

## Deborah Stratman Uses Illinois History to Examine Ideology, Exodus, and Divinity

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Film still from *The Illinois Parables* by Deborah Stratman, 2016.

How do religious belief and ideology shape our society? Focusing on historical events in the state of Illinois, Deborah Stratman's Creative Capital Project, *The Illinois Parables*, examines how religious or ideological belief have shaped the world we live in today. Using archival film, reenactment, and new observational footage, the experimental documentary consists of 11 vignettes, or "parables," that tell lesser-known stories about the state, from the violent eviction of the Cherokee people to the 1969 murder of Black Panther leader, Fred Hampton. [An exhibition at MCA Chicago](#), open through December 6, 2020, centers

around the film, and also pays tribute to Chicago radio personality and historian, Studs Terkel.

We spoke to Deborah Stratman about some of the true stories in the film, the legacy of Studs Terkel, and audio's innate ability to tell stories across time and place.

**Alex Teplitzky—I watched the film over the weekend, and I thought it was amazing.**

Deborah Stratman—It's difficult to experience it online, I'm sure.

**Alex—Well, I was going to get to this later, but I watched it with headphones on, and it made it really intimate with all the wonderful audio. It's as much an audio piece as it is a visual work.**

Deborah—That's great, not everyone thinks to use headphones, or can.

**Alex—How do you describe the project?**

Deborah—It's a loose collection of vignettes, which I call parables, all shot within the state of Illinois. That was the geographic conceit I started with, finding stories indigenous to Illinois. These 11 secular parables developed based on finding places where there was a kind of thinness between the present and the past, where something historically heavy happened—where an event had soaked into the soil. Maybe it was something totally forgotten, but which gave me reason to pilgrimage and unpack that history for myself.

Despite the fact that all the parables were shot in Illinois, and are very specifically, politically local—they speak to universal patterns. For instance, the Trail of Tears doesn't go through every state, but there's stories of exodus everywhere. Or Fred Hampton, a leader in the Black Panther movement, who was murdered in a house that happens to be a few blocks from where I've lived for 20 years. Yes, the details of that story are very specific. But COINTELPRO weren't the only organization worried about potential Black messiahs. The silencing of leaders outside the "status quo," and a State paranoid of organizers who galvanized other outsiders is common in the US.

**Alex—I'm curious if you're able to remember how this project started? I know it's been quite a long time in the making.**

Deborah—It was a few things. There were some unprocessed ideas from a previous film I made called *Or the Land* that needed addressing. That film deals with freedom, or what we lose in the name of freedom, and with increasing national militarization. At first I thought religious freedom would be a part of that film, but at some point it became clear that was too unwieldy. So I set it aside and became less interested in exploring religious freedom per se than looking at the times we're faced with something bigger than we can process because it's too confusing or too terrible, and which leaves us reaching for something to help us make sense of it—maybe faith, maybe technology, maybe history.

So it's a spin-off of sorts. Also, before I shot any material, a friend of mine had thought of inviting 50 filmmakers to make a short project about a state. It was a big omnibus project. It became an interesting challenge to me because I have often felt that it's difficult to make something about a place you've been so long that you can't see it anymore, or you're bored by it. You think, there can't possibly be anything interesting enough here.

To me, speech is always present, of the moment. Even if a conversation happened 20 years ago, the sound animates the space. It breaths a socio-political sentience into the booth that feels as relevant today as ever. The past is always also about today.

So, those two things together are what prompted the film. I didn't know what I was making for many years. I was just slowly accruing material that spoke to a cluster of questions and problems. For the first seven years, I wasn't clear what was aiming for. But at some point, enough things aligned, or maybe panic set in that I might never finish. Whatever it was, I finally locked onto some momentum and direction. So even though it took ten years or so from the first material I shot to the finished project, the years of heavy-duty focus were two or three.

**Alex—You grew up in Illinois? Or what's your connection with the state?**

Deborah—Yep, I was born in Washington, DC, but have lived in Illinois for more than 50 years, with some stints out of the state and country. I have a deep connection to the place, which is, as I alluded to before, fraught. My family has all moved away and I'm the last Midwesterner standing. I've taught in Chicago for many years, so it's a communal thinking home. It's infiltrated me in ways I probably won't understand until I move away.

