God Loves Uganda dir. by Roger Ross Williams (review)

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righteous pranks, and deliver rapier witticisms. Therefore American Teen, without intending to do so, draws our attention to the fictive, ideological, and ultimately racially loaded way that Hollywood’s teen and high school dramas depict teenagers: Minority youth are commonly depicted as a threat to society that must be tamed, while middle class white teens are portrayed as paragons of sophisticated “expressive individualism”—to use a term employed by Bulman. Despite being positioned to fulfill the latter of these roles, the five teenagers seen in American Teen do not fit the part. Instead, while each is admirable in their individual way, they also make mistakes, orchestrate childish pranks, and rely on their parents for guidance and affirmation as they navigate their paths toward adulthood, sometimes clumsily. In short, they behave like actual teens, not the Hollywood version. If we look beyond American Teen’s forced drama, stagey formal construction, and marketing hype, then we see that director Burstein has unintentionally delivered a documentary that debunks the formulaic, fantasy scenarios of the high school film genre it was positioned to join. Along the way, in its best moments as a documentary, American Teen delivers a modestly revealing exploration of life as it is experienced by a group of quite ordinary, white, middle class high school seniors in a small town in the Midwest.

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NOTE


Throughout God Loves Uganda (2013), director Roger Ross Williams spotlights the transnational connections between the American Midwest and the rest of the world. In this case, the relationship is primarily expressed through a contemporary form of Christian missionary work that many critics would characterize as neocolonial. For example, in some scenes, we see young white evangelicals gesticulating rapturously at the International House of Prayer (IHOP), a megachurch in Kansas City, Missouri, while a Christian rock band plays on a well lit stage. In other scenes, young Ugan-
dans preach to city traffic, pass out Bibles, and gather in makeshift halls, singing songs of praise and quoting scripture in global varieties of English. In both examples, people gesture similarly: swaying back and forth with hands raised to the heavens, prostrating on the floor, and weeping as the minister’s words flow over them; they are overcome with religious fervor. As the two collide, perhaps the most unsettling image is of a young Ugandan praying while a white missionary whispers fervently in her ear.

The film’s powerful, and disturbing, message revolves around the influence of American evangelism on Ugandan public policy. But, this is also a story about globalization, the intersectionality of forces. From the American Midwest to remote towns in Uganda, conservative, evangelical Christianity with a distinct focus on sexual oppression is shown to exploit the developing parts of the globalized world. Thought of by the young adults at ihop as traditional missionary work, their mission to Uganda—the “jewel of Africa,” according to one minister—has a political agenda that drips with the rhetoric of war. As one preacher declares while preparing eager young missionaries for their trip to Uganda: “We are not going to put guns in your hands, but you are going to take over the world with the power of the holy spirit!”

Through interviews with both Ugandan LGBTQ activists and midwestern evangelists-in-training, the film shows the process by which American missionaries insert themselves into the Ugandan political landscape, hoping to influence a legislature that seeks to make being gay a crime punishable by death. Meanwhile, Bible study groups focus intently—sometimes perversely—on antigay rhetoric. When asked, the evangelists maintain a stance of plausible deniability, arguing that what Ugandans do in their own political sphere is their business. The Americans are only there to spread the “good news” that Christ died for their sins.

The complexity of the situation is that these are not solely religious matters, but economic ones as well. As one interview explains, embracing an antigay political message in Uganda brings in a lot of American dollars. The film shows top officials profiting while those being preached to in impoverished and rural areas continue to be disfranchised. The culture of corruption connects powerful and influential figures at the top across national boundaries in ways that continue to exploit those at the bottom. Midwestern megachurches with big money collaborate with Ugandan politicians, many of whom actually studied at private, Christian universities in the U.S. This scheme allows for a trans-Atlantic flow of capital that reinvests in religious fundamentalism in multiple contexts.
Feminist scholar Uma Narayan observes how Western stereotypes of those who live in the so-called third world enable injustice and oppression to be “explained away” as merely symptomatic of a “national culture” that is somehow “timeless” and “outside history.”¹ Worrisome in some contemporary discussions about LGBTQ rights across the globe is a similar explanation of antigay bigotry, not as a transnationally circulated discourse partly imported from the U.S., but as a cultural norm. Without the juxtaposition of images in God Loves Uganda, Ugandan religious practices risk being explained away as “cultural,” deemed symptomatic of a “dark” and “backward” third world.

God Loves Uganda indirectly critiques this line of reasoning because it shows the transnational nature of oppressive discourse and its influence by capitalist logic and conservative values. Williams helps viewers understand that these images of religious and political hatred are a result of cultures in contact. The Midwest is no more isolated than Uganda as the two collaborate on policy and profit at the expense of the poor and dispossessed.

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NOTE

The Middle, ABC, 2009–.

During a 2011 panel discussion at the Paley Center for Media in New York with the stars and creators of The Middle—the hit ABC sitcom about a decidedly lower middle class family of five living in the middle of the country—lead actress Patricia Heaton tried to explain the secret to the show’s success across such a broad socioeconomic range of viewers: “We are very specifically midwestern, and very specifically economically lower middle class and struggling . . . and I think specificity makes everything much more universal.”

Certainly the show’s regular opening sequence of an empty road surrounded by corn fields with crows cawing in the background seems to establish an explicit and specific midwestern location and identity, as does