Movie Review

Fire and Ice

The Poetics and Politics of the Bakken in Documentary Films

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The 2015 Oscar nominations included one film about the North Dakota oil boom and surprisingly ignored another. In many aspects, "White Earth" deserved to be nominated in the Documentary Short Subject category even if the film didn't win an Academy Award. Surprisingly, "The Overnighters" was left out of Documentary Feature consideration. Both movies steer clear of overtly political and environmental issues involved in fracking in the Bakken to present humanistic stories about people at the shale revolution's ground zero. Since documentary films often carry more respect with contemporary audiences than traditional journalism, it is important to examine these films to assess how what's happening in North Dakota is being presented to the rest of the world.

White Earth

J. Christian Jensen's "White Earth" is a poetic 20-minute film about the oil boom seen through the eyes of those who usually have little to no say in the decision to migrate to the Northern Great Plains: children and mothers. "White Earth" entered Oscar season with an impressive list of awards, including the Jury Award for Best Short Film at the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival and a Special Jury Award for Best Cinematography for a Documentary Short at the Slamdance Film Festival. The film has also been featured at over 30 national and international film festivals.

Leevi Myers is an eleven-year-old girl who lives on a farm near White Earth. She rides horses, tends chickens and feels anxious about new people moving into the town from other states.

To most viewers, the film title would seem just a descriptive reference to the North Dakota winter landscape, but it is also the name of a small town where the main characters live. Founded in 1888, White Earth began losing

"White Earth," Short documentary, 2014

Director, producer: Christian Jensen

residents in 1910. Statewide, the population continued to grow but then went into steady decline after the 1930 census. In 2000, there were only 63 residents in White Earth and the median household income was $26,250. In recent years, large numbers of workers and sometimes their families moved to western North Dakota as hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling opened up the Bakken shale formation to oil production. This sudden migration created a housing and other social crises, which have become the focus of filmmakers regarding the oil boom.

Originally from Utah, Jensen is a journalist turned documentary filmmaker who made "White Earth" as his MFA thesis film at Stanford University. He'd heard from his father about large numbers of workers leaving Utah for North Dakota seeking wealth. This gold rush atmosphere gives "White Earth" its unique viewpoint. The film weaves the stories of three children and an immigrant mother into a tale of innocence and the American Dream. Most characters live in work camps or mobile homes, which Jenson presents poetically in an observational, *cinéma vérité* style. He also uses interviews to provide a stream-of-consciousness narrative that introduces the main characters, tells their tales and articulates various critical topics regarding life in the Bakken.

James McClellan, age 13, moved to White Earth with his father in the summer. When the movie begins, he is not very happy. The film was shot in the winter when seasonal depression pervades the bleak landscape. During the day, he stays alone in a trailer while his father goes to work. James doesn't attend school, instead dealing with isolation and boredom by playing

James McClellan, the main character of "White Earth," is a 13-year-old with a cynical view of the oil industry and living in a small town of 90 people in the Bakken.

video games and engaging in target practice with his Ninja-style throwing stars. Not surprisingly, the teenager is a cynical character who provides the film's most negative view of this new world of ice and oil.

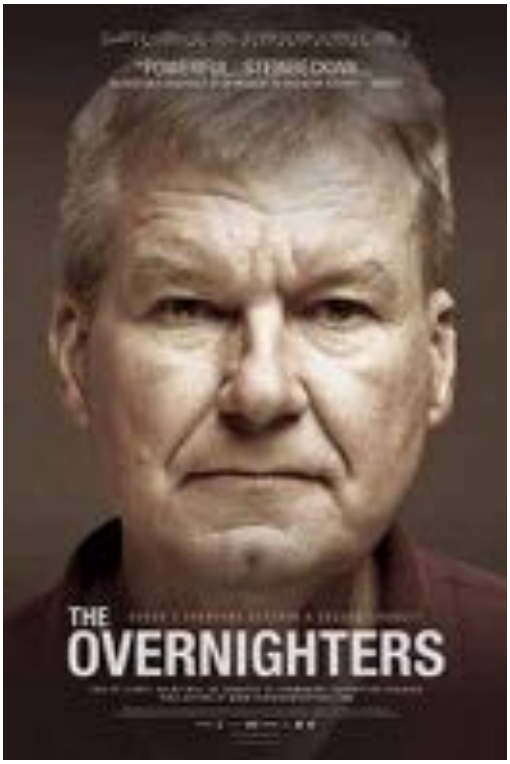
Next we meet Leevi Meyer, 11 years of age, in her classroom at a public elementary school as her teacher leads a discussion about how the oil boom is affecting the students' lives. Leevi grew up in White Earth and her entire family is from North Dakota. Jensen provides beautiful images of her agrarian life as she feeds horses and cares for the family's chickens. Leevi says the best thing about her state is that it's small and there are not many people. But the influx of new residents is changing that, and her parents don't let her venture far from home because some new residents are "scary."