**Alex—I found it helpful to look at the towns of Illinois and time periods that each parable represents.**

Deborah—Yes, that's at the end of the film in case people are curious. It gives you a chance to a) see that it's chronological, and b) see where everything is shot. That said, the film's chronology is very porous, these chapters, they slip one to the other. Sometimes you can't tell where the edges are. Nothing hews very slavishly to a rule. In fact, the only rule is that everything is really slippery.

**Alex—I love those projects that set up those boundaries and then betray them, but you can tell that they exist.**

Deborah—Right, the conceit was there to help me keep my head in the game.

**Alex—Can you discuss one or two of the parables? For instance, my favorite is the Icaria chapter.**

Deborah—That chapter takes place in Nauvoo, along the Mississippi River, which forms the western border of the state and used to be the western border of the US. Nauvoo was settled by Mormons, who arrived there after having been kicked out some other towns they'd settled in. Mormonism was very young at that point. Joseph Smith, who founded the faith and his brother Hyrum were still living. Their followers were left alone in the beginning, but at some point they started voting as a block. That's when other locals got nervous. They realized Mormon voters might affect a shift in power. Animosity grew, and to make a long story short, Joseph and Hyrum were imprisoned and then murdered by a mob in Carthage. That triggered the exodus of the Mormons and they headed west, to Utah.

The Icarians were French utopian socialists, a secular community who believed in free education, joint wealth, sexual equality, joint raising of children. They came over to the US led by Étienne Cabet, at first to New Orleans, then up the Mississippi River. Less than a year after the Mormons left Nauvoo, the Icarians showed up. They found an abandoned, partially burned up but still viable town – so they just moved in. The Icarians were the longest-lived secular utopian community in Illinois. They eventually broke apart. As in any small, utopian society things started to go haywire, but they flourished for a while.

I knew about the Mormons in Illinois, but I'd never heard of the Icarians, or the double residence of Nauvoo by intentional communities. Originally, I was drawn to Nauvoo because of the yearly Mormon reenactment of their founding that gets staged there every summer. I was very interested in enactment as a way to reinvoké history (or myth), and especially in this case because Mormonism was so new, they actually had to build and fortify their own history. Those CCA Christensen paintings you see in the film do the same thing – they're part of the Mormon project of visualizing and ritualizing their own history.

**Alex—And that's your whole project here, to visualize history, and to bring up things that have been forgotten.**

Deborah—Yeah, and not so much bringing up forgotten things, but looking at *how* they get brought up. When we are given some account of history, which stories attract us, which do we believe, which seem viable? Is it because of the medium? Does a painting register something more or less believably than somebody's retelling, or enactment, or a newspaper article? Those questions were compelling to me, and they became the central organizing blocks of the film. I tried to include as many different modes of history-telling as I could.

**Alex—There's something very pedagogical about the film, in a 1980s or 1990s way. It triggered this memory of a teacher pulling in a big TV on a rolling stand into the classroom. It's also the film quality that is reminiscent of the time period, as well as the pace of it. Did that help guide the ideas of the film?**

Deborah—In terms of shooting in 16mm, that does impact the work I make. I edit and shoot differently on 16mm film than when I work digitally, and so I *think* differently. The reason I chose celluloid had less to do with making an accurate portrayal of the type of history I'm trying to show, and more to do with the speed I needed to work at. I wanted a slower form because the ideas were hard for me. I also think working with analog, physical, time-based media has a different relationship to touch and evidence. I don't want to say "fossils," because I don't think about film as a thing of the past—but the necessity of touch changes the way it functions as evidence, and so its relationship to history is different. Viewing a film print, being subjected to the technology of a rotating shutter is a different experience than viewing a file on a laptop.

But in the end I feel agnostic when it comes to time-based mediums. I've shot on Super 8, Hi-8, DV, HD, 16mm—there's no hierarchy. I think they're all valid modes. Choosing 16mm for the *Parables* had as much to do with pilgrimage, and burden (it's heavy gear, relatively speaking) and not looking for evidence so much as waiting to see what surfaced in the material.

