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Review of *The Brandon Teena Story* Produced and directed by Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir

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REVIEW ESSAY

The Brandon Teena Story. Produced and directed by Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir. New York: Zeitgeist Films, 1998. 99 minutes.

CRIME AND RESPONSIBILITY

The Brandon Teena Story, Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir's recently released documentary, addresses the circumstances of a triple murder that occurred on the last day of December 1993 in a rural farmhouse in southeastern Nebraska. The crime received national media coverage because one of its victims, the principal target of the attack, was a young woman who had, for some time, been living as a man. The two other victims, a young man and woman, were killed because they were witnesses. The murderers were quickly apprehended and tried, one sentenced to life in prison, the other to death in the electric chair.

The documentary's title indicates the filmmakers' approach and method. Born as Teena Brandon, the twenty-one year old had, for a while, been cross-dressing and calling himself Brandon Teena. Muska and Olafsdottir's use of his chosen name is a decision to accept a principle of self-identification. The designation "Story" emphasizes the decision to present a chronological narrative of the events leading up to and following Brandon Teena's death rather than their own explanations and analyses of the material. This is a film without

voice-over narration or other forms of authorial commentary. Of course, the filmmakers do not, cannot, eschew the formal means inherent in their medium for shaping, selecting, and sequencing their material.

As do most documentaries narrating a series of actual events, *The Brandon Teena Story* relies heavily on the filmmakers' interviews with people who have something germane to contribute to the story: former girlfriends of Brandon Teena, his family and friends, an array of law enforcement and criminal justice figures, the two perpetrators—Thomas Nissen and John Lotter—and their connections, and the family of another of the victims, Lisa Lambert. Because Muska and Olafsdottir arrived in Nebraska after the murders, they had to rely on other people for much of their material: photographs, writings, and, most tellingly, an audiotape of Brandon Teena's interview with Richardson County Sheriff Charles Laux.

The film also depicts the story's setting through montages of Lincoln, Falls City, and, most eloquently, the winter roads and stubbled fields of this corner of the state. Country-Western music often accompanies

the imagery; labeling, in the form of time and identification titles, newspaper headlines, television footage, provides informational links.

The opening section devotes considerable time to Brandon Teena's teenage girlfriends in Lincoln, where he was born and grew up. Sexual issues are raised from the start, the young women maintaining that they believed Brandon Teena was a man, even though some of them were sleeping with him. In the face of their friends' skepticism—"People said, do you feel a strap-on?"—they wanted to agree with him that "this isn't a gay relationship." There are two ways of accounting for this denial. All of these young women enjoyed being with him: "He knew how to please you"; he bought roses, pizzas, engagement rings. And none of them seems to have wanted to face the social consequences in their milieu of the possibility of being in a lesbian relationship. When Brandon Teena's gender, in the physiological sense of the term, became too well-known to be ignored, the women recount his explanations: he said he was a "hermaphrodite," or he came up with stories about a just begun sex change—steroids, implants. Perhaps it was public embarrassment that caused them to turn on him: "How could you lie to me?" "You are a female"; "He lied and lied." A middle-aged friend of his says that whenever he tried to tell the truth, he was called a fag, a dyke, a lesbo, a freak.

Brandon Teena's courtships cost money he did not have, leading him to forge checks and to be confronted by the criminal justice system and placed on probation. Finally, in an attempt to escape his encircling legal problems, he went to Falls City, about one hundred miles southeast of Lincoln, in November of 1993. His life there continued along similar lines: he spent his time with a group of young people, most of whom were not regularly employed, two of whom, Lotter and Nissen, had been in prison, and he continued to pass as a man. After a number of quick romances, he began dating Lana Tisdell in December.

The narrative proceeds with a dreadful inevitability. On 16 December, Brandon Teena is arrested for crimes stemming from Lincoln and charged as a woman, a disclosure causing turmoil in his circle. At a Christmas Eve party, Lotter and Nissen confront Brandon Teena and forcibly determine his sex. The viewer learns of these events through intercut interviews with Lana Tisdell, her mother Linda Gutierrez, Lotter's sister Michelle, and Lotter and Nissen in jail. After the party, the two men force Brandon Teena into Lotter's car and drive to the edge of town where they rape and beat him.

