlines and deceptively editing scholar interviews to discredit Fishbein and elevate Brinkley. Suggesting that medical elites conspired against Brinkley, *Nuts!* depicts his detractors, including one wearing a Dr. Evil eyepatch, plotting in a smoky backroom. The film reaches its climax with Brinkley’s failed libel suit against Fishbein in 1939. Here, *Nuts!* finally exposes Brinkley as a fraud, and viewers, perhaps as was the case with Brinkley’s own patients, realize they have been duped all along. The trial scenes reveal that Brinkley had a criminal record, that his famous “1020 Formula” was nothing more than blue dye and water, and that he never actually “grafted” goat glands to male testes as advertised. Lane again distorts some of the facts, but now to discredit Brinkley. She fabricates trial testimony, as when she falsely charges that Brinkley peddled a “cancer-cur-ing” toothpaste.

Lane’s manipulations add comedy to the unfolding drama and highlight Brinkley’s skill as a propagandist. Moreover, unlike Brinkley and most documentary filmmakers, Lane does not hide her distortions. Linked to the film’s website, she provides “Notes on NUTS!”, 319 footnotes revealing what is verified, distorted, and invented in the film. The notes demonstrate Lane’s extensive archival research and provide interesting insight into her filmmaking process. However, her defense of several ahistorical scenes disappoints. Lane justifies fabricating a scene in which she has Brinkley delivering a “zinger” at a hearing before the Federal Radio
Commission by saying it made him look “cool.” And she admits that although Brinkley never sold “cancer-curing” toothpaste, she wanted to give a “shout-out” to a modern charlatan who does.

There are other minor issues of interpretation and focus. The film makes little effort to analyze Brinkley’s patients and political supporters, who come across as ignorant bumpkins. Lane also overemphasizes the negative impact of the Fishbein libel trial on Brinkley’s fortunes. The doctor faced other challenges. For example, his anti-Semitic and isolationist radio broadcasts grew increasingly out of sync with the views of the broader public. Lane’s focus on Brinkley’s family in the aftermath of the doctor’s death provides closure for the film, but the extensive coverage, including an animated reenactment, of his son’s suicide in the 1970s seems gratuitous.

Although Lane’s Nuts! fudges several facts, its main message is true. Brinkley was a quack, and he knew it. Lane helps revive a fascinating historical character and the unique context in which he thrived. In watching the film from start to finish, viewers learn how Brinkley’s misguided genius led to his success in radio, medicine, and politics but also destroyed him in the end. In sum, Nuts! is provocative, educational, and fun. From its opening animated scene of copulating goats to its closing images of Brinkley set to the musical track of “He’s a Hustler” by the Revelations, the film captivates and entertains.

Eric S. Juhnke
Briarcliff University


The Profit. Directed by Kevin Willmott; screenplay by Kevin Willmott and Scott Richardson; produced by Kevin Willmott and Scott Richardson. 2017; color; 90 minutes.

Basketball is an American art form. Invented on American soil by a Canadian immigrant, it was forged to fit the ideals of Progressive-era discipline. Shaped by regional difference and demographic circumstance, it was embraced by men and women, city people and rural folk, native-born whites and immigrants, and African Americans. It requires the framework of the team yet allows for individual innovation. It grew into a capitalist enterprise. It has both reinforced repression and championed liberty. Basketball thus reflects larger patterns of American history and culture.

The sport is a clear inspiration for filmmaker Kevin Willmott. On the heels of his film Jayhawksers (2014), which depicts Wilt Chamberlain’s remarkable and contentious tenure at the University of Kansas, Willmott has directed two more basketball-themed projects, both with KU connections: Fast Break, a documentary film about the barrier-breaking coach John McLendon, and The Profit, a fictional film about a modern player confronting the hypocrisies of big-time basketball. Together, the films illustrate the sport’s complicated dynamic as both an instrument of freedom and a tool of exploitation.

Fast Break draws on Milton S. Katz’s outstanding biography, Breaking Through: John McLendon, Basketball Legend and Civil Rights Pioneer (2010), and Katz is the most prominent voice in the documentary. He helps narrate McLendon’s Kansas childhood, including his navigation of segregation and his family’s ethic of pride and achievement. James Naismith—the man who invented basketball—was McLendon’s mentor at the University of Kansas. Influenced by Naismith’s sense of free-flowing basketball, McLendon developed a fast-break system built on pressure defense and rigorous conditioning.