Installation view of *Feeling Tone* by Deborah Stratman at MCA Chicago, 2020.

**Alex—Can you talk about the exhibition at MCA Chicago?**

Deborah—It's a two-part installation which *The Illinois Parables* is half of. The film plays on a loop in a dark gallery with a few seats. In the adjacent gallery is *Feeling Tone*—a full scale replica of the radio booth Studs Terkel operated out of in the '80s. From outside it looks like a set. You can see into the booth through the studio windows, and it looks like he's just stepped out. Studs was an oral historian and radio host—a socially and politically active believer in people's history. He's renowned in Chicago, and he's known outside of Chicago through his books, but he has a real presence here.

Speakers are mounted on the booth exterior. They play one conversation per day (143 in all) from interviews Studs did between 1953 and 1996, curated from 5,000 plus hours of conversations he hosted over his lifetime. I worked only from his radio archive—I didn't include interviews he did for his books like *Working* or *Division Street America*. The piece is basically just a really fancy giant speaker cabinet that happens to look like a radio studio. The interviews are accessible [online](#) too, which has become more essential given pandemic circumstances.

The *Parables* and *Feeling Tone* act together. At one point I thought Studs was going to be a part of the film, but he didn't make the final cut. His archives were still being digitized while I was editing, so they were difficult to access. But now that work is mostly done. To do radio as an art form is such an ephemeral thing—I felt having the physical anchor of the booth replica was a way to root the conversations.

To me, speech is always present, of the moment. Even if a conversation happened 20 years ago, the sound animates the space. It breathes a socio-political sentence into the booth that feels as relevant today as ever. The past is always also about today.

**Alex—It's interesting to think about how many people are starting podcasts. And that's just a new word for conversations, right?**

Deborah—Totally, yeah, I think there's something we miss of the public square, or even just conversation. Being able to hear from a greater number of people instead of a few docents or "authorities." It's nice to hear a chorus multiply define the times. The parables share that sort of choral perspective. There's not one definitive viewpoint that's like, "well now I know what Illinois is."

**Alex—Yeah, I love that scene where it's one mathematician writing on the chalkboard and then all of a sudden you hear different people writing on chalkboards at once.**

Deborah—People love that! It's a hot, popcorn moment. That's Enrico Fermi tabulating on the chalkboard. People have interpreted the sound as a Geiger counter or all the mathematicians over all the eons writing on all the boards. There are a lot of different ways that it's been interpreted. But because it bounces around in the stereo setting, it really declares itself.

My favorite audio moment is close to that scene, after the tri-state tornado, when you see the archival bi-plane footage showing the path of the disaster. One of the witnesses recalls finding their parrot all covered in black and singing "Sweet Hour of Prayer." You're hearing those stories, which cut to a gospel rendition of the song, which gets layered over by a municipal tornado warning announcement, and then atop that by contemporary audio of a father and daughter hunkered down in their bathroom describing a tornado live, as it rips apart their house and their neighborhood. The sonic layers are such different times and idioms, but there's a way they can all be present together. You could never do that visually. There's a way that sound absorbs multiple times so elegantly without you feeling the burden of it. We can listen on many levels.

**Alex—Has Creative Capital been helpful to you with this project?**

Deborah—Oh yeah. A lot of times I'll stubbornly pursue something regardless of what kind of support I get, and I might be swimming in an ocean of doubt, so to have a person or an institution come along and assure me that I'm on to something, that they trust my vision, is amazing. That has meant so much to me.

It was helpful to go to the retreat to pitch the idea way before the film was done, to have to present a work-in-progress as a lecture. It was terrifying to me at the time, but became so useful to start drawing connections I hadn't yet, and help set anchors to build off. And the fact that you're contacting me now, years later, it was great. You're like the census people, knocking again, finding out I'm still working on spin offs.

*[Read more about and see Deborah Stratman's exhibition at MCA Chicago.](#)*

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