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THE DARKER ANGELS OF OUR NATURE
THE SOUTH IN AMERICAN HORROR FILM

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Southern Studies
The University of Mississippi

by

Steven Saunders

April 2013

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ABSTRACT

How does one make a region horrific? For well over half of a century, the American South has functioned as a site for national anxieties over race and modernization. This study uses an inter-disciplinary approach in order to understand the various forces involved in the construction of the South in American horror cinema. Particular attention is paid to the influence that images of the civil rights movement have had on the development and evolution of the South as a horrific and terrifying space for the rest of the nation. It focuses on four main subcategories of the genre: the white degenerate redneck, the Voodoo film, the natural horror film, and the post-modern horror parody. Using the theories of Giorgio Agamben and Julia Kristeva as a foundation, the study also tries to evaluate the processes by which the South is constructed as the nation's monstrous Other. While it is by no means a comprehensive study, this thesis covers some major (and some minor) depictions of the region in the horror genre.

DEDICATION

For Mom and Dad, who didn't even bat an eye when I said I wanted to get my Master's in Southern Studies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is difficult to encapsulate the number of people without whom this project would not have been possible. Firstly, a great deal of credit goes to my thesis advisor, Dr. Kathryn McKee, whose counsel, patience, and support have been vital to the development of this work. It is also certainly true that the rest of my committee, Dr. Leigh Anne Duck and Dr. Deborah Barker, have provided feedback and inspiration that have been vital to the success of this undertaking. I cannot thank my parents, Herb and Mary Saunders, for letting me grow up in a house that didn't censor my viewing habits and for their support (intellectual, financial, and emotional) over these past several years. Joe Saunders, my brother, deserves at least some credit for introducing me to the exploitation genre when I was too young to know better. Jacob Rice deserves special notice for helping make me the Southerner I am today. Lastly: Gregg, Johnny, Becky, Tye, Susan, Jillian, Madelyn, Craig, Kari, Billy, and the rest of my friends whom I have failed to list for sitting through countless hours of my rambling about horror movies and provided me limitless entertainment during the darkest hours of writing this thesis. My love to you all.

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INTRODUCTION

THE SOUTH'S INFLUENCE ON AMERICAN HORROR FILM

Fear. It is one of the greatest powers that we imbue our literatures with: the ability to make us fear. For that moment, the creative world can reach out from the page or screen or speaker and shape the audience's perceptions of the world. Tearing away the boundaries between the spectator and the character, works of terror (which we call thrillers or horror) effectively pass beyond the objective notion of the senses and into a world of pure affect. Horror's ability to shape our psychology, rendering us terrified or playing with our concept of reality, makes it the genre that is most guarded from and polarizing. It is a realm that some will simply refuse to engage with, saying that it represents our basest urges or simply refusing to subject themselves to that feeling that defines the genre: fear.

Horror has another function, however. It offers us a window onto ourselves. A work of horror becomes a snapshot of the cultural and social anxieties that created it. It is a communal work—the product of cooperation between the creator and his audience—that openly engages with the two parties' view of the historical moment in which they live. Using their knowledge of the cultural moment, authors plumb the depths of their own psyches, building a horrific world in their work that is based on the one around them—similar, yet just different enough to function as an uncanny facsimile and excite the imagination of the viewer. In turn, viewers surrender themselves to the author's vision, suspend their disbelief, and allow themselves (whether it is a

conscious process or not) to become scared. Through this interaction, the work of the horrific must engage with the viewer's own sense of the world in a way that few other genres do. The images of the horrific, in many cases, become overt references to moments in time and space, located at a nexus between the two and seeking to answer one specific question: What scares us *right now*?

The question is one that has defined literature for millennia. To the tellers of *Beowulf*, fear was contained in the monstrous visage of Grendel and the threat that the tenuous bonds of society could and would be destroyed by the natural world. Bram Stoker read of the barbarisms of the past and forged Dracula—an ageless creature, who resides in a land far from the light of English civilization, who consumed human life force, and whose chief victim is a pure white maiden. In a more modern example, H.P. Lovecraft found terror in annals of archaic knowledge and the occult, and in doing so created Cthulu. Of course, the factors that feed into this process are multiple and varied depending upon national context. W. Scott Poole, in his book *Monsters in America*, boils the notion down to a simple fact: “American monsters are born out of American history. They emerge from the central anxieties and obsessions that have been a part of the United States from colonial times to the present...” (4). Poole's book examines the ways in which the national construction of the horrific has changed since its founding, ranging from Cotton Mather's discovery of fossilized evidence of Biblical giants in 1705 to the mid-twentieth century's fascination with the atomic monstrosities as an expression of the fear of nuclear proliferation. If we consider the implications of Poole's statement (and his book), which focuses on the nation broadly, we can see how the horrific seems tailor-made for the American South.

Since even before the Revolution, the South has functioned as the one of the central sites for national conflict. As a site of Indian removal, slavery, the Civil War, the civil rights

movement, and as a region marked (in the national mind) by its “backwardness”, racism, and poverty, the South has long been a center for American “horrors”—the darker angels of our nature that have followed us since the founding of the nation. Jennifer Rae Greeson, speaking of the early days of the Union, has put it this way:

The moral universe of late-eighteenth-century imperialism... dictated that colonial, tropical societies were inherently degenerate, holding a station in the order of nature and nations subordinate to that of metropolitan societies; and in the 1790s the southern states began to be figured in U.S. print culture primarily in terms of these negative moral associations of coloniality (231).

However, with the development of the motion picture camera at the turn of the 20th century, the world was handed a new medium: film. The result was a new era for popular representations of the South. Films like *The Great Train Robbery* and *Birth of a Nation* set the stage for a national obsession with representations of the South in film. In his landmark study of Southern myth in Hollywood cinema, Edward D.C. Campbell says: “Much of the modern misunderstanding of the region, by natives and outsiders alike, was the result of a persistent mythology willingly accepted by countless audiences” (14). Prior to the 1960s much of the representation of the American South focused on a mythical past, usually defined by the antebellum plantation. However, with the social upheaval of the civil rights movement as well as shifts in the American film production system that allowed for a more open market in terms of film production, an increased interest in the South coincided with a boom in the horror genre.

These two forces met each other in the 1960s and created an enduring relationship that persists to this day. In his entry for the 18th volume of *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (“Media”), film reviewer John Beifuss says of the South in horror film:

Instead of encountering bats and crumbling castles, though, the unwary outsider who intrudes below the Mason-Dixon line in the movies may find dead armadillos and dilapidated shacks, swamps and smokehouses, pin-stuck dolls and Rebel flags, and snakes and chainsaws (69).