McLendon started coaching at North Carolina College for Negroes in 1937. He not only won eight titles in the Colored Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) but also fostered racial integration, as the now-famous “Secret Game” in 1944 against a white team from Duke University indicates. In the early 1950s, after the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) resisted the inclusion of champions from black colleges, McLendon led the charge for those institutions to join the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), leading to more integrated college basketball contests. In 1954 McLendon moved to Tennessee State University, and he won three consecutive NAIA titles from 1957 to 1959. His teams’ successes helped pave the way for more interracial competition in basketball and provided exposure for future NBA stars such as Dick Barnett.

McLendon then coached the Cleveland Pipers, an integrated semiprofessional team that beat the legendary 1960 Olympic basketball team in an exhibition game. When the Pipers joined the short-lived American Basketball League, he became the first black coach of a professional basketball team (until he was fired by its blustery owner, shipping magnate George Steinbrenner). He was also the first black coach of a U.S. national team, taking a squad to the Soviet Union in 1961 for a series of exhibitions.
Fast Break does not cover every important aspect of McLendon’s career. It mostly ignores his stints at Kentucky State University and Cleveland State University (where he was the first black coach at a predominantly white institution) as well as his ill-fated job in 1969 with the Denver Rockets of the American Basketball Association (again, he was the first black coach in that professional league). But the film aptly summarizes McLendon’s influence, both as a racial pioneer and as a coaching trendsetter. It features a roster of knowledgeable authorities. It could not include much film from McLendon’s early years, so it dynamically moves around photographs and talking heads, accompanied by a jazzy soundtrack, suggesting McLendon’s philosophy of constant motion. The footage of his fast-breaking Tennessee State teams is alluring, and the archival interviews with McLendon reflect an admirable man of deep morals, intelligence, and pride.

The film ends with testimony of his impact from coaching luminaries such as Larry Brown and Bill Self. It also makes the poignant point that although McLendon was inducted into the National Basketball Hall of Fame in 1978 as a “contributor,” he deserved to be admitted as a “coach,” an omission finally rectified in September 2016. The long wait for that recognition reflects a prejudice against the quality of black basketball and one of its greatest pioneers.

On the surface, The Profit bears little resemblance to Fast Break. This low-budget feature revolves around Joseph “the Profit” Smith, a nine-year NBA veteran who earned $70 million over the course of his career but is, at the film’s outset, broke, thanks to free spending and four kids with three women. He needs one more year in the league for a full pension but has been diagnosed with an enlarged heart. His agent arranges a one-year pro contract, but he must first mentor a potential star, Jamal Chesterfield, at his alma mater, North Central Iowa University.

Former University of Kansas standout and NBA veteran Scot Pollard hatched the idea that led to the script by Willmott and Scott Richardson. Pollard, renowned for his quirky choices in hairstyle and fashion, also stars in the movie. Robert De Niro and Leonardo DiCaprio can rest easy, but Pollard is more than adequate as the hard-drinking, sex-binging protagonist. The same cannot be said of the script and editing. In early scenes, a few characters speak straight into the screen, but that fake-documentary tactic is soon abandoned. There is a romantic subplot with Smith’s old college flame, Maggie Parks (Michelle Davidson), but she keeps flipping her attitude without explanation. Similarly, the relationship between Smith and the hardheaded but sensitive Chesterfield (Joseph Anderson) follows a jagged, unconvincing arc.

By the film’s end, Smith realizes the depths of the sports cesspool, including the exploitation of young commodities such as Chesterfield, and he makes heroic choices at his own expense. “There’s nothing pure in this world,” his old college coach warns him. “Everything in this game is a business.” In its endearing but clumsy way, The Profit sheds light on that world. It asks for more integrity, for more people like John McLendon.

Aram Goudsouzian
University of Memphis

The Tallgrass Prairie Preserve: A Flint Hills Love Story. Written, directed, and produced by Dave Kendall. 2016; color; 87 minutes. Distributed by Prairie Hollow Productions.

“Justice will take us millions of intricate moves,” writes the Kansas-born poet William Stafford. While the number may not reach into the millions, The Tallgrass Prairie Preserve:
A Flint Hills Love Story documents the many “intricate moves” necessary for the creation of the preserve just south of Council Grove, Kansas, and serves as a tonic for our own particularly divisive times. The film demonstrates how even bitter adversaries can find their narrow way to a useful resolution: the creation of the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve.

