

## Dark and Bloody Ground Indeed



by Fred Johnson

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An Appalachian Media Response to Robert Schenkkan's play,  
"The Kentucky Cycle", originally printed in *Ace Magazine*,  
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**The fact that a Pulitzer award** has gone to *The Kentucky Cycle* assures that many people in Kentucky and Appalachia are going to praise the work as excellent drama and literature. That is predictable; it is almost a cultural law that people who are consistently misrepresented or invisible in the dominant culture are pretty much grateful for whatever visibility they can achieve, from whatever source and however fractured and misleading that expression might be. This is a state that has been too frequently represented in the white-hot glare of the national culture by the likes of Phyllis George Brown, or that all-too-beaten-of-a-biscuit, the Kentucky Derby.

So despite the fact that *The Kentucky Cycle* has been recognized as a nationally significant work of art and that many in this region might agree on its qualities, it is still wise to ask whether we should be grateful that Robert Schenkkan has decided to use the landforms, stories and politics of this region as raw materials for his work.

After reading the work, I have to say I am not feeling particularly grateful. My objections to the work have nothing to do with the craft of theater; by word of mouth, I hear the play is extremely well staged and acted, and it is important to keep in mind that it won a Pulitzer for drama, not strictly for writing. My concerns are the social and cultural space this work represents and helps to reproduce. Regions like Appalachia are socially constructed, as surely as the latest debt-financed office tower gleaming in a downtown near you. I want to imagine what kind of Appalachia this work constructs. For example, is it a place in which people from the urban centers will be more or less likely to continue to dump their toxic waste?

The creation of all social space (nations, cities, regions, ethnic cultures, global information communities) is a notion of power; a command over space is always a fundamental source of economic, military and political power. It is achieved with money, transportation and communications systems, maps, literature and art. Cultural anthropologist Allen Batteau has written, "Appalachia is a creature of the urban imagination. The folk culture, the depressed area, the romantic wilderness, the Appalachia of fiction, journalism, and public policy, have for more than a century been created, forgotten, and rediscovered, primarily by the economic opportunism, political creativity, or the passing fancy of urban elites." This urban cultural invention is the Appalachia from which Robert Schenkkan has constructed his narrative technology. It seems poised to become a powerful cultural tool in maintaining many of the exploitative relationships his work ostensibly raises its voice against.

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together from many of the cultural images Batteau’s urban elites have found useful in creating Appalachia: The “strange land and peculiar people,” the romantic primeval wilderness, “white savages”, the new industrial frontier, the “fiercely independent mountaineer,” the militant unionist and everybody’s favorite, the “dark and bloody ground.”

Now, even though Schenkkan spares us the “incestuous throw-backwoodsmen” and the “indolent hillbilly,” it is critical that we understand this socially constructed Appalachia is a whole, interdependent idea, and you cannot use some of it without calling it all into existence. Even the positive images have been used by the nation to justify the repeated sacrifice of the land and people to the national economy or cultural consciousness. For example, urban-based images of Appalachia have been used as a contrasting cultural space against which to create an emerging notion of “American civilization” in the late 19th century, and similarly again to serve as an anti-civilization of romantic hope and refuge for many of us mentally fleeing the urban spaces of the late 20th century. None of it had anything to do with the region. Schenkkan reworks all this; he does not take it anywhere to construct new territory.

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Of course, I am not suggesting that poor Robert Schenkkan has conspiratorially set out to promote continued looting of Appalachia. No, he is just using his obvious literary talent and intuition to follow a path many U.S. literary and artistic figures have followed on and off for years. There is an extremely compelling historical and literary tale here, one that has provided fundamental symbols to the national consciousness, and Schenkkan has recognized that. (In a way, it makes perfect sense that, having gotten out of Appalachia the timber and coal needed for passing industrial eras, the nation will now turn to minding / mining cultural information from the region as the “information economy” cranks up in earnest).