After decades of demographic decline, North Dakota's population increased by 15 percent to 739,482 from 2000 to 2014, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Most new residents moved to western North Dakota because of jobs in the oil fields and related services. During the same period, the population in Mountrail County (White Earth) increased by 47.5 percent to 9,782 and in Williams County (Williston) by 62.5 percent to 32,130. These figures are considered to be very conservative by residents and local officials, reflecting the rapid and massive proliferation of man camps, for which there are no reliable tallies. In addition, employment is volatile in the Bakken, fluctuating by thousands of workers from week to week.

Elena Guadalupe Loaiza moved to White Earth from California with her daughter Flor and her husband when he got a job in the oil fields. Workdays

begin at 4 a.m. when Elena sees her husband off, as Flor looks on, and then she goes to work for a janitorial service. Meanwhile Flor enjoys a happy childhood, adapting well to her new environment and making friends. Elena dreams that one day Flor will graduate from university, live a better life than her parents and never have to uproot her family.

While the stories of the characters are engaging, the film's most impressive element is the cinematography. Jensen's use of the contrast of light and dark, and especially his incorporation of methane flares in the oil fields, create striking images. The most pervasive visual technique involves placing flares behind oil rigs, trucks and other industrial equipment, allowing the red, orange and yellow glow to infuse the darkness. This creates a strange dawn or dusk effect as if on an alien planet, but this scenario has become the norm in the Bakken.



"The Overnighters"
Full-feature documentary, 2014
Director: Jesse Moss

The Overnighters

"The Overnighters" is a feature-length film, directed by Jesse Moss, which won a Special Jury Award for Intuitive Filmmaking at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival. Like Jensen, Moss shoots in a *cinéma vérité* style, providing a mostly fly-on-the-wall chronicle of Pastor Jay Reinke as he tries to bridge the growing gap between Williston's longtime residents and new arrivals. Moss, a California-based filmmaker, happened to read a column written by Reinke in the Williston Herald, appealing to the community to welcome the newcomers despite the rising crime rate.

The film begins with a brief retelling of the abduction and murder of Sherry Arnold, a high school math teacher, on the Montana side of the Bakken by two men from Colorado. This horrific story provided clear evidence to the residents of Williston, near where Arnold's body was found, that their town was changing. The Williston Herald published stories on the growing crime rate, and fear of new arrivals increased as a result. Meanwhile, workers desperate for high-paying jobs continued to arrive in Williston where scant housing was available and rents were exorbitant. Many job seekers found themselves on the verge of homelessness. Looking for help, they turned to Concordia Lutheran Church. With little input from church members, Pastor Reinke started The Overnighters Program, offering temporary housing in the church and overnight parking to those in need.

"The Overnighters" is a wonderful example of nonfiction storytelling. The

twists and turns of human relationships are portrayed in convincing texture and complexity. Pastor Reinke's response to the needs of workers is admirable, but he makes mistakes that lead to a series of intriguing conflicts. Many church neighbors are concerned for the safety of their families. In response, the city council acts to limit where workers can stay, which prevents migrant workers from sleeping in their cars in the church parking lot. Many Concordia members feel their church community is changing drastically for the worse and leave the congregation. Eventually local news media discover that Reinke has opened up his home to a migrant worker who is a registered sex offender. Pastor Reinke initiates damage control as he tries to protect his family, his faith community, the new arrivals and his job. A twist in the third act of the film leaves the audience with questions about Reinke, several overnighters and even the filmmaker, which linger as the credits roll.

In addition to Pastor Reinke's story, Moss chronicles several people who have received help from The Overnighters Program. A young father from Wisconsin talks with his girlfriend and toddler via Skype in a temporary bedroom at Concordia. He struggles to find a job, a place to live and to stay connected to his family. Then there is a middle-aged unemployed man from the South who drove to Williston to support his family. He struggles to find immediate employment, like many others, and fears for the future.