Beifuss' assessment, a comparison to the gothic imagery of Dracula's Transylvania, begins to reveal the vocabulary of the 'horrific South'. This vocabulary has its roots in historical and literary moments, which have imbued these images with their meanings. A 'Rebel' flag, for instance, conjures images of raging white supremacists intent on denying African Americans entry to a public school. It connotes violence, threat, and animalistic rage. With the region's violent history, it comes as no surprise that such images are common when talking about the American South. What may come as a surprise, however, is the dearth of explicit studies concerning the South's varied and complex role in horror, particularly in the cinema. This is not to say that there are no such works; as with all realms of scholarship, a certain level of canonicity has formed. Works dealing with films like *Deliverance*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *White Zombie* are plentiful, yet rarely (if ever) are the films' Southern aspects explored, or, when they are, scholars ignore their place in the larger genre. What is lacking is a broadly focused, multifaceted study incorporating aspects of Southern studies, film studies, literature, and history that will explore the manifold ways in which the South has developed as a site of horror in the American cinema.

For the purposes of this project, I intend to unravel John Beifuss' assertion that the South in American horror film is little more than a "classification of scary movie trends" (68). Instead, I see the South as holding an abiding influence on the development and evolution of the American horror film: both as a space that is historically problematic, and as a site of modern anxieties about industrialization and mediation. Using an approach similar to that laid out by Rick Altman in his essay "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre", I intend to examine just a few of the ways in which the South has changed over the course of horror film history. By highlighting the influence that the region's history, culture, and imagery have on its presentation

in the horror genre, I intend to illustrate the vast role that the South has played in American horror. It is difficult to encapsulate that influence as simply being one thing, but rather a shifting collection of images and themes that appear over and over again in various subsections of the larger horror genre. In order to examine the how and the why, we must first address one thing: what are the sources of these images?

I do not wish to resuscitate a notion of film authorship. Although at certain points it is certainly true that films are capable of being expressions of one person's vision, I believe that it is important to consider the role that source plays in the creation of the cinematic South, and to separate the notion of a regional literature from that of a regional cinema. Namely, the latter only exists in rare occasions. In her book, *Dreaming of Dixie*, Karen Cox does an excellent job of showing the ways that Northern authors, songwriters, performers, and filmmakers contributed to the creation of a mythical, idyllic South. Additionally, Edward D.C. Campbell goes to great lengths to track the development of the cinematic image of the South that originated in Northern publishing houses and was actively consumed by both Northerners and Southerners alike. The twentieth century can be undeniably considered a period of the nationalization (and globalization) of culture, defined by the growth of radio, television, the film camera, and the automobile. As a result, images of the South—particularly in films and on television, which were consumed by national and international audiences—can no longer be considered the product of regional cultures. Instead, the screen portrayal of the South needs to be considered as part of a national consciousness, an American imaginary in which the South and Southern culture certainly has an active part. However, the films discussed here are not 'Southern' in the sense that they emerge specifically *from* the South. Rather, they function as the *national*

confrontation of its own Other-ness, and draw on the constructed notions of the South in order to do so.

This notion of Southern other-ness plays out in the cinema in a multitude of ways, yet the source of this imagery lies (at its root, with a few notable exceptions discussed in Chapter 4) outside of the world of the cinematic. Inevitably, the question arises about the role that the literary classification known as the Southern Gothic plays in these films. The construction of images of the South as a horrific space definitely owes a great deal to authors like Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner. However, it is also important to remember that these films—as the products of Hollywood filmmaking and not a Southern literary tradition—also incorporate a vast lexicon of European cinematic tropes borrowed from cinematic traditions like German Expressionism, as well as literary influences like British Gothic. As a result, attempts at determining the exact role of the Southern Gothic imaginary in the construction of the South in American horror film border on the impossible. A film like 1964's *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte*, for instance, with its decaying plantation house and devastated family unit, can be seen as having some connection to the Southern Gothic tradition, yet it is also important to note that much of its plot is derived from 1944's *Gaslight*, and that it was the quasi-sequel to 1960's *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (an American gothic film and novel set in Hollywood). The inability to extricate a cinematic Southern Gothic from other literary and cinematic modes makes the continuation of this line of reasoning difficult, and therefore beyond the scope of this study.

Instead, I will link the prevalence of these images in American cinema to specific historical and cultural moments (both Southern and non-Southern alike), dating back to the earliest days of the medium. Edward D.C. Campbell notes, “Film versions of the slave South functioned far more as agents of reinforcement than agents of change” (20). For Campbell, the

mythologized antebellum South became something immutable, a process through which to reinforce stereotypes, misrepresentations, and expectations for mainstream audiences rather than subvert them. This is no less true for the negative stereotypes about the South, which gained new prominence in the mid-twentieth century. While it is present in American horror cinema in earlier periods, the South takes on a central role in the genre after the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. Images of grotesque Southern sheriffs, violent attacks on protesters, assassinations of civil rights leaders, and Southern backwardness became commonplace during this period and began to affect the imagination of the nation. The blatant racialized violence that was obscured in mainstream television series and films like *The Andy Griffith Show* or *Cape Fear*, became a favorite topic among exploitation filmmakers during the African American freedom struggle. Sharon Monteith, discussing this move, notes the reason: “movies... capitalized on revisions to the Production Code, in its final throes in the 1960s, that allowed for the exploitation of ‘issues’ such as ‘miscegenation’ and sexual permissiveness” (197). With cinema liberated from the constrictions of the Production Code, filmmakers gravitated to subjects and content previously closed to them. The South would play a vital role in this new era of free expression in the cinema with 1956’s *Baby Doll* (a film set in the South, and written by Tennessee Williams), the first film produced by a major studio outside the purview of the Production Code. As a result, filmmakers like Hershel Gordon Lewis and Roger Corman were able to discuss major social issues while still drawing in audiences with the promise of taboo images. Additionally, this created a new market for horror that could cross the boundaries of ‘good taste’ and incorporate more and more violent imagery. The cinematic South became a haven for grotesque cannibals, scantily clad victims, and murderous rednecks and in doing so set the stage for the development of the modern horror film.

The South of the American horror film is a place of threat. It is a place that exists outside of the boundaries of the nation's peaceful existence. The monsters that populate it—be they cannibalistic white degenerates, gruesome nonhuman animals, or powerful voodoo priestesses—suggest the upending of the status quo. They are the revisions to the master narrative of American idealism, racial progressivism, and biological supremacy. As Leigh Anne Duck has pointed out, “Increasingly, after the Civil War, the dominant national time was understood to be that of capitalist modernity—a linear progressive temporality allowing new mobility and opportunity...” (5). For Duck, as for this study, the South came into conflict with the national self-identification with progression and modernization, and in doing so filmmakers constructed it as a space for national dialogue over anxieties about modernization and the resulting class inequalities. The films discussed here feature a South which is a site in which characters cross the border out of modernity, and in doing so face an identity crisis as they come into contact with their nation's uncanny doppelganger—a world with many of the trappings of their own, but with a terrible Other-ness lurking beneath the surface.