What is troubling is that the writing he has done functions to hide the complexity and richness of the place, rather than articulate it. *The Kentucky Cycle* is not about Appalachia; it is about things that were about the exploitation of Appalachia. It doesn’t matter a tinker’s damn that many of the things it is about shared the same urban left/ progressive sentiment Schenkkan expresses. The work will continue the vulnerability of the region by displacing images and representations that might make the place more knowable and human, and

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therefore more difficult to loot. I like to think of it in terms of what someone famous (whose name escapes me) said: "It's not a question of making films about politics, it's a question of making films politically".

What Robert Schenkkan thinks his work represents is irrelevant. The economics of culture will now go to work. With the Pulitzer, the play will take on a powerful cultural life of its own. Schenkkan fades into the background as another worker in the urban-dominated cultural industry, and the work becomes a valuable commodity. A beautiful narrative technology still poised... it will be staged in a handful of urban cultural centers, and then a problem must be overcome – its length makes it an expensive and difficult commodity to exploit (it is designed to be performed in two parts by an ensemble company of 12 actor/musicians in two consecutive evenings or in an continuous, all-day performance with a single dinner break). When was the last time you tried to get anybody to spend two evenings consecutively at the theater? No problem – this only compels the work to achieve the form for which it was always destined, film and television.

The emerging global networks will flash *The Kentucky Cycle* all over the planet. Then the narrative technology will go to work and the social space of Appalachia will be recreated by the play, for the people it was written for in the urban centers of the world. Think of all those people in the cities, sitting around over a cappuccino, trying to figure out what to do with their garbage, with deluded little 'dark and bloody grounds' in their cultural maps of the world. Now what will they do with garbage and toxins?

Hopefully, it does not surprise anyone to find out that literature and art are implicated in power and domination, rather than above it; so rather than discuss the relative merits of weapons systems or narrative systems, it might be more useful to think about what shifting moral space this discussion inhabits. First of all, neither I nor anyone else has a universal and pure position from which to pass any kind of judgment. I certainly cannot presume to speak for Appalachia; I don't live there, and depending on whom you ask, I may never have lived there. But we are not speaking about physical landscape here anyway; it is the cultural landscape we are after, and that is changing too rapidly to allow anyone to get very self-righteous about much of anything. In the hard-wired class society of the global village, the cultural industries have figured out that culture is the ultimate form of planned obsolescence. How many times can one consume the same performance or screening?

In such a shifting landscape, it's tempting to wander off into some form of extreme tolerance and relativity, or to lose yourself in the "rigorous" analysis of

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mindless detail, both of which require that we ignore or fail to see the enormous patterns where the nation projects an image onto a whole region or people in order to create a place they can ruthlessly exploit. It is interesting to note that Pulitzer recognized a Lexington writer for a journalistic series looking at child abuse. You have to wonder in what region they pass out the awards for work celebrating the emergence of the enlightened human spirit.

It is difficult to find a place to stand. It would not do to effectively join up with Jesse Helms to call for an attack on the First Amendment in order to change or stop what Robert Schenkkan writes. The exploitation only continues, and Schenkkan, and many other important voices get silenced by Helms. Perhaps we could begin talking about the difference between Schenkkan's expression and corporate expression. But beware –most of the people who even think about these issues are at least marginally part of a shifting new class of writers, artists, designers and consultants whose interests are inextricably entwined with the cultural industries; start to tinker with corporate free expression, and they will stand by while the lawyers and money pull you apart.

It also does not help to start thinking of city-dwellers as a bunch of information 'strip miners'. Most cities are getting pretty well mined out themselves: at the top are the world cities, centers of international finance and the headquarters of the multinational in gleaming towers built in rubble of the old industrial cities. The other cities take on a different function down the ladder that has its last rung in the rural spaces of the world. Besides, everyone can benefit from an outside perspective now and then – xenophobia does not work either. I look for a group of local investors to open the Dark and Bloody Ground Amusement Park any day now.

How about some kind of polite rules of cultural engagement and neighborliness? Perhaps if you want to write about a place, you should go there for a while and visit people; find out what they are doing with the landscape, tales and politics of the place, ask some questions. Put yourself in the position of being an outsider who does not know, but who is open to finding out. Maybe get embarrassed, but find out. Invite some critical comments, perhaps arrange to make sure that your creation gets distributed, shown or staged in the place you choose to represent.

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