

Rich Hill: A story that “could be told in hundreds of towns”

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Directed by Andrew Droz Palermo and Tracy Droz Tragos

Rich Hill, directed by cousins Tracy Droz Tragos and Andrew Droz Palermo, centers on the lives of three boys living in an impoverished, rural Missouri town. Winner of the Grand Jury Prize in the documentary category at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival, *Rich Hill* shows the extraordinary level of economic deprivation that dominates much of present-day America.

Although some 250 miles southwest of Ferguson, Missouri, the St. Louis suburb now the scene of widespread protest and intense state repression, the rural and predominantly white Rich Hill belongs to the same social universe.

The small town’s social conditions would not be out of place in many undeveloped countries. In fact, one could describe Rich Hill as “undeveloping”—in free-fall disintegration. A former coal mining center, whose mines wound down near the turn of the last century, the town had a short-lived revival thanks to strip-mining in the 1950s. Now Rich Hill’s poverty statistics are staggering, with nearly a third of its population living below the official poverty line (in reality the “subsistence line”), versus the state average of about 15 percent.

The filmmakers aptly describe Rich Hill as “Everytown, USA.” The movie’s web site observes that “people still live here: 1,393 of them at last count. Deep potholes line the gravel roads, and property tax is almost nonexistent. The town center is littered with piles of bricks, and crumbling buildings are all that remain of the original bank, the corner pharmacy, a cafe.”

Viewing Rich Hill’s young people as representative of “a lot of American kids,” the film’s creators focus on three teenagers:

Andrew, 14, whose family has moved a dozen times in search of nonexistent economic opportunities. His father Willie is a talented guitarist who specializes in the songs of Hank Williams; his mother Elizabeth, bedridden in part from acute depression, tragically dies at the age of 39 from an accidental medication overdose, a fact mentioned in the film’s postscript. At one point in the movie, Willie fills the bathtub by heating water in a pan and a coffee-maker. (You “learn to survive when there is no work and everything gets shut off.”). The family, which also includes Andrew’s beloved sister Alyssa, eventually becomes homeless and is forced to live with relatives. Handsome and athletic, Andrew defiantly tells the camera: “We’re not trash; we’re good people.”

Appachey, 13, has been diagnosed with ADHD, bipolar disorder, OCD and possibly Asperger’s syndrome, according to his mother Delena, a tough, articulate woman overwhelmed by her circumstances. Between caring for her children and working, she attempts, without much success, to lift the family above the squalor and destitution of their lives. She tells the filmmakers that she “never got to have dreams or ideals about my life.” Appachey is sent to a Missouri juvenile detention center after he assaults a fellow student. He is a smart kid, never without his skateboard. He fantasizes about moving to China and becoming an art teacher, “because paintings from China are awesome.”

The most troubled of the three seems to be Harley, 15. (“I’m not happy, I’m a demented little kid.”) With an oddball, but endearing sense of humor, he lives with his grandmother. His mother Joann is in prison for trying to kill Harley’s stepfather, who was sexually abusing her son. Harley is devoted to his mother, whose incarceration, he feels, is unjust. (Joann says tearfully: “I’m just a waitress who loves her kids.”). A chronic

truant, he eventually drops out of school in the 10th grade. The movie's web site explains that Harley was diagnosed this past spring with a brain tumor wrapped around his optic nerve.

The situation of these three families, and much of Rich Hill's population, is painful and compelling.

In a bitterly ironic scene in the first portion of the film, the townspeople mark a Fourth of July celebration with a limp version of "God Bless America," along with a pie auction to pay for the fireworks.

Poverty, which is engulfing wide layers of the US population, is rarely treated head-on in current American cinema. *Rich Hill* is a noteworthy exception. It's an intimate exposure, thoroughly sympathetic to its hard-pressed young subjects and gives voice to a community, like many others, teetering on the economic precipice.

A 2012 article in *Filmmaker Magazine* by Tragos and Palermo explains that their parents grew up in Rich Hill. They write that its story "could be told in hundreds of towns. American poverty is worse than ever ... living without electricity isn't a romantic choice for most families, and it means cooking on makeshift pots in the backyard and going without refrigerated food. Not having running water means no showers or flushed toilets, and a thirst you can never quench." (This could also describe large portions of Detroit, a major American city).

They go on: "There are children in Rich Hill who seem lost. They are born into these conditions, into families that have for generations lived in poverty. They have no agency to 'work the system' and they often are ashamed to reveal the true circumstances of their living conditions."

The documentary offers a close-up view of abject poverty and the wanton demolition of precious lives. *Rich Hill* also exposes, by its very absence from the lives of its protagonists, what is missing from American social life: a social safety net, which has been shredded by Democrats and Republicans at every level of government. In the ongoing war against the working class, entire families and even communities are pushed into the abyss. Andrew, Appachey and Harley yearn for a different life, a prospect cruelly denied them.

It is worth noting, although not in itself an astonishing fact, that *Rich Hill*, as a film, tends toward passivity and resignation. Not having experienced a

period of mass struggle themselves, the filmmakers see the oppressed largely as victims and cannot at this point envision the eruption of outrage and protest.

Yet not so far away is Ferguson, Missouri. As the WSWS commented on August 19: "The anger on the streets of Ferguson is an expression of sentiments felt deeply throughout the country. It is an anger over not only police violence, but over unemployment, poverty, inequality and the relentless assault on the social conditions of the entire working class."

Rich Hill is available for viewing at Amazon and iTunes.



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