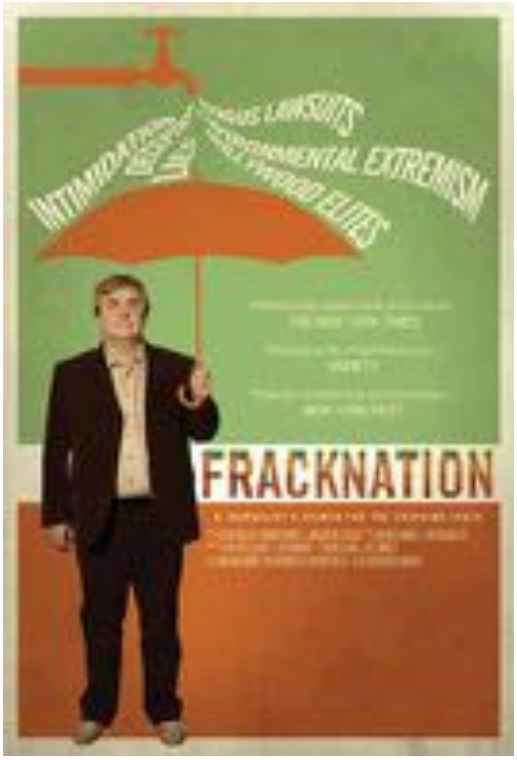
The stylistic choice to tell a story in *cinéma vérité* style does create problems. When a filmmaker points his camera in a particular direction, he makes a conscious decision not to film something else. The audience follows a narrowly constructed story as a result. Filmmakers argue that this is necessary to provide the intimate details of the particular story they are telling. There is no narrator in pure *cinéma vérité* documentaries; no voice of authority that provides direction for the audience or reminds them of particular details. Without this voice, the audience is left to discern the facts as presented without context.

While this is an appealing idea for filmmakers, *cinéma vérité* can lead the audience to make large assumptions. For example, the town of Williston is not presented in the best light. Residents are seen as icy, leery of all outsiders. While some might be friendly to the new arrivals, most seem to want them to leave. The only place the audience sees anything that looks like a welcoming community is with Pastor Reinke and other migrant workers at Concordia Lutheran Church. This presentation of Williston might not be what Moss intended, but it does bolster the dramatic structure of the film as a battle between one man and his community.

The audience doesn't hear the stories of families who have benefited from employment here. Nor are there any examples of how communities have gained positively by welcoming new residents. We do not see the efforts of the oil and gas industry being environmentally responsible.

Accurate Portrayals?

Humanistic stories, such as "White Earth" and "The Overnighters," connect with audiences more successfully than films discussing technical or scientific subject matter. Poetic imagery and voices of the everyman have the power to impact audiences, but are these narrative elements used to portray North Dakota's oil boom accurately? In some ways the answer is, yes. In both films, new oil wells are being drilled and job seekers continue to flood into the state. Families who have lived in the state for generations witness vast changes in their communities. The bitter cold of the North Dakota winter never changes. But in other ways, these films do not present an accurate image. The audience doesn't hear the stories of families who have benefited from employment. Nor are there any examples of how communities have gained positively from welcoming new residents. We do not see the efforts of the oil and gas industry to be environmentally responsible.



"FrackNation"
Full-feature documentary, 2014

Directors:
Phelim McAleer, Ann McElhinney, Magdalena Segieda

These films present change in ominous shades, which film critics have described as "Steinbeckian." In "The Overnighters," down-and-out workers continue to struggle; some lose everything. Communities wrestle with the changes forced upon them. Many residents sell their homes and leave. Questions are posed but left unanswered. The beautiful images of the alien-like world of "White Earth" highlight the "stranger in a strange land" quality of newcomers to the Bakken, especially through the eyes of children. The unspoken enemy in both films is the oil industry, which is also seen as the only hope for the future.

"Come on people. Why should we just take all the beauty away from the landscape by putting up fires and making it smell horrible," says James McClellan in "White Earth." "All the guys want is money. But I don't know what would happen if there was no oil fields. That's the only job my dad ever worked in."

While not directly political, both films support tighter regulations on the oil and gas industry in the name of environmentalism. Four years before, fracking made its feature documentary debut in Josh Fox's "Gasland," which is set up as a personal journey of discovery into the shale revolution from Pennsylvania to Colorado, Wyoming, Utah and Texas. Fox interviewed people who had experienced chronic health issues, allegedly connected to contaminates in the air and water in areas where drilling takes place. In one scene, made famous in the film's trailer, a resident sets his tap water on fire.

