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Nebraska Dir. Alexander Payne (review)

Walter Metz

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of God. The ideas and interpretations of one woman and her relationship to God teach thousands of children to become radical followers.

What is most alarming about *Jesus Camp* is the future that the documentary predicts. The camp attendees presumably will grow up under the influence of Fischer's teachings, enabling her evangelical values to spread out of the Midwest and expand around the world. When the former campers reach adulthood and continue to perpetuate the radical ideas they were taught as children, Fischer will ultimately get what she wants—an evangelical army of God born from the Midwest.

Autumn Prazuch

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN—MILWAUKEE

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Nebraska. Dir. Alexander Payne. Paramount Vantage, 2013.

There's a terrific scene early in *Nebraska* where a son and his elderly father on a road trip from Billings, Montana, to Omaha, Nebraska, stop at Mount Rushmore. At first, the dad, Woody Grant (Bruce Dern) doesn't respond positively when his son David (Will Forte) suggests they take a short detour to the Black Hills on their way through South Dakota. Even when they get there, they merely stop their car in front of the ranger's station, presumably so they do not have to pay the entrance fee. Woody remains unimpressed. He critiques Gutzon Borglum's work, saying that it looks unfinished. Indeed, Woody is correct: Borglum died in 1941, so his son Lincoln tried to finish his father's sculpture, but with Depression era public works funding exhausted, the completion failed. After a short few moments staring at this "incomplete" artwork, Woody says they've now seen it, and they can resume their journey to Omaha to collect what he believes to be his one million dollar publisher's clearinghouse prize.

National monuments are typically used in a very different way in Hollywood cinema. From *North by Northwest* (1959) to *National Treasure II: Book of Secrets* (2007), Mount Rushmore usually serves to connect the national security to individual romance. In Alfred Hitchcock's film, Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) defeats communists and rescues CIA agent Eve Kendall (Eve Marie Saint) so that he may marry her, lifting her from the edge of the monument into his honeymoon bed aboard a train about to streak into a tunnel.

Payne's film positions Borglum's monumental sculpture not as an

American triumph, but as an emblem of national incompleteness. Payne's films are obsessed with mere snippets of American geography, depicting local environs such as southern Californian wine country in *Sideways* (2004), Omaha in *About Schmidt* (2002), and Hawaii in *The Descendants* (2011). Indeed, *Nebraska* is a wondrous inversion of *About Schmidt*, centering Payne's biographical obsession—he was born in Omaha—on the North American Great Plains. In the earlier film, Warren (Jack Nicholson), upon the death of his wife (June Squibb, who also plays Woody's wife in *Nebraska*), buys an RV so that he can leave his insurance sales job in Omaha and drive westward across Nebraska to see his daughter get married in Denver. In *Nebraska*, a son has to drive his elderly father east to finally come to understand their confounding relationship. Counter to the Hollywood flyover narrative, where nothing exists between New York and Los Angeles, both films produce character transformation without reaching either coast.

In the middle of America, Woody enters his hometown bar for the first time in decades, hoping to reunite with his old friends. As David looks around the empty establishment, with a few lonely souls at the bar, we know this cannot end well. As Woody stubbornly walks up to some women at the bar, David shakes his head, yet without missing a beat, follows behind his father to help care for the man. This is not the heroic stuff of Mount Rushmore films—the dueling spies in *North by Northwest* or the seekers of lost gold in *National Treasure*—nor is it the celebration of the national leaders in Borglum's sculpture, but it is heroic nonetheless.

Leo Tolstoy begins *Anna Karenina* (1887) with the cheeky observation that all families are uniquely dysfunctional: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." And the unstated corollary, of course, like some kind of Catskills joke, is that there aren't any happy families. *Nebraska* is a film in that melodramatic tradition. It takes our everyday lives and positions them as meaningfully tragic. Payne's film reins in Bruce Dern, whose role as the discarded father of polygamist Bill Henrickson on HBO's *Big Love* was a tour de force of nasty insanity. Payne refuses to settle for the easy depiction of parents who ruined their children's lives. Instead, Payne understands that no matter how flawed parents are, they almost never ruin their children's lives, but for better or worse, they truly do shape who we are. Woody Grant will not win father of the year anytime soon; but more importantly, he is not a monster.