In order to see the ways in which this construction of the South has been achieved, I draw upon a multi-faceted, interdisciplinary set of texts. First and foremost, perhaps, is Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, which she puts forth in her essay *Powers of Horror*. Kristeva, in her attempt to understand the underlying psychological implications of horror, defines the “abject” initially as being opposed to the notion of the ‘object’, but sharing one quality with it: “that of being opposed to *I*” (1). This idea of the abject as opposed to the self, yet not being an object, “a ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing” (2), causes the disruption of identity and notions of order and society. The South is, therefore, the thing which—as Duck noted—does not agree with the overarching national narrative of progression and democracy, and

thereby disrupts the notion of the national self by being both unidentifiable as a distinct other thing, yet identifiable as not belonging. This process is perhaps most comparable to the experience of watching the violence that occurred between civil rights demonstrators and the Birmingham police department on Bloody Sunday. Images of violence and injustice, unrecognizable as part of the American self-image, cause a schism in the national consciousness, and the resulting divide was filled (and, I will argue, rehabilitated by) the Southern horror film. While Kristeva's main point is that the self and its reflexive idea of identity is threatened by the abject, we can also see the South as unraveling national ideas of power, sovereignty, and control.

Giorgio Agamben, in his work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, asserts that sovereign power, in order to form a political identity, must first define its boundaries. Agamben says, "the production of the biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power"

(6). Much of this is tied to Foucault's concept of 'biopolitics'—a state that Agamben summarizes as the moment when "natural life begins to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of State power" (3). 'Bare life' is life that is not included in the biopolitical body, yet still subject to its control. It is a state, therefore, on the borders of sovereignty—one that is not controlled by the organizing and justifying mechanisms of sovereignty. Agamben also says that the "fundamental categorical pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence... exclusion/inclusion" (8). For the purposes of this study, let us consider the idea that the Southern horror film is an exploration of the conflict that occurs when the biopolitical entity of the United States comes into contact with the bare life of the South, which threatens to—as we saw with Kristeva—unravel the notion of sovereignty and political identity. This process creates just one of the many sources of terror that exists in these films. The sense of safety and control that biopolitical bodies offer, which Agamben (paraphrasing Foucault)

describes as "political techniques (such as the science of police) with which the state assumes and integrates the care of the natural life of individuals into its very center" (5), is threatened by that which does not conform to the constructions of the biopolitical. When characters enter into a Southern space the very notion of political (or biopolitical) order is turned upside down, and they are disconnected from the biological authority of sovereign power. By doing this, filmmakers are able to portray the South as a region outside of the United States, yet bearing a terrifying similarity to it. This almost apocalyptic devastation of the national order effectively disorients the audience and sets the stage for the terrifying content of these films.

In his entry on the South in horror film, John Beifuss lists a few permutations of the Southern-ness in horror film: "the rural backwoods thriller, the voodoo movie, the 'southern gothic' drama, the 'redneck' gore film" (68). Using this list as a beginning, this project seeks to examine several of the different subcategories of the American horror film in which the South is incorporated in the interest of positioning them in their historical and social context, as well as the ways in which theories like those of Kristeva and Agamben allow us to understand these films better. While these categories represent several of the major trends in the horror genre over the course of the last century, they are by no means a complete account of the various aspects and minor cinematic iterations of the region as a site of terror. Rather, included here are a set of constructions and tropes of the region that are as varied and colorful as the South itself. They are: the monstrous white redneck/hillbilly, the voodoo film, the Southern eco-horror, and the contemporary postmodern horror parody. Each chapter displays a different section of the region's culture, population, and landscape. The development of these subcategories, in many ways, mirrors the development of modern horror cinema: tracing a genre that has its roots in the classical monster film, developed along with exploitation cinema after the end of the Production

Code, and attained mainstream status during the 1970s. Many of these films do not simply represent landmarks in the portrayal of *the South* in American cinema, but major milestones from the medium as a whole.

Chapter 1 will explore the image of the monstrous white Other that came to prominence in the years during and following the civil rights movement. This image takes multiple forms: the backwoods redneck, the flag-waving Confederate racist, and the crazed chainsaw-wielding slasher. For want of a better term, this can be considered the ‘golden age’ of Southern horror: the period of the 1960s-70s in which South became a center of national anxiety and citizens were bombarded with images of violent white supremacists resisting black liberation. Films like Hershel Gordon Lewis’ *Two Thousand Maniacs* (1964), John Boorman’s *Deliverance* (1972), and Tobe Hooper’s *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) cemented the idea that the South was a haven for whites whose retrograde ideology, tendency towards incest, and isolated locations, all combined in order to deform them into an unrecognizable state. This contortion often takes the form of the monstrous hillbilly resorting to cannibalism and violating taboos that are taken for granted in society. As such, this group of films is the ideal opportunity to explore the role that taboo and primitivism play in Kristeva’s theories of abjection. Most importantly, these films abject the South in order to allow the nation to work through the historical trauma of civil rights violence by separating itself from the perpetrators of that violence.

Chapter 2 will continue this theme of primitivizing the American South by examining the Voodoo film and the threat that Voodoo practitioners pose to established power structures. Voodoo, a product of cross-cultural exchanges between European and African religions, as well as a tradition which has found its home on the outskirts of society (rural areas of the U.S. South as well as the island of Haiti with many of its rituals and beliefs obscured by its isolation)

becomes a terrifying mixture of the familiar and the alien. Similarly, Haiti, which has long been the subject of much speculation and anxiety for the United States, becomes the source of magical powers that threaten to invert the established power structures of American society. In some instances, such as *White Zombie* (1932, dir. Victor Halperin) or *The Skeleton Key* (2005, dir. Iain Softley), this inversion threatens the white or multiracial status quo from an outside force, while for a film like *Sugar Hill* (1974, dir. Paul Maslansky) Voodoo becomes the catalyst for African American liberation and domination. Springing from the bare, undefined outskirts of American society, Voodoo represents a South that will defy the inclusion/exclusion dichotomy that biopolitical societies are founded on.

In Chapter 3, the landscape of the South takes center stage. These films depict a region that has been unclaimed and untamed, building off of local legends and modern anxiety about the precarious nature of human civilization. The monsters of these films are extensions of the landscape of the South: a Native American ghost in control of wild creatures (*The Death Curse of Tartu*, 1966, dir. William Greffe), animals rebelling against the devastation of the natural world (*Frogs*, 1972, dir. George McCowan), and a misunderstood Bigfoot (*The Legend of Boggy Creek*, 1972, dir. Charles B. Pierce). Mixing ecological and environmental theory with the stereotype of the South as a primordial space we will see the way that the American imaginary situates the South as being closer to the natural world and therefore having a more tenuous grasp on the tropes of civilization. Coming face-to-face with this conception of the natural world causes the breakdown of notions of human identity and self, leading to anxiety and fear in the viewer. The South, therefore, is represented as a rural space where urban, modern American identity is under threat, and the region again becomes a space that threatens to counter the organizing processes of biopower.