Since Lotter and Nissen's stories vary from this time on, their victim's testimony is crucial. The filmmakers have been able to obtain a copy of Brandon Teena's audiotape-recorded interview with Sheriff Laux the next day. It is at this point that the film's intertwined dramatic and political climaxes are reached, even though the murders are not committed until six days later. Muska and Olafsdottir treat the material skillfully for maximum clarity and emphasis. We hear the interview while watching a black screen, the questions and answers laid on in white type. A small, still photograph of Laux appears in the top left-hand corner and one of Brandon Teena, his hand over his eyes, in the bottom right corner, thus separated as far as possible from Laux. We hear the Sheriff's loud questions and Brandon Teena's soft responses while we read the transcript white on black. Laux's approach is crude and hostile. He wants to know how Brandon Teena was positioned when the assailant "got ready to poke you." "Did he have a hard-on? Did you work it up for him?" "Where did he try to pop it in first?" During the course of his report, Brandon Teena describes how Nissen beat him before and after the rape; he says that he had never had sex before and it hurt. But Laux has other questions about sex: "Why do you run around with girls?" Brandon Teena asks, "What does that have to do with what happened last night?" Finally, he whispers that he has a "sexual identity crisis." Laux's tone is genuinely befuddled: "What? Explain." The

question is not answered on the tape as edited.

Prior to his visit to Laux, Brandon Teena had been taken to the Falls City Community Hospital where, although the film does not spell this out, a rape-kit examination showed vaginal bleeding and semen specimens in both the anus and vagina. Yet Lotter and Nissen were not called in for questioning until 28 December, three days later, and then released. In the aftermath of the murders, which occurred early on 31 December, many law enforcement figures in Nebraska criticized this decision. In the film, Brandon Teena's middle-aged friend Jo Ann asks, "Where was the law?" Defending against the criticism, Richardson County Attorney Douglas Merz says that he was having difficulty getting "cooperation" from the accuser, although we have heard on the audiotaped interview Brandon Teena's detailed account and willingness to testify against his assailants. Deputy Sheriff John Larson cites Brandon Teena's own criminal record as a factor in not acting more quickly: he might be unreliable. A little later in the film, Larson calls Lotter a well-known "trouble maker"; it is unlikely that the law enforcement agents did not know that both Lotter and Nissen had served time in the penitentiary. Nevertheless, Deputy Sheriff Olberding says they decided not to detain the accused men while investigating further, although they had threatened Brandon Teena if he told anyone, under the advise of Sheriff Laux.

Her discovery of the murders is narrated by Lisa Lambert's mother, Anna Mae Lambert, initially over shots from the driver's seat of a car that reconstruct the approach to the Humboldt farmhouse murder scene, twenty-six miles northwest of Falls City. Mrs. Lambert then describes in detail what she found there. The rest of the day's events are presented through television footage and interviews. Nissen and Lotter are arrested on rape charges but quickly accused of the killings.

The remainder of the film focuses on the two trials. During his trial, Nissen blames the

murders on Lotter and agrees to a plea bargain to testify against him in return for life in prison without parole. After his guilty conviction, Lotter is sentenced to death. During this section we learn that the primary motivation for the attack in Humboldt was Lotter and Nissen's desire to prevent Brandon Teena from testifying against them if there were a rape charge. The quality of their reasoning comes as no great surprise, given what we have already heard them say. In the closing credits, end notes tell us that Sheriff Laux lost his bid for reelection but was then elected County Commissioner. *The Brandon Teena Story* is dedicated to Lisa Lambert, Philip DeVine, and Brandon Teena.

Audience response to a film, especially a documentary, is part of the film's larger story. *The Brandon Teena Story* has been well received in Taiwan, Finland, Sao Paulo, Paris, and Berlin, as well as in this country. Nowhere was interest probably higher than in Lincoln when the filmmakers showed their work in late October 1998 at the Mary Riepma Ross Film Theater on the University of Nebraska campus. There had already been extensive press coverage locally, including comments about Stephen Holden's *New York Times* review of 23 September 1998. Several writers bristled at Holden's calling the region "the Land of the Pickup Truck," although less was said about the word "especially" when Holden mentioned "deep seated fears about gender and alternative sexuality harbored by millions of Americans, especially those living in the heartland." Despite a highly favorable review by L. Kent Wolgamott in the *Lincoln Journal Star* on 22 October 1998, worry was circulating that the film "gives the impression that Nebraska—particularly small-town Nebraska—is unsafe for everyone but heterosexuals."