This is the symbolic lesson of Borglum's Mount Rushmore, perfect despite its incompleteness. The great presidents of mythology that Borglum

intended to place on the mountain, resplendent from head to waist, are only partially depicted. The films that canonize the mountain as the symbolic location of American greatness suffer from a reductive assumption: either you are a national hero or a communist. Payne's beautiful film indicates that every moment of our lives is incomplete because that moment is irrevocably preceded and followed by others just like it.

When he arrives in his hometown, crucially in the rural Midwest, Woody tells David about the automotive repair shop he used to run with Ed Pegram (Stacy Keach). When we finally meet Ed, he turns out to be a complete jerk, the film's villain. Throughout *Nebraska*, David has been trying to convince his father that the certificate he believes guarantees him the one million dollars is a sham; Woody stubbornly refuses to believe it. After some of the Grants' ne'er-do-well relatives steal the paper from Woody, believing him to be a millionaire, they discover that the document is merely a piece of junk mail. After they throw it away on the street, Ed picks it up and shows it around the bar, positioning Woody as an object of ridicule. When David sees the devastating effect this is having on his father, he punches Ed, allowing David to fully come into his own as a man for the first time. That David can both be the film's voice of reason early on and the defender of his father's integrity late in the film demonstrates that the incompleteness of Mount Rushmore is the correct positioning of human identity.

When they finally arrive in Omaha, they discover the sweepstakes center is a pathetic office in an industrial park, not the showplace promised by Ed McMahon. When the worker there looks up Woody's certificate, she confirms that he is not a winner. She offers him a hat instead. David, unwilling to let his father die in abject disappointment, sells his own car to buy his father a new truck and an air compressor, the two things Woody said he was going to acquire with his winnings. As Woody drives his new truck through his hometown wearing the "prize winner" hat, David has given his father an exceptional gift, allowing against all odds the absurd journey to Omaha to have been a success.

As they leave the small rural setting, Woody stops the truck and switches seats with David so that his son can drive them safely back to Billings. In an exquisite final shot, Payne in extreme long shot frames the truck pointing westward, isolated on the lonely road. It is the film's final expression of incompleteness. For David certainly, but also for Woody, the journey has folded back on itself. While each has gotten to know the other better, the moments after the film is over will change these dynamics inexorably. Even

as the end credits roll, Payne's film insists on the always in progress nature of our lives, up until that final moment when we take our last breath.

This is something the cinema is the perfect art form to convey: when the camera is turned off, a certain kind of death occurs. The magic box has brought people to life by projecting their images on a screen. When the light ceases, the characters cease to exist; for all practical purposes, they die. As much as Mount Rushmore tries to indicate otherwise in monumental granite, the cinema is a machine of the ephemeral, of that which is always in motion, always doomed to incompleteness. In short, the movies are the perfect art form for telling our stories, and some of those tales concern those of us who live and love in between New York and Los Angeles.

Walter Metz

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Carbondale, Illinois

Parks and Recreation. NBC. NBCUniversal Television Distribution, 2009–15.

Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler), the protagonist of NBC's primetime sitcom *Parks and Recreation*, obsessively loves the small midwestern town for which she serves as deputy parks director and, briefly, city councilwoman. The show, set in fictional Pawnee, Indiana, revolves around the daily work of a parks and recreation department. Seasons four and five provide a closer look at the intricacies of local politics as Leslie campaigns for office and serves as councilwoman during this multiseason narrative arc. Pawnee itself takes on a substantive role throughout the series, as much of the show's humor emphasizes the stubbornness of the town in response to Leslie's determined yet reasonable brand of progressive politics.

The show operates on a contradictory logic that sympathetically portrays Leslie's excessive love for her small hometown while simultaneously offering Pawnee up as the butt of many jokes. While Leslie is quoted on "multiple occasions" as saying that "only a moron would ever live anywhere other than Pawnee, Indiana," the show relies on stereotypical notions of the Midwest as a conservative cultural wasteland.¹ *Parks and Recreation* reinforces such negative regional associations with its portrayal of Pawnee, especially in its representation of futile town hall meetings. In their introduction to the Midwest, scholars Joseph Slade and Judith Lee discuss the public's understanding of the Midwest as either "Heartland" or