Chapter 4 brings our study into the present day, with a collection of films made since the turn of the century that incorporate a highly self-reflexive view of the construction of Southernness in the cinematic realm. Acutely aware of their predecessors, this new breed of horror films that feature the South creates complex systems of referentiality and deconstructs the conventions that the genre has already established. These films—*2001 Maniacs* (2005, dir. Tim Sullivan), *Tucker and Dale vs. Evil* (2010, dir. Eli Craig), and *Hatchet* (2006, dir. Adam Green)—run the gamut between remake, reinterpretation, and parody. Incorporating comedic elements and over-the-top gore, these films allow the audience to be acutely aware that they are watching a film, and engage with other films through a series of allusions and visual references in order to pay homage to the rest of the genre. This result is a reverential set of new ‘Post-Southern’ horror films that openly critique the previous stereotypes and tropes that their predecessors have allowed to become so commonplace that they border on cliché. While this turn is by no means all encompassing and mainstream films have tended towards a more conservative approach to genre, these films represent a new voice in the conversation, openly engaging with the notion of caricaturing a region for the purposes of entertainment.

The South serves a vital function in the American mind. It draws out images of historical battles, racial injustice, and idyllic landscapes. Yet in the twentieth century, the South also served as a staging ground for discussions of the darker side of American life and society. This has allowed the nation to come face to face with literal representations of its demons, providing us with a photographic history of our own self-reflection on what it means to be ‘American’, and giving us the opportunity to look back in an attempt to trace how the idea of American otherness has developed and thereby come face-to-face with the underlying ironies and hypocrisies of American exceptionalism. These twelve films, ranging from as far back as eighty-one years to

as recently as two years, trace the complex racial, cultural, and social landscape of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This study represents an attempt to begin trying to understand the role that the South has played in the American consciousness as a place of fear and monstrosity. By understanding this, we can begin to see the ways that American horror is formed through a complex admixture of history, media, and philosophy.

CHAPTER ONE

THE WHITE RACIST MONSTER: WHITE MONSTROSITY, ABJECTION, AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA HORROR FILM

I. Introduction: The Degenerate White Southerner as Racial Other

When Woodrow Wilson, speaking of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, said that it was "like writing history with lightning" he could have no idea of the advances and changes that the moving image would undergo in the next half century. The Second World War was the first major conflict to have widespread use of the motion picture camera, with newsreels and a motion picture industry that was firmly in the hands of the federal government in order to aid in the war effort. However, by the 1950s, with the advent of television, the availability of news and images became the defining characteristic of the next major social conflict in America's history—the African American struggle for freedom. The indelible images created by the media coverage of the civil rights movement shaped American perceptions not simply of the South as a region, but its relationship to the nation as a whole. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s represents a major turning point in American media and a profound shift in the way in which American audiences interacted with the historical and social moment in which they lived. As Allison Graham has noted in her book *Framing the South*, "To see oneself, to become aware of oneself as an image: such was the legacy of television in the region, according to its early practitioners" (1).

In their introduction to Volume 18 of *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (“Media”), Graham and Sharon Monteith enumerate several examples of the media coverage of the movement—Hoxie, Arkansas; Sumner, Mississippi; Birmingham, Alabama—as examples of the ways in which “the mass media contributed—and continue to contribute—thematic and iconographic contours to the South” (2). Through television and print images of unruly mobs of segregationists, overweight sheriffs, and assaulted protesters we begin to see the ways that the American media not simply reacted to (which is true) but also took an active role in shaping the conceptualization of the American South. More so than in the Second World War—when not only was the enemy a foreign ‘other’, but the much of the production was controlled/censored by the US government—we see can see the ways that American media take an active stance in the advancement and shaping of American self-perceptions in the civil right movement. The foremost of these perceptions, without a doubt, is the creation of an archetype that shaped audience’s notions about the South for decades: the Southern white degenerate.

Words like ‘hick’, ‘hillbilly’, and ‘redneck’ seem too small to encapsulate the wide-reaching effects this character. Even before the beginning of twentieth century, poor whites had been used to represent the dangers of the passing on of genetic traits like ‘feble-mindedness’ and ‘idiocy’ through violation of social or sexual taboos. In his work on the representations of ‘poor white trash’ in American cinema and its connection to American eugenics studies, C. Scott Combs says: “The danger was ‘cacogenics,’ or unacceptable sexual reproductions, including consanguinity (relations between cousins) and incest” (113). While eugenics was not a new phenomenon in the American landscape, the cinematic white degenerate represents a slightly different play on the same idea: they are ideologically degenerate, hidden away for long enough in the backwoods sections of the country to allow for their backwards ideas and poor social

graces to physically turn them into deformed monsters. The angry, screaming segregationists photographed protesting the integration of Little Rock's Central High School morphed into something easier to digest and—more importantly—distinguish from the American public's image of itself. This, of course, had the dual affect of allowing viewers to separate themselves from the 'bad guy' who was attacking peaceful protesters in Birmingham with German Shepherds, and at the same time allowed the true face of racism—the one you cannot pick out of a crowd—to go unnoticed. Regardless of this fact, the image has persisted in forms ranging from Buford T. Justice in *Smokey and the Bandit* to Leatherface in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and has profoundly affected the way that the South is seen in the context of the broader nation.

Nowhere is this image more overt, or more intriguing, than in the American horror genre. To quote Graham: "...American movies have traditionally formulated our national racial crisis as a series of random encounters with evil incarnate..." (12-13). Horror film has the culturally important task manifesting our fears and anxieties in a medium that allows us to stare them in face without actual threat, and thereby it becomes the most important outlet available for looking at the social fallout from the civil rights movement. Southern horror films play out a national fear that the white racists that appear on television screens or in magazines are waiting the Southern parts of the nation to trap and kill those that they do not consider part of their society. This fear has the twofold action of separating white audiences from self-reflection, and allowing multiracial audiences the joy of seeing the hero or heroine escape from these monsters and return to a free, progressive world. However, these films—with few exceptions—also have the added bonus of reminding audiences that you cannot truly kill the monster, only hope to contain it.

