

Toronto International Film Festival 2002: Interview with Travis Wilkerson, director of *An Injury to One*

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An Injury to One, directed Travis Wilkerson, centers on a significant episode in American labor history, the murder of Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) organizer Frank Little in Butte, Montana in August 1917. The film provides the historical background to the event, the decades-long exploitation of the region and its workers by the Anaconda Copper Mining Company.

The company's Butte operations provided 30 percent of the US copper total, and 10 percent of the world's, at a time when the need for the metal exploded thanks to its role in electrification. In 1917, provoked by low wages, dangerous conditions and reports of Anaconda's war profiteering, Butte's copper miners, organized in the Metal Mineworkers Union, walked off the job en masse. Socialist and left-wing tendencies had strong support within the city's working population.

Obviously a remarkable figure, Frank Little—born to a white father and Cherokee mother in Oklahoma in 1879—had been a longtime activist for the left-wing IWW. As *An Injury to One* explains, shortly after his arrival in Butte, Little addressed 6,000 miners, denouncing the capitalist system and proposing a program of worldwide revolution by the working class. Ten days later he spoke to another meeting of 6,500, during which he termed President Woodrow Wilson a “lying tyrant,” and called on workers to “abolish the wage-system and establish a socialist commonwealth.”

Official Butte was outraged by Little's activities. On August 1 a gang of vigilantes, none of whose identities were ever learned, abducted the IWW organizer from his hotel room, drove outside of town and, after dragging him behind their car, hung him from a railway trestle. They pinned a note on him that read “3'-7"-77”,” the dimensions of a grave in Montana. No one was ever arrested or convicted for Little's brutal murder.

Wilkerson's film also examines the present state of Butte, a much-decayed industrial city of some 32,000 people, blighted by the largest body of contaminated water in the US, the Berkeley Pit. This is the legacy of Anaconda, which abandoned the town decades ago. The company reportedly had extracted \$25 billion worth of copper by that time.

Detective story writer Dashiell Hammett presumably based his fictional “Poisonville” in *Red Harvest* on Butte. Hammett, who worked as a Pinkerton detective from 1915 to 1922, claimed in interviews in later life that he had been offered \$5,000 to take part in the murder of Little, a claim treated by many with skepticism.

The strength of Wilkerson's film, which suffers from occasional bouts of self-consciousness, is its seriousness and intelligence in the examination of a history that is almost entirely concealed by official sources. It is an unusual and sometimes quite moving effort. We spoke in Toronto.

David Walsh: Could you tell me something about your background?

Travis Wilkerson: I grew up in the West. I was born in Colorado, lived

there till I was 12 or 13, then my family moved to Butte in 1982. It was an interesting time to move to Butte. We moved into town when everybody was moving out of town. The mines had been slowing for years, but 1982 was really when the bottom was falling out, so it was a very depressed time. Although it's not really much better now.

I went to high school in Butte, which was a fascinating, weird experience for me. As you can imagine, it's a fairly insular town at this point, so I was treated with a certain amount of suspicion, but over time I felt pretty comfortable there and liked it a lot. When you're just a kid you probably don't appreciate the history as much as you should, but I've come to love it.

DW: By the time you began making films were you already aware of the Frank Little story or did you study it at that point?

TW: A little of both. The story of Frank Little is something of an urban legend in Butte. People all know it, sort of, they know he was lynched, they know he was there. It's very unclear what people's attitudes toward him are. I think most people would say, Dashiell Hammett killed him.

DW: That was entirely knew to me.

TW: It's a kind of legend that Hammett encouraged. It played a role in his persona. I don't think it's very likely actually. Some sources say he was there. But he was 18 or 19 at the time, and the idea that Anaconda would have entrusted him to carry out something like this seems very unlikely. Others say he wasn't even there at the time and that he didn't even arrive there till 1918 or 1919. I've always felt that Frank Little was on the margins of *Red Harvest*. The events are very elusive. There's no description at all of mining or miners.

I was there and didn't realize how extraordinary Butte was, and I think that's what Hammett did. He was there and he only realized later that he was present during this incredible and fascinating time.

So in terms of the research, when I was in college I started doing research because I was simply curious about it, and there's very little information available. There's a few articles in Western history journals, out of print journals, by Arnon Gutfeld, who was a scholar of American history and wrote a lot of material about Montana. His pieces are very good. A lot of the things he's citing as primary sources I can't discover any more, I don't know what's happened to them in the years between when he wrote his material in the early 1960s and the present day. They seem to have disappeared.

For example, Gutfeld cites a good deal from the daily strike bulletin, a radical daily, which became known as the *Butte Bulletin*. William Dunne was the editor. It was one of the most radical dailies in the history of US journalism. But I can't locate it anywhere.

I began to do the research. It's an amazing story, I feel like I've only scratched the surface of it. There is more there. I would love to discover more about Little's history, it's very elusive. The extant evidence is

terrifyingly miniscule. I think I found enough.

According to the strike bulletin, there was a film made of the funeral. That's my Holy Grail. It was shown on the one-year anniversary of his murder. The film of course has disappeared. No one knows anything about it.

DW: I think anyone interested in the history of the working class and left-wing politics is drawn to that history. It has a certain romanticism to it also, which perhaps needs to be dispelled. What is the connection between this past and the present? What sort of issues would you like to raise in the mind of a spectator?

TW: The starting point would be to look at Butte and to see that Butte is a place that we constructed. Because there's a sense when people come to the town, because the devastation is so widespread—you come over this hill and there's this gaping hole, the pit looks as if it were two-thirds of the size of the entire city. In fact, it isn't, but it feels that way. And everywhere you look are these big things that are gouged out, there are tailings everywhere. It's a place that people going on vacations in Montana try to avoid or pass through as quickly as possible.

