

## “DVD Roundup: High Plains Films - Bucking the Hollywood System”

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By Marc Mickelson

A bored husband and wife learn that they are both assassins and have been hired to kill each other. Where has this happened? Only in the movies, specifically Mr. & Mrs. Smith, which stars Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie as the married killers. Hollywood churns out such ridiculous fare; Mr. & Mrs. Smith is more like a marketing plan brought to the screen than a movie, and it's complete with an off-screen love affair ready-made for TV and tabloid coverage.

Who watches this stuff?

I suspect that Doug Hawes-Davis and Drury Gunn Carr wonder the same thing. In the early '90s, these two amateur filmmakers created their own “no budget” documentaries independent of each other. They later met, commiserated about making films, and decided to make a go of it professionally, founding High Plains Films, which makes documentaries and licenses stock footage for TV and film. If you need footage of a National Park or National Forest in the Western US, they probably have it, along with a growing catalog of documentary films whose subjects are carefully chosen and whose points of view are unique.

What is most interesting about High Plains Films as a business is not that it's located in Missoula, Montana. It's a non-profit corporation, albeit one that currently derives most of its revenue from DVD sales, broadcast-license fees, stock-footage sales, and contract work for other producers. “Regarding the non-profit status, it was a decision we made early,” Doug Hawes-Davis told me. “I think it's sort of a toss-up really. There's nothing that we really can't do as a non-profit.... So, unless we start selling films to huge distributors for big advances, operating as a non-profit only enhances what we're able to do.”

High Plains Films is about as non-Hollywood as an organization that makes movies can be, and its documentaries reflect this. In her entertaining article, “DVD Rental—Is Life Too Short for Netflix?,” Charlotte Meyer mentioned *This is Nowhere* (\*\*\*/2), “about oldsters in mobile homes who go from Wal-Mart to Wal-Mart because they can park overnight for free.” Who could resist? I checked it out at my local public library (a great resource for educational and offbeat movies, in case you didn't know) and loved it. Told mostly through interview, it is a film of words and images set to an edgy soundtrack. What begins as a celebration of personal freedom turns into a discussion of political ideals, the social effects of big business, and a desire to escape from both. A feature of High Plains Films work, the filmmakers present many perspectives through deftly edited interviews and let viewers make of them what they will. By the end of *This is Nowhere*, I thought that some of the “oldsters” were quaint and compelling, and others were insufferable, especially as they trumpeted the virtues of Wal-Mart. In one important scene, an RVer joy-rides a four-wheeler around the Wal-Mart parking lot—an expression of freedom with the Wal-Mart sign, the symbol of corporate America, looming in the background. Great stuff.

*This is Nowhere* is the exception in the High Plains Film catalog, which emphasizes nature and wildlife subjects, and man's effect on them, often with a Western slant. *Varmints* (\*\*\*/2) and *Killing Coyote* (\*\*\*/2) are similar films in many ways. Both are about animals that some people consider pests—prairie dogs and coyotes. They are condemned as harming cattle, which leads to the poisoning, trapping, and killing of them purely for pleasure, although both are important parts of their respective ecosystems. As with *This is Nowhere*, the filmmakers allow people with varied opinions to express themselves, showing in the process the

complexity of the issues and that man's interaction with the natural world is usually predicated on intolerance and greed, and consistently makes matters worse. These films aren't for squeamish viewers, but they are powerful statements about our inability to manage, or even appreciate, wildlife. They will outrage some viewers and sadden others.

Short films discuss water rights (*Wind River*, \*\*\*/2) and natural-gas development (*Powder River Country*, \*\*\*) in the West. *The Naturalist* (\*\*\*) follows introverted outdoorsman and wanderer Kent Bonar, who spends his days trekking through the Ozarks and filling notebooks with drawings of native plants. The inspiring and beautifully filmed *American Values, American Wilderness* (\*\*\*/2) collects the thoughts of a diverse group of people on America's wild areas and is narrated by the late Christopher Reeve.

The masterpiece of the High Plains Films catalog is also the most recent full-length movie, *Libby, Montana* (\*\*\*\*), which documents the effects of an asbestos mine on the small Montana town in which it was headquartered. Instead of pointing fingers and taking the easiest road to resolution, the filmmakers decided to let the story tell itself. And quite a story it is, a tragedy whose power to anger is enhanced by the filmmakers' desire for fair and thorough coverage. Doug Hawes-Davis: "We don't believe that folks learn very well if they feel they've been spoon-fed or that other important perspectives have been left out of a story. People like to feel like they've come to conclusions on their own, so we try to let them do that." *Libby, Montana* reminded me of Centralia, Pennsylvania, a near ghost town where underground mine fires have been burning since 1961. One is left to wonder how such places can exist in modern-day America.

Common threads of High Plains Films documentaries are a journalistic approach that honors research and facts expressed by the people who know them; a respect for the natural world, which underscores our need to protect it; the willingness to let people look petty and misinformed, even as their beliefs are passionately held; and the discussion of issues from all points of view so as to present a deep and lasting understanding of them. While they make documentaries, Doug Hawes-Davis and Drury Gunn Carr are not from the Michael Moore School of filmmakers, who seek controversy for its value as publicity. It is clear that their films are too personal for such an approach. Missoula, Montana is not very far from Hollywood in geographical terms, but the movies that come from there are about as different as they can be from what Hollywood peddles to the public. Your public library may have some High Plains Films DVDs in its collection, and if you live in the Western US, you may be able to see a few of the documentaries commercial-free on PBS. You can also purchase DVDs directly from High Plains Films.

We need more movies like these, and more people who appreciate movies like these.