In order to do this, filmmakers use an established racial visual vocabulary, simply inverting the skin color from black race monster to white *racist* monster. Stereotypes like

cannibalism, sexual perversion, ignorance, and barbarism—all stereotypes historically associated in racist circles with primitive cultures—become the standard tropes for showing Southern whiteness in the horror genre. Put simply, some of the same cinematic cues that can be attributed to Gus, the rapist slave in *Birth of a Nation*, can be attributed to the grotesque, white hillbillies of *Deliverance*. As Julia Kristeva outlined in her essay *The Powers of Horror*: through the establishment and violation of dietary and sexual boundaries, a subject (in this case: the Southern white) is made ‘abject’. The act of separation is done through the delineations of a society’s borders through abjection. When Kristeva notes that the original, ‘primitive’ “societies have marked out a precise area in order to it from the threatening world of animals and animalism, which are imagined as representations of sex and murder” (12-13). Similarly, American popular culture has positioned white Southern racists as an animalistic other, in order to assuage national anxieties about the prevalence of racist attitudes. By taking their enemies’ arsenal and turning it back on them, filmmakers are also able to alleviate their own complacency in the racial and social stereotyping and prejudice through the use of a scapegoat.

Characters like Gus are absent in this discussion, simply because none of the films contained in this chapter feature black characters. The degenerate white Southerner offers an opportunity to examine the role of racial otherness without the need of blackness. These characters are unrecognizable in the boundaries of normative whiteness, and have allowed filmmakers to juxtapose characters that white audiences can identify against a terrifying other. Through the physical and mental deformities that have been caused by the isolation of rural Southern landscapes, the monstrous villains of these films are able to represent the threat historically posed in white supremacist literatures by black characters. These degenerate whites’ animalistic sexual and dietary proclivities situate them as a terrifying threat to the standard

(implicitly white) viewing audience of the 1960s and 70s. By inverting characteristics like cannibalism and sexual deviance onto white characters, the filmmakers are able to comment on the racial conflicts of the nation through replacement, as opposed direct confrontation.

In order to understand this inversion better, we must examine three films that represent the development and standardization of the white social degenerate in the American horror film: *Two Thousand Maniacs* (1964, Hershell Gordon Lewis), *Deliverance* (1972, John Boorman), and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974, Tobe Hooper). Certainly, this cannot be a complete examination of the trope; there are simply too many examples to count, with minor iterations appearing in many films (a redneck gas station attendant here, a distrustful sheriff there). However, it is with these films that we can see the image of the white supremacist Southerner rising out of the very pages of *Life Magazine* and then slowly separate from a more nuanced, urbanized South in the mid to late 70s. It is important to note that in only one of these films are the victims explicitly 'Northern', and even then little is made of their origin than a visual joke. More often than not, these monsters are a threat not to the nation's stability, but rather to modernity itself. For horror film, it is as if the civil rights movement's main victory was reminding Americans that there was an entire subset of the population that hadn't even made it to the 20th century. These films, three distinct cinematic moments, illustrate the anxiety that goes along with the advance of progress. Ultimately, these films left an indelible mark not just on the American psyche, but also on the entire cinematic landscape. They would be parodied and remade countless times, and their legacy continues to the present day. As such they are the perhaps the most important films to understand in order to examine broader implications of the South in American horror cinema.

II. The South Will Rise: *Two Thousand Maniacs* and the Neo-Confederacy

In her examination of the relationship between the exploitation film and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, Sharon Monteith states: “The insertion of northern middle-class ‘foreigners’—‘red diaper babies’ and students from Ivy League schools—into the ‘savage’ South was not only a media dream but a source of melodrama for filmmakers” (194). Astutely, Monteith hits upon role that exploitation plays in the social space of American film of this period—a cinema mainly geared towards teenagers or young people, with an independent production industry, free from the constricting censors of larger studios, and with a desire to tell stories of the salacious and play upon the contemporary subject matter. The films of Roger Corman, Hershell Gordon Lewis, and others offer a lens upon the political stance of the filmmakers that few mainstream releases have. As such, films like *Two Thousand Maniacs*, released in March 1964 just months before the start of the SNCC’s Freedom Summer in Mississippi and on the eve of the Civil War centennial, are a window onto the views and anxieties of non-Southern audiences during a period when the South was on everyone’s mind.

The story is that of several travelers who take a detour and happen upon a small town called Pleasant Valley in rural South Carolina. The town itself is having its own centennial celebration, and was the opening credits roll we hear the bracing banjo cords of the films theme song entitled “The South is Gonna Rise Again” played over gap-toothed men in overalls setting up a detour sign, people in the town passing out Confederate flags, and a group of small children strangling a cat with a sign around its neck that says ‘DAM YANKEE’. We see an image of the South that is both strange and familiar, one obsessed with commemorating and standing by its rebellious past. The unsuspecting Northern outsiders (explicitly Illinois—‘The Land of Lincoln’) who are unlucky enough to happen upon this town are treated initially with all of the

bells and whistles that are associated with an Old South ideal of hospitality. The mayor of the town seems obsessed with their staying for the celebration, as their “guests of honor”. The travellers agree, but are wary of this town. In a scene in their hotel rooms the guests express concern over the town’s openness and overly cheerful attitude: one woman remarks, “It’s like John C. Calhoun’s version of trick or treat.” These comments are juxtaposed with a seemingly unconnected scene of two of the townsfolk replying to their comments like a bizarre Greek chorus; their responses are our first hint at the dark purpose this town has for celebrating (“We gonna provide the tricks, and them folks up there, they gonna provide the treats!”).

Two Thousand Maniacs plays on age-old preconceptions of Southern culture. The towns acceptance of outsiders under the auspices of Southern hospitality drives the viewer to suspect something more insidious is afoot, yet does so using a vocabulary and tropes that they would be familiar with. The fanfare that greets these Northern travelers is something akin to a Southern street fair—with live music, children playing, flags waving, and genteel manners. The town’s mayor, dressed in a grey suit, wide-brimmed white hat, and black ribbon tie seems like something out of Mayberry, the fictional setting of *The Andy Griffith Show*. The women and men of the town seem to exist somewhere between the down-home simplicity of *Lil’ Abner* and the mild-mannered planters of *Gone With the Wind*. As the story progresses and we watch the visitors slowly killed off one by one in gruesome ways, the film couches these bloody sequences in an air of rural simplicity, an almost carnival-like atmosphere, as townsfolk cheer and wave their confederate flags. By displaying such violent imagery in this way, the film suggests that the old Southern stereotypes are true, but they are merely expressions of the South’s inherent barbaric nature. It is one thing to show a quaint small town having a fair, but in this case the

dunking booth is a large rock with a ‘Yankee’ placed under it waiting for someone to hit the bulls-eye and make the rock come tumbling down.