The documentary beautifully depicts the preserve: nearly 11,000 acres of what had been the Z Bar Ranch, just off highway 177 north of Strong City, a unique venture run by the Nature Conservancy and the National Park Service. There, visitors may walk over forty miles of paths (mainly old ranch roads) through the tallgrass ecosystem, encountering its flora and fauna, including a herd of genetically pure bison. The early part of the film treats the creation and delineation of the Flint Hills. Rex Buchanan, past director of the Kansas Geological Survey, explains that the Flint Hills are a series of benches consisting of interbedded shale and chert-bearing (“chert” being the geologist’s term for the flint that gives the place its name) limestone, the deposits of a series of oceans that periodically filled the area and receded. Annie Wilson, a teacher, rancher, and musician, discusses the Flint Hills Map Project, which placed maps of the Flint Hills in all schools in the area so that students can “center themselves” in the last 4 percent of tallgrass prairie that once made up much of the middle of the continent.

The film also examines the site’s cultural heritage, from George Catlin’s documenting of native cultures in the 1830s to Jim Hoy today. Hoy, a rancher, folklorist, professor, and director of the Center for Great Plains Studies at Emporia State University, discusses the “distinctive style of ranching” practiced in the Flint Hills, “pasturing transient cattle.” Hoy notes that the rich grasses there allow for the feeding of cattle on a tenth of the land required in a place like eastern Colorado.

The subtitle of the documentary is A Flint Hills Love Story, and the love of the participants for the place is palpable. Hoy, like many of the film’s commentators, discusses the meditative nature of time spent in the Flint Hills, stating that they “don’t take your breath away; they give you a chance to breathe.” However, as Jay Nelson of the Strecker-Nelson Art Gallery notes: “It takes being in [the Flint Hills] to appreciate them.” The sentiment is echoed by Alan Pollom, who suggests that we cannot just look at the Flint Hills; we must look into them. The bulk of the film constitutes just such a “looking into,” tracing the intricate moves necessary to preserve a section of tallgrass prairie and make it accessible to the public.

As early as the 1830s, George Catlin recognized the need to preserve part of the prairie, and Walt Whitman saw the prairie as “North America’s characteristic landscape,” the heart and soul of our democracy. By 1884 D. W. Wilder, editor of the Hiawatha World, was lamenting the lack of a state park preserving a swatch of the prairie. Fourteen years after the National Park Act of 1916, the one ecosystem still not represented by a park was grassland, but the Great Depression and World War II further postponed the development of such a park. The film’s great strength is in its limning of the tortuous legal and financial progress toward the preserve, from the Eisenhower administration to the Clinton presidency. That process often pitted conservationists against ranchers, townsfolk against rural citizens, and family members against one another as those in favor of a publicly-owned park and those who revered Kansas’s tradition of private ownership of land found themselves at loggerheads.

In a film full of compelling characters, the hero (if there is one) is Nancy Landon Kassebaum, U.S. senator from Kansas. She was able to pull together the various factions in the struggle for and against the preserve (a tug of war she jokingly likens to the Hatfield and McCoy feud) to create a joint venture, with public and private ownership shared by the National Park Service and the National Park Trust. The Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve was created in 1996 in one of the last pieces of legislation passed.
before Kassebaum retired from the Senate. Eight years later, when financial difficulties threatened, Governor Kathleen Sebelius and former governor Mike Hayden (secretary of the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks at the time), brokered a deal with the Nature Conservancy to save the preserve. Thus, it found its way to its current configuration, jointly owned by the National Park Service and the Nature Conservancy.

Buchanan sees the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve as a metaphor for the political process (the way it should work, one supposes): both sides eventually talking to each other, realizing their mutual love of the Flint Hills, and finding a way together to share their appreciation of this special place. Buchanan calls this “a particularly Kansas way of approaching controversy.” In recounting this process, The Tallgrass Prairie Preserve: A Flint Hills Love Story is an ambitious film, thorough in its scope and instructive in its lessons.