This sensitivity climaxed in the 3 November review in the university's student newspaper, *The Daily Nebraskan*. Headlined "Nebraska Bashing" and subheaded "Stereotypes ruin 'Teena Story,'" the review is interesting as an example of the frequent—albeit

not always conscious—attempt to alter the direction of the discourse when treating painful subjects. The review and the letters to the editor it elicited shed light on the confusion and disagreement about the nature of documentary as a genre.

“The most astonishing aspect of the film,” “Nebraska Bashing” asserts, “is how, ironically enough, while attempting to raise awareness on the subject of hate crimes, the film at the same time supports and proves true many other long-standing stereotypes, debatably of equal importance.” There is a faulty comparison here since “hate crimes” are not “stereotypes,” but this off-kilter analogy allows the reviewer to attack the film for its alleged unfairness to Nebraska: most of the people “speak with bad grammar”; “the scenic shots of Nebraska aren’t exactly pretty”; “interviews with the two convicted murderers only added to the overwhelming ignorance that the film so delights in perpetuating.” Clearly, the film pressed a sore point. The conclusion of the review states: “The film is an indictment of the entire state and its people based on a small nucleus of intolerance. . . .”

Responses to the review came quickly. In an impassioned letter published the following day in *The Daily Nebraskan*, a student writes, “A small nucleus of intolerance? Is that what you think allowed Teena Brandon to be raped, and consequently ridiculed and *murdered* when she talked about it? Obviously you have never heard of institutional oppression.” The writer attempts to join the different issues raised in the film and review: “‘The Brandon Teena Story’ indicts our entire society. You compare the most vicious manifestation of hatred and intolerance to common stereotypes of Nebraskans. How insulting. When was the last time you have heard about someone being fired from a job, raped or murdered for being a ‘trashy, homophobic chain-smoker’ who listened to ‘annoying’ country music?”

Two days later another letter writer claims that both the reviewer and the first respondent “have missed the point.” In fact, this writer agrees with a good deal of the review:

while depicting well “a certain variety of Nebraskans . . . [the film] forgets to mention all Nebraskans are not like those featured in the film.” Because the documentary “concentrates intently on the specifics of the occurrences in Falls City and Humboldt,” it is not “as effective a larger social indictment” as the previous letter writer thinks. A major portion of this letter attacks the idea of setting up a “hierarchy” of prejudice from the “innocent” to the “grievous.” Since he lists only “grievous” prejudices, however—those against African Americans, Jews, women—the argument does not address the issue of whether *The Brandon Teena Story*’s alleged “Nebraska Bashing” might have the vicious consequences of gay bashing.

Finally, a few days later, a third writer adds common sense and an important theoretic consideration: “Of course, all Nebraskans aren’t homophobic murderers. But this crime did happen here, and that should make us uncomfortable as residents of this state and citizens of this planet. And frankly, the purpose of this film was not to give a ‘balanced’ view of Nebraska; it was to tell one very specific story.”

The idea that all documentary films ought to be balanced is a curious but widespread one, probably arising from network television’s credo of presenting both sides of an issue. But advocacy films, a significant subgenre of documentaries, have a long and distinguished tradition from Ernest Hemingway and Joris Ivens’s *The Spanish Earth* and Alain Resnais’s *Night and Fog* to Marcel Ophüls’s *The Sorrow and the Pity* and Barbara Kopple’s *Harlan County, U.S.A.* Some people may think that Jean-Luc Godard went too far when he said that all nonfiction film is fiction, but no one knows better than filmmakers how, in deciding where and where not to point the camera, what angle to shoot from, what shot to edit just before or after another one, the material of reality is always shaped for a variety of purposes. When a documentary affirms the status quo, relatively few viewers find bias because the work’s implicit or explicit

political advocacy fits with mainstream ideology. Documentaries expressing controversial positions are more frequently viewed as exhibiting bias or misread as taking positions that are more easily attacked.