One of the things that drew me to it was the desire to say, look, this is not an act of God. This is a human act. We destroyed this town. Well, I didn't, but some people did. And there's a reason for it. I wanted to first and foremost explore that. How did it get to be like this? And what I kept coming back to is this fascinating piece of history, that this one person was there and he proposed an alternative and he was murdered, and here's where we are. Which isn't to say that if Frank Little lived ... but we do know that it went this certain way and we're now faced with what we're faced with, which is this disastrous circumstance.

So the most important thing is just this idea that we constructed this and that we have the ability to construct our environment in all sorts of ways, the ability to construct our society in all sorts of ways, and we made certain choices, and this is a powerful example of what's gone wrong.

Another part of it is unearthing the history. I think there is a far richer radical history in America than almost anyone will acknowledge. I constantly get into arguments with people on the left who say, we have nothing, we have this pathetic history, we'll never achieve anything because of our history. Montana was the epicenter of a very exciting period in the radical history of this country.

In Butte a lot of the people later joined the Communist Party and went in that direction. And I can see why. I have every confidence that Little would have been one of those people as well. He certainly was politically heading in that direction.

All of my work ends up doing the same kind of thing, uncovering an unknown or under-appreciated history.

DW: What were some of the conscious influences that were at work during the making of this film?

TW: I think the most influential filmmakers for me have been these "Third Cinema" filmmakers, who I feel were the most successful at initiating a tendency which was destroyed very rapidly for a variety of reasons, which fused a kind of understanding of the relationship between form and content, finding forms that befitted new ideas and new forms of expression. We can't find new ways to apprehend reality unless we find new strategies, new cinematic strategies, new literary strategies. So I was drawn to that. [Santiago] Alvarez was an influence, I made a film about him, [Fernando] Solanas and [Octavio] Getino. Although their films are very hard to see. There is some work of Chris Marker's that I like and some I don't like as much.

It's not just documentary. I've been heavily influenced by narrative film, that's what I'm increasingly drawn to. Partly because of the problems with this film. I've shown the film here and I get all sorts of nice press, but in reality the audience is so limited and there's just no way to get the work out. There are only so many battles you can choose to fight.

We're entering this period in which the means of film production are available to us, but the means of distribution are totally unavailable to us, and that seems increasingly to be the most pressing issue facing progressive or radical filmmakers. How to get the work out there. It's proving more difficult than I imagined, the barriers are stronger. There's such resistance to political work. And people hear that it's about some event in Montana in 1917 and say, "That sounds tedious, like a Ken Burns film, only worse."

Butte has always been its own pocket of something. It's an industrial city in a rural state. I had some fascinating conversations with miners. It was interesting, every miner with whom I had a conversation about this history seemed to be to the left of me. When I would say, do you wish Anaconda were still here, with all the problems, at least you had the jobs?, they would say, Anaconda was a despicable company and it destroyed this town. One miner told me that in the 1960s they started bringing in these fairly inexperienced Mexican miners, and they were dying constantly. He remembers one shift he worked where three Mexican miners died and they didn't even halt production. They brought them out, they kept working. They didn't know what they were doing. There weren't enough people to speak Spanish.

There were a lot of different things that people hate about the company, they don't just hate it because it left a wasteland. For example, there was a beautiful amusement park, the pride of the town, and Anaconda systematically just took that area over and created the pit where that was. They only switched over to open pit mining in the 1950s, it was all underground prior to that. They simply destroyed this section of town, the most historic working class area, the park area. They continued destroying it virtually to the year they left. They completed the destruction and then they left.

DW: What's your view of the present political situation?

TW: It's very disturbing. The Bush administration seems set on this course of imperial aggression. There's a lot anxiety and unease. It reminds you a little of Weimar Germany. And the lack of opposition, or public opposition, is worrying. That may come, I hope it will.

Additionally, Travis Wilkerson submitted to the WSWS these thoughts on the state of cinema:

The cinema is in crisis. It neither apprehends our reality in an honest way nor does it aid us in imagining a different kind of future. It is suffocated by a set of anachronistic conventions dictated by the agents of commerce. What follows are incomplete notes on the basis for a new cinema practice:

The absence of verisimilitude in the corporate cinema has reconfirmed the essential radicalism of critical realism. But the new cinema will also reflect the fact that, as bb [Bertolt Brecht] has observed, "realism is not simply a matter of form."

Instead of asking whether images change the world (a question whose answer now seems obvious), the new cinema seeks to discover what should be changed, and how.

The new cinema recognizes that any apprehension of the present is predicated upon an understanding of the past. Likewise, a new future can only be imagined after an understanding of the present is attained.

The new cinema doesn't concern itself with technological debates, particularly the antagonisms of analogue against digital. It employs, without prejudice, any and all tools available to it.

The new cinema can only exist in a state as unfinished and incomplete as the world it aims to mirror and engage.

The new cinema should strive for beauty, but never perfection.

That which has been viewed as beautiful, the new cinema will regard as ugly;

That which has been seen as ugly, the new cinema will regard as beautiful.

Clarity is a form of beauty. Mystification is a form of defeat.

The new cinema refuses to recognize national borders. It identifies itself neither as fiction nor as documentary. Likewise, it is unconcerned with genre, which is useful only to the agents of commerce.

Popular culture is neither. The new cinema will strive to return popular culture to the people themselves.



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