The film was received positively, especially by environmental activists, and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary. "Gasland Part II" premiered at the 2013 Tribeca Film Festival.

"Gasland" also inspired director Phelim McAleer to make "FrackNation," which addresses the misinformation about fracking presented in films such as "Gasland." The New York Times praised "FrackNation" for its methodical research and for "underscor[ing] the sheer complexity of a process that offers a financial lifeline to struggling farmers."

Big Men: Everyone Wants to be Big

It is rare to find a documentary film about the oil industry that treats all sides fairly. In "Big Men," filmmaker Rachel Boynton achieves this as she examines the inner workings of a small American oil company trying to establish operations in Ghana in West Africa.

The media often present oil companies as intrinsically evil entities looking for the easiest way to make money. While money is a key concern for Kosmos Energy—a small Dallas-based oil company—Boynton allows us to see the human side of company executives through sit-down interviews and personal observational moments.

Boynton's level of access is even more impressive when the film takes us to Ghana where we are privy to meetings between Kosmos executives and government officials, as they discuss the exploration and development of the Jubilee Oil Field, off Ghana's Atlantic coast.

As well, Boynton and her film crew follow and film a group of rebels in neighboring Nigeria, who fought for a greater share of oil revenue for locals, most of whom live on less than a dollar a day. For Ghana's future, this is a cautionary tale if its citizens don't receive fair economic benefit.

The Nigerian rebels sabotaged pipelines in the mid-2000s. This was partly responsible for the spike in oil prices that created economically favorable conditions for the fracking boom in North Dakota.

"I don't describe myself as a journalist or as objective, but I do promise to listen," said Boynton in a telephone interview. "I practice an open way of seeing the world and don't pass quick judgment. The film isn't about political points but about how the world works. All the characters have the same desires regarding reputation, money and power—to become 'big men'—and go after this in different ways."

"Big Men"
Full-feature documentary, 2013

Director: Rachel Boynton

Executive producer: Brad Pitt

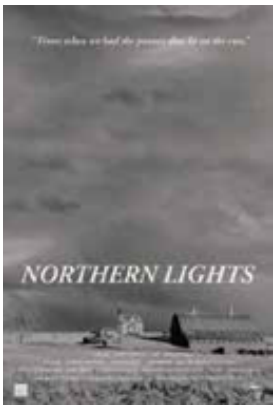
North Dakota Film Omission

"The Overnighters" and "White Earth" tell powerful stories from the Bakken. One significant problem for North Dakotans is that both filmmakers come from elsewhere and then leave. Local viewers typically voice the same sense of disconnect from these films as when they read newspaper and magazine articles written by outsiders who "parachute" into the state and usually confirm their biases, rather than take the time and effort to understand the state's history, culture and people.

North Dakota has little infrastructure designed to support a local film industry or develop homegrown filmmakers. Nor are incentives offered to filmmakers from here or elsewhere. Minnesota operates a Snowbate program, which offers a 20-percent rebate for in-state expenses and an additional five percent if filming is done outside the Twin Cities. This program recently attracted five feature films to the Minnesota. More aggressively, Canada has been building a strong film industry for decades. In Alberta, funding is available for 25 to 30 percent of total production costs and a labor-based tax credit of 45 to 55 percent. As a result, the first season of the TV series "Fargo," which is set in Minnesota and North Dakota, was filmed mostly in Alberta.

Surely North Dakota would benefit culturally and economically from a robust film commission. This would inspire future generations of talented North Dakotan youngsters to consider—and become apprentices in—filmmaking as a career. Given the importance of the Bakken as the shale revolution's epicenter, many stories will be told in various video formats for regional, national and international audiences. The question is whether there will be authentic North Dakotan voices among the storytellers.

Little Big Film on the Prairie



"Northern Lights" is one of the few full-length movies in recent decades both filmed on location in North Dakota and involving North Dakotans. The film, released in 1978, dramatizes the founding of the Nonpartisan League in North Dakota in 1915 as a populist expression of the anger and frustration small farmers felt at being exploited by out-of-state companies and banks. This political movement ultimately led to the founding of the Bank of North Dakota. "Northern Lights" was produced, directed, written and edited by John Hanson and Rob Nilsson. The film was awarded the Caméra d'Or at the 1980 Cannes Film Festival for best first feature film. Hanson was born in Minnesota and raised in McClusky, North Dakota. His documentary film, "Sisters" (2000), portrays Benedictine nuns facing the challenges of the modern world. The film aired on PBS.