William Sheldon
Hutchinson Community College


One of the most troubling legacies of colonialism is the loss of indigenous languages. Of some 300 languages spoken on this continent north of Mexico at the time of Columbus’s arrival, warfare, death, disease, dispossession, policies of removal, reservation life, and reeducation have reduced that number by half today. Dire predictions of a rapidly increasing extinction of those that remain abound, constituting an existential threat to Indian Country because language contains the stories, songs, ceremonies, traditions, and beliefs of Native peoples and nations. In sum, those people’s very identities are under siege and threatened by a bewildering disconnection from the past.

Most tribes are acutely aware of this staggering loss and its implications for the future, and many are engaged in the difficult work of revitalizing languages that carry their cultural lifeblood. Rising Voices/Hóthänįŋpi, focusing on the Lakota people of the northern plains, explores the numerous challenges faced in this undertaking. Comprised of interviews, footage documenting language classes and programs, and other short films by tribal members on the subject, it takes us to the front lines of the campaign to preserve heritage by halting the decay of language. One teacher describes the situation to her students in stark terms, telling them, “You are in the biggest battle of your lives.” The question is whether that warning is being taken seriously; a moment later in the interview, she admits that most of her students wonder, “What battle?” The insidious nature of colonial thinking is laid bare here as we see the descendants of those often forcibly divorced from their language failing to grasp the importance of it.

Rebuilding language must focus on the young if it is to survive, but at the same time, it depends upon seasoned speakers to convey the language to those youths. As the filmmakers state, fewer than 5 percent of the Lakota population are fluent in their native tongue, and most of them are elderly. We see this in the scramble to record the Lakota dictionary of some 22,000 words so as to ensure correct inflection and pronunciation; in the committed instructors who make long daily commutes to meet with small classes in isolated locations; and in the work of the Lakota Language Consortium to codify standards of phonetics, orthography, and other conventions. While the stakes are clear and daunting, there is also palpable hope expressed in the joyful faces of young children learning in immersion programs and the liberation expressed by young adults awakening to a greater understanding of themselves and their culture through knowledge of the language. As one observes: “When I speak Lakota, I feel connected” to relatives, the land, and her own identity. Yet she remains in the minority of those few willing to learn and preserve their heritage in a world of modern distractions and other obstacles to revitalization. Some viewers will doubtless be surprised that a number of those on the preservation forefront are not Native speakers themselves, having learned the language as outsiders in order to do this critical work.

Although the film briefly addresses the role of federal boarding schools for American Indian youth that espoused assimilation at all costs and promoted the abandonment of Native tongues as part and parcel of a “civilizing” process, the schools’ hand in the broader social dysfunction plaguing the Lakota Nation (and many others) should not be underestimated. Cycles of poverty, violence, and despair, partially linked to the ethnocide inherent in this reeducation mandate, demand much of the limited resources available; these demands make language revitalization, ironically, a lower priority as Lakota communities attempt to stanch the bleeding...
from generations of deep cultural wounding. Taken together, issues of funding, programs that operate by fits and starts, lack of a unified and overarching approach to teaching and speaking, and the demands required to learn Lakota from the ground up continue to hamper a more widespread and lasting impact. Sadly, these realities are common across Indian Country.

Despite such impediments, retention of the Native voice, expressed on and in its own terms, is of paramount importance. Whether or not language is the touchstone of identity—a point some of the young people interviewed here debate—the fact remains that thinking in Lakota is central to cultural fluency. As one subject notes, certain words and ideas defy translation into English so one must know the language’s intent and power to truly understand the conception of the world it transmits. To this end, alternative approaches to “speaking” are emerging, including in the work of artists and through integration of the language with popular activities such as basketball. These modes of learning can go beyond the structural limits of classroom lessons and rote memorization by putting language into action and, as another teacher puts it, “building the sidewalk as we’re walking down it.”

In the final analysis, this film presents viewers with a complicated range of issues in a brief compass, deftly highlighting both the problems and progress of language loss and revitalization. It will appeal to educators concerned with addressing and overcoming this ongoing crisis among American Indian communities, and the documentary’s length makes it suitable for classroom use. Moreover, its approachable nature should earn it a wider application. It can be hoped that the film will provide valuable insights for the general public into Native American history, Lakota culture, and the rough dynamics of colonialism that laid the groundwork for this current situation. The greatest achievement, however, will be if it can help inspire other Indian Nations (and their allies) to take up the task of preserving languages that constitute their unique epistemologies and cultures. If these should wither and die, the world will be a poorer place indeed.