The atmosphere of the film isn’t simply carnivalesque, however, it also has the added affect of a lynch mob. As the story progresses and the inevitable final chase ensues, the town becomes a chanting mob obsessed with capturing and killing its prey. A group of happy, white faces waving Confederate flags as the a young white woman is pulled apart by a band of horses seems too eerily similar to the image that is conjured in ones mind—and on camera, for that matter—when one considers the outbreaks of racialized violence that have defined Southern history since before the Civil War. The idea of lynching is noted throughout the film as one small child carries around a noose with him at all times, even lynching a cat off screen at one point. Murder and bloodlust being a part of Southern way-of-life seems to be an inescapable notion when one thinks about the visual and rhetorical landscape at the time—the desegregation of Hoxie, Arkansas; Bull Connor’s reaction to the protestors in Birmingham in 1962; the riots at the University of Mississippi that same year—all provide further context to the viewing of the film. One cannot help but think of the white supremacist reaction to the civil rights movement when the bloody corpse of a white woman is juxtaposed to the grinning faces of the Pleasant Valley townsfolk—the sheer sadistic pleasure of the sequence is practically inhuman and speaks to the fears that liberal audiences would have towards a region that they cannot understand, and that seems out of control in every way.

Perhaps one of the most troubling aspects of the film’s notion of the South is how this violence is tied to consumption. The townsfolk of Pleasant Valley are explicitly cannibals—bringing grotesque new implications to notions of Southern food as something that ties the culture together. The Kristevan idea of the ‘abject’ becomes central in this case, as we consider

what the violation of the cannibalism taboo says about the town's place in opposition to wider society. For Kristeva, in her discussions of the role that dietary prohibition plays in the biblical sphere—the distinction between what is pure and what is impure to eat relates directly back to the expulsion of Man from Eden, and the consumption of the 'forbidden fruit'. What is more, the consumption of human meat becomes tantamount to the reiteration of the mark of Cain. These prohibitions and taboos, Kristeva argues, are the defining moments for the creation of the abjection, the boundary between oneself and the other—good and evil, us and them, man and animal, etc. By positioning these Southerners as violators of the first rule of mankind ('don't eat each other'), the filmmakers place them outside of society, outside of humanity, and outside of reason. The idea of cannibalism being an aspect of primitive societies is in no way a new one, tribal groups in Africa and the Americas have long been accused of cannibalism as a way illustrating them uncivilized and in need of Western intervention. In 1964, however, we see the idea shifting away from some isolated tribal community and being incorporated into an image of the South that is eerily similar to the one that the average American sees on the news every night. Not only is this image of the South far from what progressive audiences might consider to moral and civil, but also in this case they threaten to literally consume the rest of the nation.

The film's message is solidified when we discover at the end that the town itself does not actually exist, or rather does not exist any more. Pleasant Valley was a town of Confederate citizens massacred by Union troops in the Civil War, and now they return on the anniversary (or in this case, the centennial) of their murders in order to wreak havoc on unsuspecting travelers from outside the South. The implications of this revelation are twofold: on the one hand the ideas and prejudices that founded the Confederate States of America cannot be destroyed, but on the other hand they are the result of sectional strife and man's historical inhumanity against his

own species. Regardless of this duality, the film shows us a Civil War that never truly ended, and the very cause itself was never lost even to those who may have been defeated. The institutionalized racism that established itself in the South after Reconstruction is itself as terrifying and dehumanizing (both for the oppressor and the oppressed) as slavery was in the antebellum period. The ghosts of *Two Thousand Maniacs* are spectres of ideology as well as atrocity—symbolizing a broader American narrative that despite our best efforts the darkest parts of our nature survive, and what is more continue to threaten our stability as a nation. Using more contemporary imagery based in television and print media, the film outrightly says that the South of today *is* the South of yesterday—and is therefore an enduring threat to American peace and liberty. Pleasant Valley, for all of its anachronism, speaks to the imagery and strife of America in 1964 by confronting it head-on and showing audiences what they feared most: a South that wasn't them, that wasn't even human, and that couldn't be killed or reasoned with, only escaped. This idea would continue to propagate throughout the following years, until it was finally articulated in a real and brutal way—John Boorman's *Deliverance*.

III. The Landscape that Rapes You Back: *Deliverance* and Covering the Southern Wilderness

It is difficult to put into words the far-reaching effect that *Deliverance* has had upon the American cultural landscape. In the decades since its release in 1972 it has become impossible to escape its various parodies and references. Everything from children's cartoons, to primetime sitcoms, to Hollywood blockbusters have played upon its conceits, and its theme song, "Dueling Banjos", has become "semiotic shorthand to a benighted, primitive American South" (Graham and Monteith 2). The story is, on the surface, a simple one. Four suburbanites from Atlanta venture into the wilderness in order to canoe down a river that is about to be flooded by the building of a dam. On the way, these four come across a pair of grotesque hunters who rape one

of their party before one of the assailants is killed and the other escapes. The protagonists spend the rest of the film trying to escape from the wilderness and the hillbillies that they suspect are pursuing them. The film's images of the poverty of rural life and its use of deformed and otherwise grotesque actors, coupled with its establishing of the rural South as an almost surreal landscape, have opened the floodgates and provided countless other filmmakers with the tools that they needed in order to portray the South in as monstrous a way possible.

However, the main thematic push of the film (the filmmakers' main goal) is ecological. The opening credits roll over images of a placid, untouched natural landscape, juxtaposed with images of large earthmovers and construction equipment doing their best to prepare the landscape for destruction. The audio of this sequence is a conversation between the four would-be adventurers as they prepare for their trip. Lewis (Burt Reynolds), the self-assessed outdoorsman and survivalist, proclaims "They're gonna rape this whole goddamn landscape, they gonna rape it." The line is ironic considering that it is not the landscape that will be raped, but rather one of Lewis' traveling companions. Jhan Hochman has suggested that the forest of *Deliverance*, while the film may try to suggest a need for conservation, is still a site of fear and need for 'deliverance'. In particular, Hochman has suggested that there are three main forms that the natural landscape takes in the film: "ghetto, Dantean hell, and site (a place where various rites of passage are enacted)" (71). In the film, all three of these places are imbued with qualities that set them solely in the realm of the US South. The ghetto of the first scenes—the ramshackle house and the grotesque boy with the banjo; the Dantean hell of the forest, where two hunters emerge to sodomize the unsuspecting travelers; and the site—the cliff where John Voight's Ed learns to take a life, completes his initiation as a hunter, and in doing so abandons his peaceful life in the suburbs of Atlanta. By doing so, the filmmakers (and author, since the film is based on

James Dickey's novel of the same name) play upon the same ideas as *Two Thousand Maniacs*, a wild and uncontrollable South, totally abject in both physical appearance and in its threat to the 'civilized' way of life.

