Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 17
Issue 1 *April 2013*

Article 18

January 2013

After Tiller

Dereck Daschke
Truman State University, ddaschke@truman.edu

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Recommended Citation

Daschke, Dereck (2013) "After Tiller," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 18.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol17/iss1/18

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After Tiller

Abstract

This is a film review of *After Tiller* (2013) directed by Martha Shane and Lana Wilson.

Keywords

Abortion, Murders, Late Term

This sundance film festival review is available in Journal of Religion & Film: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol17/iss1/18

After Tiller

Directed by Martha Shane and Lana Wilson

(Documentary Competition)



The title of the documentary *After Tiller* refers to the future of late-term abortion in the U.S., embodied by the four providers who remain in the wake of the murder of their friend and colleague, George Tiller, who was shot in his Wichita church by anti-abortion activist Scott Roeder in 2009. While the documentary mainly focuses on both the day-to-day operations of the clinics and the motivations of these doctors to continue to offer this controversial service even at the risk of their own lives, the religious zealotry that ended Dr. Tiller's life is never far removed. The Christian forces that have made abortion rights a target ever since the Roe v. Wade ruling most obviously affect the practice of Dr. LeRoy Carhart, whose clinic is driven from Nebraska by a state law limiting abortions to within twenty weeks of pregnancy (late-term abortions may be performed up to twenty-eight weeks), then thwarted by protesters across the river in Iowa, and harassed by activists in Maryland.

One of those activists expresses his disgust at Dr. Carhart and his practice in terms of the evil of killing viable children just weeks away from a natural birth. But as the documentary makes clear, if these babies are viable at all, it is only with the prospect of horrifyingly severe medical problems, the type that guarantee whatever time the child spends out of the womb will be filled with bodily limitation, pain, and mental suffering. The women shown seeking this procedure in the various clinics (the others are located in Boulder, Colorado and Albuquerque, New Mexico) are almost invariably overwhelmed with sorrow at the prospect they face. If the patients presented in the film are indeed typical, generally speaking the need for the late-term procedure is born out of the discovery of a catastrophic health condition in the fetus at a later stage of development. The mother absolutely wanted this child, was planning for this child, and now must choose between bringing the child into the world for a short, painful life, or terminating the pregnancy before it – and the child's condition – can progress any further.

The conservative Christian presumptions that all life is sacred, all births are just as God intends them to be, and humans are constrained from making an ethical choice that may determine that a humane death is far more beneficent than this kind of natural birth are all challenged by the realities of conditions in which people seek out this procedure. Certainly the stereotype that those seeking these

abortions are lazy and nonchalant about the enormity of the choice they are making is dispelled in these scenes, as is the assumption that these providers are heartless and cynical. Not only do they engage each patient with absolute compassion, concern, and care—before, during, and after the procedure—but they also remain affected by each case, even ones they had to turn away. Susan Robinson, of the Albuquerque clinic, in particular resents that she is put in the position of determining who "deserves" to have this procedure based on the quality of their story to persuade her. If a patient has made this choice, she wonders, why is it up to her whether it is a good one, for the right reasons?

While late-term abortion is reviled across the board, even by supporters of abortion rights, *After Tiller* goes a long way to humanize all involved and to demonstrate that far from being a necessary evil, something so necessary for some in impossible circumstances can hardly be considered "evil."

— Dereck Daschke