Eric P. Anderson (Citizen Potawatomi Nation)
Haskell Indian Nations University

*Called to Walls*. Directed by Amber Hansen and Nicholas Ward; featuring Arlene Goldbard and David Loewenstein; contributing producers Sharon Beshore, Chris and Robin Janzen, Michael Loewenstein, Judy and Denny Bollanger, and Peggy Flucke. 2016; color; 83 minutes. Distributed by Queen Alidore Productions. For screening information, see www.calledtowalls.com.

“VOLUNTEERS NEEDED CLEANING/REPAIRING THIS \ / HOUSE ANY HELP WOULD BE APPRECIATED”

*Called to Walls* is a luminous, kaleidoscopic film, a lodestar. A little more than a third of the way through this documentary, a sign bearing the above message provides the focal point of a neighborhood scene through which the Lawrence-based filmmakers Amber Hansen and Nicholas Ward drive as they chronicle the creation of *The Butterfly Effect: Dreams Take Flight* in Joplin, Missouri, one of four monumental, public, community-driven Midwest mural projects documented in the film. The text is handwritten on what appears to be a wilted, water-damaged poster board, propped up on the porch on a folding chair against the front of a house with peeling, worn white paint. The adjacent empty window is covered in plastic; the “V” is filled in with scribbled lines. The starkness of this beckoning—from residents of Joplin, Missouri, less than a year after a devastating EF5 2011 tornado hit the city—partially encapsulates the mission compelling the featured muralist, Dave Loewenstein, and indeed the film itself. Epitomizing writer and cultural activist-leader Arlene Goldbard’s thought that “the strategy that’s worth trying is the one where we tell the truth,” it still resonates today, five years later.

The somber, blanched mood of the sign scene contrasts with a motif that not only literally illuminates each city of each project but sheds light on the chaotic jubilation characteristic of this type of collaboration. Light: little girls backlit as if by magic, with radiant hair and refracted rainbow auras, summer-evening arms outstretched, faces blurred; moving people of all ages casting larger-than-life shadows over the giant, empty, coloring-book-page building walls. Curiously gesturing to create abstracted figure shapes over the preliminary outlines of mural narratives, animated by soulful folk music, these dancers visually merge into and out of the mural, often bearing fragments of the projected drawing directly on their bodies as tattoos or clothing. The moving painting is alive. The boundaries between art and life, maker and subject, real and imagined are eliminated, if only momentarily.

The Place of the Present in the Past

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“Who are we as a people? What do we stand for? How do we want to be remembered?”—is made manifest as small, self-selected design teams are shown wrestling with past and present issues of immigration and colonialism, social and economic disintegration, disaster reconstruction, racism, and bureaucratic conflict. Through each mural’s development of content, imagery, the ultimate message, and the finished product (as well as corollary offshoot projects), individuals of varied backgrounds, ages, and viewpoints are shown working through power inequities: discussing, listening, laboring, drawing, and painting.

This process is pictured in the Newton mural’s “imagineers”: citizens sitting around a quilted table, part of the cultural and farm landscape patchwork they create. Likewise, the documentary characters are depicted with reverence and empowerment. They include, among others, everyday (but often invisible) heroes such as Max Carr, the Tonkawa World War II pilot who threw mail out of the cockpit of his plane; “I want to help, but I’m not sure what I can do ’cause I’m just a kid” Brianna Sturdevant of Joplin; and Sammy Blackmon, an elderly handicapped Arkadelphia artist. Historical footage incorporates texture, context, and validity. Deepening the grassroots perspective, Hansen and Ward take viewers into kitchens, living rooms, local gift stores, parking lots, Boys and Girls Clubs, community pottery studios, porches, art-center lobbies, and even a barbershop to gather stories. Town canines also serve as playful but nonetheless delightful reminders of the “underdog.”

Finally, in a perhaps unconsciously symbolic (if consciously sentimental and ritual) act, in several instances groups celebrate their town and accomplishment through song. The culmination of varied yet harmonizing voices parallels the increasingly radical goal of this Renewal Project. As Loewenstein summarized at the dedication in Joplin, “The creation of this mural points to the untapped potential for regular citizens like us to re-inhabit the public spaces in our hometowns, and fill them with images and conversations that reflect our own hopes and dreams; to begin to occupy our visual environment with something more than advertising and sloganeering and to bring a sense of shared culture, memory and possibility back to civic life.” This processing of social responsibility,
democratic practice, and summons to progress is captured by Hansen and Ward with sensitivity, optimism, and at times an endearing self-conscious wackiness. Called to Walls transcends heavy-handed didacticism or schmaltzy motivationalism with beauty, authenticity, and artistic integrity.