The film's first scene takes place at a gas station, where the travelers hope to find someone to drive their cars to their final destination downriver. Bobby (Ned Beatty) announces upon their arrival that this is "The end of the line." Indeed, in many more ways than one, it is. They have reached the edge of their world of comfort and convenience and now enter into a wasteland. The audience is not permitted to see, until the end of the film, an image of the gentrified, modern Atlanta that these characters come from. By not laying a foundation of normalcy in which to ground the narrative, the filmmakers immediately destabilize the audiences' perceptions, putting them on edge and creating the paranoia that defines the film. Throughout these opening scenes we have signifiers of sickness and violence: a young deformed girl sits in her chair while an ancient woman looks after her, a gun sits in the window of a truck waiting to be used. The South we see in *Deliverance* is diametrically opposed to the South we seem to find in *Two Thousand Maniacs*—'Southern hospitality' has no meaning in a place as inhospitable as this. The reticence of the locals in their communication with these men gives the world of these sequences a surreal quality; we are immediately distrustful of rural folk who seem to have something to hide. After several stops, the protagonists find someone to drive their cars downriver, yet we do not expect to see the cars at the end of the movie as these creatures are not to be trusted since they are unrecognizable as human. It is not until the end that we realize exactly how much our preconceptions have shaped the way that the film plays out. The paranoia has been unfounded—the cars are there. C. Scott Combs has suggested a complex relationship between this paranoia and the character's motivations to continue with their trip: "*Deliverance*

suggests that what propagates the white trash stereotype is a mixture of fear of and desire for proximity with the white ‘other.’ A need to establish an intimacy with rural strangers” (118). This idea of perception versus reality is a central theme of the film, playing on outsiders’ anxiety about Southern white trash, and affirming the threat that they pose.

The monsters of *Deliverance* seem to be connected to the landscape in a very tangible way. Dressed in muted earth tones, they blend in with the indigenous foliage so much so that when the climactic scene of the film comes, Ed and Bobby do not see their assailants until they are right on top of them. The scene comes almost at the exact middle of the narrative, as Ed and Bobby have stopped on the shore to get their bearings. The two hunters arrive from nowhere, as if sprung bodily from the landscape. The rest of the scene plays out as the two groups attempt to maintain control of the situation, ultimately coming to a head as one of the attackers rapes Bobby. This violation of the boundaries of humanity, literally the abject entering into the self, is the film’s most poignant scene and the one that has gained the most acclaim. While many have attempted to situate this scene as a commentary on class distinctions, or ecological disaster, it is perhaps most notably a moment of racial conflict. The hunters use the term ‘boy’ (said with all the thick condescension of a white supremacist) when referring to these two outsiders, as they tie Ed to a tree with his own belt (effectively lynching him) and proceed to force themselves upon him and Bobby. Luckily, Lewis and Drew arrive to save them, killing one of the rapists in the process. After the unnamed hillbilly is dead, Drew—perhaps the most domestic of the group—demands that they call the police. Lewis’ response is telling: “Shit, all these people are related!” The legacy of the civil rights movement is one marked by injustice, situating the South as a place where one cannot get a fair trial, where outsiders aren’t simply distrusted, but unsafe from oppressive, corrupt legal system. Their choice is simple: stand trial

and be convicted, or hide the body in hopes that when the river is dammed it will wash the evidence away forever. The animalistic rape scene, with its monstrous hillbillies screaming like beasts as they defile Bobby's body gives way to Bobby and his friends digging in the dirt like dogs. The loss of humanity and descent into animalism is thus memetic, challenging preconceptions of the hillbilly (or the segregationist) being the villain rather than the forest (or segregation itself). In the end, the travelers become hillbillies themselves, the taint of the landscape spreads to them and once again the terrible qualities of the South threaten to spread to rest of the nation.

This idea of place being the source that spawns monstrosity is evident when considering the way that the narrative plays out. The travelers spend the rest of the film on their guard as they float down the river towards their destination. Apparently suffering from shock over the horrors that he has just lived through, Drew collapses off of the canoe and is pulled into a set of rapids. His companions, suffering from their own guilt, think the attacker that escaped has shot him. This leads to Ed's shooting of a lone hunter on top of cliff with his bow and arrow, thinking it is the man who he met before but discovering after killing him that it was not. In this moment, Ed has become that which he hunts, springing from forest just as they did. His status as an outsider has fallen away, like his wallet from the cliff with its pictures of his family and ties to his life in the suburbs. Ed has now done what he was never able to do before: kill. As a result he can no longer fully belong to the life that he lives in Atlanta, but instead will forever have one foot in the hellscape of the river. The sins of the past, like the Confederates in *Two Thousand Maniacs*, always come back to haunt the present.

When Ed, Bobby, and Lewis return to Atlanta, they try to contain their guilt over the murders that they committed. The final scene shows the same placid lake from the opening

credits with one disturbance: the arm of the rapist that they had buried floats up to the top. Ed awakens in bed with his wife, soaked with sweat, fearing that the things that we try to forget—like slavery, war, and racism—cannot stay buried forever. This is the ultimate theme of the film: trying to bury the evil of the South, of racial and sexual defilement, and the constant fear that it will spring out again. While this may be couched in conservationist message, the ultimate goal of the film is to show a Southern space that can no longer exist if we are to progress as a nation and as a region. Unfortunately the building of a dam cannot cover all of the evils in the South up, and thus the conceptions of the region as a breeding ground for degenerative white monsters was propagated rather than destroyed by *Deliverance*. In fact, they would take on a much more gruesome form two short years later, with *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* by Tobe Hooper.

IV. The Ruined South: *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and the Cannibalistic Primitive

As the first step in the development of the slasher subgenre that would define horror films and criticism throughout the 1980s and beyond, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is a landmark in American cinema. Other authors—such as Robin Wood and Carol Clover—have sought to understand the film's notions of gender and the role that sexuality plays in the narrative. These critics mainly base this notion on a psychoanalytic framework, owing a great deal to the works of Freud and Kristeva, without actively considering the fact that the film is established explicitly in the South and that the family represented in it owes as much to the monstrous hillbillies of *Deliverance* as it does to Norman Bates in *Psycho*. One of the things that distinguishes *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* from others in the genre (*Halloween*, *Prom Night*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, etc.) is that it does not take place in generic, middle class, white suburbia but in rural Texas, the borderland between the frontier and the Deep South—a land of displaced workers feeling the brunt of the regions drive towards industrialization and mechanization. As such, Hooper invents

a family that resembles the barbaric primitive societies commonly attributed to the uncivilized world, yet dwells inside of the boundaries of the United States. As in the previous two films examined, the conceptualization of a Southern underclass takes on attributes commonly associated with racist caricatures of yesteryear and in doing so functions as something that the nation has repressed, and fears may return. As Robin Wood has noted on the concept of ‘Otherness’,

Its psychoanalytic significance resides in the fact that it functions not simply as something external to the culture or to the self, but also as what is repressed (though never destroyed) in the self and projected outward in order to be hated and disowned (66).

Reading these words, one can only be reminded of the role that racism and the South have played in the American cultural landscape for over a century. Through this process of repression, filmmakers like Hooper, Lewis, and Boorman are handed clearly delineated locations for a monster to dwell, both inside and outside the national consciousness.