Muska and Olafsdottir were already aware of the possibility of resistance to their project during their trips to the state while working on *The Brandon Teena Story*. Before the film opened in Nebraska, Muska said in an interview in the *Lincoln Journal Star* of 21 October: "When we were out there filming, people would ask us 'Why are you focusing on this? Why not look at the good things in Nebraska?'" In another local interview, she said, ". . . people wanted us to show some of the more positive aspects of the state. . . . We liked the state and look forward to going back, but that is not what this is about. We couldn't focus on the winning football team because it's not the point." In remarks that seem to me to bear directly on choices made in shaping the film, Muska has said, "We feel especially now when hate crime is on the rise, it's very important for people to understand how these things happen. . . . It's people in authority who set the stage for these things to happen. It's that kind of prejudice that insecure young people latch on to." *The Brandon Teena Story* indicates that hate crimes often occur within a larger climate of opinion. Nebraskans seeing the film understand, for example, that sheriffs are elected directly by people exercising their views on law enforcement.

The filmmakers avoid the conventional route of demonizing Lotter and Nissen. Speaking from the stage of the Ross Film Theater they said that the young men were not "monsters." They do not attempt to exculpate the murderers but to understand the context in which they acted. There is an interview in the film with a prison inmate, Leon Thompson, who served time with Lotter and suggests that he was affected by his being intimidated and sexually assaulted in prison; now that he was on the outside, Thompson thinks, Lotter had his chance to intimidate. Nevertheless,

in an interview with Nissen, when he self-puttingly begins to say that if he had "never met Lotter and Brandon," we hear Muska's voice, off camera, asking, "What if you'd only met Brandon, not Lotter?" This is virtually the only time a question is included in an interview, and its presence is telling: responsibility should not be evaded.

The Brandon Teena Story raises the issue of how far moral responsibility extends. Yet, because the film is only ninety-nine minutes long, the social context is not filled in as fully as the filmmakers might have wished. For example, they have mentioned their surprise that more townspeople did not attend the trials, but the film does not touch on this subject. John Gregory Dunne, however, in his absorbing essay "The Humboldt Murders" (*The New Yorker*, 13 January 1997), offers some detailed socioeconomic background to the case, including the same question of trial attendance. "In spite of the intense media attention the murders originally generated," he writes, "I was struck by the absence of a curious local citizenry in the courtroom." When Dunne pursues his curiosity, asking Robert Roh, the pastor of Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church—Catholics are the largest denomination in Falls City—about "this apparent lack of community interest, he answered that only a minuscule percentage of his congregation . . . knew anyone involved in the case." Dunne speculates that "What seemed implicit in his remark was that the accused and the dead were an embarrassment to Falls City's upbeat middle-class image of itself." Much of Dunne's analysis is based on the importance of examining class structure to an understanding of how the tragedy developed. Muska and Olafsdottir, on the other hand, focus on the problem of widespread homophobia as the major factor.

The film does not offer explicit solutions to this problem. Rather, by letting us hear so many individual voices, the filmmakers apparently trust that the damage done by ignorance and prejudice can activate the viewer's own resolve. Despite all these voices, Brandon

Teena himself is the most vivid presence in the film. He appears in frequent still photograph montages; sometimes a photograph is superimposed over a scene's opening or closing shot. Thus the emotional heart of the documentary—the depiction of the brutal, unnecessary waste of life—reaffirms the human value of all lives.

A general truth is often most effectively communicated through the reality of a particular representation. This Aristotelian notion underlies *The Brandon Teena Story*. Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir have managed to avoid exoticising an unusual and unplumbed

protagonist who inhabits an unlikely setting and is confronted by a destructive force that is both individual and societal. Yes, it could have happened anywhere, as local apologists always say. Yes, it did happen in southeastern Nebraska, an instance of anywhere. There is no place to rid ourselves of the burden of our knowledge. The film asks its viewers to make their pity and terror a countervailing force.

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