Stephanie Lanter
Emporia State University


Frank Baum’s The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (1900) was one of many books that, at the turn of that century, imagined new and wonderful worlds. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, dystopic visions outnumber the utopian. The film Ozland cleverly juxtaposes the idealized and the grim.

Dressed in tattered, quasi-military fatigues, Leif (Zack Ratkovich) and Emri (Glenn Payne) seem to be the lone inhabitants of a postapocalyptic world. They journey west through flat grasslands and dusty fields, unsure what they might find. Leif is the follower, literate and vulnerable in his health. He thinks about drying up, as he imagines others have, and blowing away. The two move from one abandoned farmhouse to another, foraging for food and water. Emri, whose name in the language of Oz combines Uncle Henry and Aunt Em, collects advertising pictures from old magazines.

When Leif finds a copy of L. Frank Baum’s The Wonderful Wizard of Oz in an abandoned schoolhouse in Brooksville, he begins to entertain Emri by reading aloud, or summarizing what he reads about what he calls “Ozland.” Leif wants to know if they are looking for a home, if they will see a desert like the one that surrounds Oz. Is it possible to be a live scarecrow, who can walk and talk with no brain? Can a man become tin, losing his heart and his ability to love? Well-chosen passages from Baum’s novel figure throughout the film.

A practical wanderer, Emri says, “We’ll keep on surviving, enjoy life while it lasts.” His losses have deadened his imagination and hope, though he ruminates over the fashion pictures he keeps. Leif is infused with and energized by Oz. In an abandoned industrial building, he roars like a lion; he sees a metal mask that might well be the remains of the Tin Woodman. “It’s just a story, Leif. It’s not real,” Emri lectures Leif, but both seem in the grip of this symbolic overlay to their otherwise aimless travels.

Leif remembers his mother’s death, how he went for help and never could find his way home again. Emri wants comfort rather than daily survival. A crucified skeleton, the remains of someone burned at the stake and marked with the sign “terroris” [sic], is their scarecrow. A robot, Loi, a tin concoction winding down in his own quest to “find home” (with garbled speech and erratic, violent behavior), is their Tin Woodman. A circus poster is their connection to the Cowardly Lion (and to midgets who might be Munchkins). They are beset by Ozian bees, wolves, and crows. When an abandoned cassette-tape recorder plays a message from “Dee,” they have their Dorothy. Still, nothing imagined from Oz becomes real, and Emri and Leif are left longing for the same things as Dorothy and her companions: home, brains, heart, courage, all nearly impossible in this abandoned landscape. Postapocalypse does not mean postimagination, and the imagined Ozland becomes, for Leif, all that they are searching for.

Short on water (Leif is secreting some in case they meet the Wicked Witch of the West), angry, and hopeless, Emri tires of Leif’s frantic interpretations of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, insisting on the same harsh reality that the novel starts with: “When Dorothy stood in the doorway and looked around, she could see nothing but the great gray prairie on every side.” See nothing, feel nothing, imagine nothing, he seems to insist. He tears the final pages from the book and burns them. Grief-stricken, and with no end to ground him, in an abandoned house much like Dorothy’s, Leif creates his own Oz ending from Baum’s Oz beginning, a gesture that blows him, quite literally, away.

The Ozland landscape and place names are from Kansas, and the film was shot on locations in Minneola, Kansas, and in the Mississippi towns of West Point and Meridian. The movie has its implausibilities: the wayfarers always have food; the land is still green, with birds and insects but no human beings; no explanation or memory tells why all the people have “dried up,” as Emri and Leif believe. But Ozland moves toward the real questions posed by The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. What if we were forever separated from home? How can we find brains, courage, and heart? What if imagination is all that can really sustain us?

This meditation on the power of a single book—as utopian alternative reality and postapocalyptic guide—is an interesting addition to the popular culture of L. Frank Baum’s The Wonderful Wizard of Oz.

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