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The Illinois Parables

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The Illinois Parables

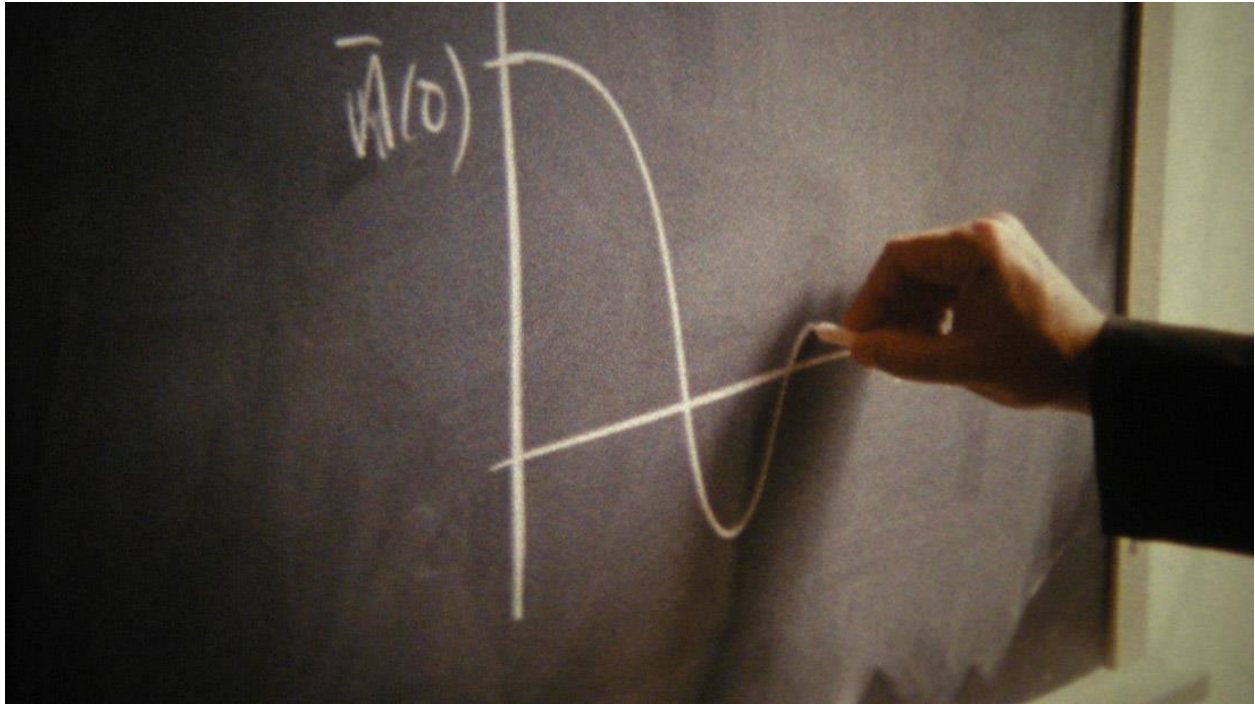
Abstract

This is a film review of *The Illinois Parables* (2016) directed by Deborah Stratman.

Author Notes

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The Illinois Parables
(2016)
Directed by Deborah Stratman



The New Frontier section of the Sundance Film Festival “champions filmmakers who expand, experiment with, and explode traditional storytelling. It recognizes the crossroads of film, art, and media technology as a hotbed for storytelling innovation.”

Deborah Stratman’s *The Illinois Parables* was shown as part of the New Frontier and rightfully so. The movie is a combination of film, pictures, graphics, documentary footage, history, narrative, sound, documents, and paintings – the crossroads of film, art, and media technology. Just what you would expect as part of the New Frontier.

The movie opens with film footage of prairies, rivers, farms, and towns, thereby setting the stage for *The Illinois Parables*. There are eleven parables, each connected to a particular location in Illinois and a particular time period. The first parable is set in Cahokia, from 600 to 1400 CE. A shaman tells us that he comes here often to gain strength and wisdom from his ancestors. The

message is that we ought to pay close attention to our ancestors because they may have been much wiser than we think we are. The second parable is set in Alton, in 1673. Here we see present day signs of “deer attacks.” In 1673, however, it was our task to live in harmony with nature. When we did not live in harmony with nature the deer attacked. The message is that we have not yet learned this lesson and our failure to learn it puts us at risk. The deer will attack. The third parable shows us that the Trail of Tears ran through the lower portion of Illinois. We hear a train whistle in the background, a symbol of civilization. We sometimes referred to the Indians as savages, but the parable asks us to consider who the real savages are.

The fourth parable takes us to Nauvoo, Illinois, between 1839 and 1848. Here we learn that Nauvoo is the beginning of what has often been called the California Trail or the Oregon Trail or the Mormon Trail. Nauvoo had become a refuge for Mormons who had been driven out of Ohio and other places. But even here, the strangeness of Mormon beliefs caused their fellow citizens to drive them out, across the Mississippi into what was then not a part of the United States. They were in fact driven out of their own country. Nauvoo was the starting point of the exodus of Mormons from Illinois, under the leadership of Brigham Young. The parable asks us to consider how we treat people who are noticeably different from ourselves. And that is an important question for today’s world. The fifth parable also finds us in Nauvoo and in Icaria where there came to be an Icarian community. The Icarians believed that property should be communal. But, as Icarians moved further west, the communities lost their focus and gradually disappeared. This story probably has several parables, from tolerance to communal property.

Parable six focuses on Gorham and Crossville. The year is 1925 and a tornado sweeps across the state, ravaging communities along the way. Here we hear the actual sounds of the tornado, as well as the voices of people as the tornado passes through. This might be a parable

about the force of nature and our own humility, but it is also a parable about the role of faith in a time of crisis. The seventh parable finds us in Chicago, at the University of Chicago, where Enrico Fermi and his colleagues created the first controlled self-sustaining nuclear reaction. This was the first step in the development of nuclear weapons and the parable warns us to be wary of what we wish for. Parable eight is about Joliet, Illinois, where the nuclear waste from the first experiments is stored, again warning us to be careful about our wishes coming true.

Parable nine is about a series of inexplicable fires. Since investigators cannot explain the cause of the fires, it is suggested that our enemies are testing the ability to start fires using radio waves. The parable suggests that before we latch on to a conspiracy theory, we might want to look at more of a simple explanation. Parable ten concerns a government raid on a Black Panther Party apartment in Chicago. What we discover is a government cover-up of the raid that took place. Be wary of government behavior. As well, be wary of acting out of fear. Finally, the eleventh parable takes us back to rural Illinois, Buffalo Rock, and asks us once again to consider the wisdom of our ancestors and, of course, our own ignorance and arrogance.

I have given here my own interpretations of the parables. My interpretations are probably more secular than those of Deborah Stratman. Viewers should feel free to find their own interpretations. The movie is fascinating because whatever interpretation you give the parables, the film takes you to interesting places in unusual ways, making it a pleasure to develop your own elucidation. I do want to mention the music. Creating music for this film is really more like creating music for eleven different films. In each case the music is remarkably appropriate and sometimes even magical.