Unlike the previous films in this chapter, the protagonists of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* are young teenagers with outwardly liberal sensibilities who are from the South, on a road trip to visit their family’s ancestral home—itsself a relic of the Old South of sorts. By situating its characters as modern Southerners, the film becomes—much like *Deliverance* with its would-be outdoorsmen—an attempt to reconnect with the past on the part of a new, urbanized generation of Southerners. The result is that they encounter the repressed parts of the nations psyche thought to be done away with by the ever-continuing march towards modernization. The first encounter our protagonists have with this displaced world is through an innocuous radio broadcast telling of the desecration of a gravesite in a nearby town. This desecration is implicitly the work of those that the viewer meets later, and the broadcast illustrates that the established social conventions surrounding burial have little or no meaning here. Along the way,

believing—as liberally-minded teenagers who discuss astrology on long road trips do—in the infallible goodness of man, they are shocked when a hitchhiker begins regaling them with tales of the slaughterhouse that his family once worked at and showing them pictures of mutilated cattle. By doing so, the hitchhiker shows them the gruesome reality behind a common food group and in doing so blurs the line between man and animal. As Julia Kristeva notes, “Food becomes abject only if it is a border between two distinct entities and territories. A boundary between nature and culture, between the human and the non-human” (75). When the Hitchhiker is later revealed to be part of the cannibalistic family that perpetrates the titular “massacre” we see the ways in which these white degenerates are shaped as abject creatures that exist in a blurring of boundaries between man and animal. This point is further driven home when the hitchhiker produces a razor and begins cutting not only himself, but also one of the teens—the wheelchair-bound Franklin. This moment of the exposure of blood, making the body itself an abjection, horrifies the already unnerved teenagers, who kick the hitchhiker out of their van.

When they finally arrive at their destination, Sally and Franklin’s childhood home, they find a ruined, burnt-out relic. This house in many ways reflects the landscape that surrounds it: desolate, imposing, and in many ways unnerving. The setting is made more monstrous as we watch Franklin in his wheelchair try and fail to adapt to the space—unable to move and explore his own home. His handicap becomes a terrifying signifier of the helplessness that he will face when the inevitable onslaught ensues. In a sick form of irony, this house with its crumbling walls and unstable floors is safer than the one other house the film features. While exploring the grounds, two of the teens encounter a large farmhouse, seemingly domestic and well kept. Seeing that they are running a generator, the two decide to ask the inhabitants for some gas for their van. Appearances, unfortunately in this case, are deceiving—as Carol Clover writes: “What

makes these houses terrible is not just their Victorian decrepitude but the terrible families—monstrous, incestuous, cannibalistic—that occupy them” (78). The seemingly normal exterior of the house obscures the festering cancers of murder and cannibalism inside. In the blink of an eye, the rushing figure of Leatherface emerges from a hidden door and grabs one of the teens. It is only later learn that both the hitchhiker and the attendant at a gas station where the group asks for directions are also members of this creature’s family. Again, we see notions about the insular nature of Southern isolation; as Lewis suggested in *Deliverance*, “all these people are related.” This further situates the South as a place of horror since there is no escape, no safe haven that can protect you since *everyone* is out to get you.

The Sawyer family (whose surname is never given in the original, only in sequels) exists in a state that is far outside the borders of the civilized world. Their house is adorned with lamps, chairs, and decorative pieces made from the bones of humans, and they still practice their traditional method of slaughtering cattle (people) using a sledgehammer. To make matters worse, the family also operates a barbeque restaurant, where they sell their victims to unsuspecting consumers. The imagery surrounding the clan, from the desecrated statue in the cemetery to the imagery that confronts one of the girls as she stumbles upon their ‘living’ room with its all-bone aesthetic, invites a comparison to tribal fetishism. To quote Kristeva, “Corpse fanciers, unconscious worshipers of the soulless body, are thus preeminent representatives of inimical religions, identified by their murderous cults” (109). Again we see the vocabulary of western racist attitudes applied to degenerate whites living on the margins of Southern society. As many have noted, the Sawyers are the waste products of capitalist progress, and have therefore succumbed to isolation and regressed to a violent and uncivilized state. We see here echoes of the civil rights South as a place unable to adapt to the changing socio-economic

conditions of the nation and instead devolving to a degenerative, bloodthirsty mass. As Kristeva asserts:

Contrary to what enters the mouth and nourishes, what goes out of the body, out of its pores and openings, points to the infinitude of the body proper and gives rise to abjection... That is the price the body must pay if it is to become clean and proper (108).

The Sawyers, by implication, are relics of a lost period, displaced from the newer generation of Southerners already beginning to reap the rewards of multiculturalism and mechanization. This family is inevitable conclusion to the march of progress, expelled from the rest of the nation in order to cleanse it of its impurities. They are, as Kristeva suggests, a necessary evil, the price a society pays in order to be able to consider itself 'modern' or 'civilized'.

What was consumed and expelled by this process of modernization now threatens to consume and expel those that have benefitted. This obsession with industry shows through in the film's soundscape, with the drone of engines, generators, and chainsaws assaulting the audiences' senses and increasing their anxiety. This is, of course, ironic in that the family uses the tropes of industry to take revenge for the loss of their jobs to it. A disregard for human life is central to this irony—man is just another animal to them and throughout the film we see the protagonists put up on meat hooks like cattle, their bones used to fashion crude furniture, their skin making the mask that Leatherface wears. If *Deliverance* represents the landscape that rapes you back, then the Sawyers of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* are the animals that eat you back. In the end, however, there is no repressing the Sawyers again: they are loose. While Sally, the only survivor of the film escapes, cackling with glee as a truck drives her out of sight of Leatherface, we are met with the feeling that we have only escaped the horror for a moment. While the Sawyers are still alive, we cannot escape the creeping dread that we may see them again (and we did: five

more times). As such, the monstrosity of the Southern degeneracy can never be defeated, only outlived.

V. Conclusion: Southscapes and White Degeneracy

If we step back for a moment, we can see the ways in which these films are connected to one another through the strands of signification stretching back from even before the civil rights movement. *Two Thousand Maniacs*, as a response to nations long held obsession with the Civil War, points out the ways in which the war gained new meaning in the hands of segregationist forces fighting against protesters. The images of these counter protesters, as illuminated in the pages of *Life* or on the television screens of American households, fed into previously held notions of Southern backwardness. However it is the volume of these photographs and clips that truly began to breathe life into the image of the degenerate Southerner. As Combs puts it, “What cinema offers that eugenic fields studies could not is the image of poor whites moving or being in their bodies. Moving images commit these bodies to narrative form” (115). By giving life to an image that the audience has of the poor, ignorant, benighted Southerner, film allowed that Southerner to be dealt with in a very controlled fashion without need for actual violence. *Two Thousand Maniacs* functions as an ideal example of this, and something of a prototype for the images that would follow. The horror film as a whole, in fact, lends itself to the discussion of fears about what Southern white racism means for the nation as a whole. In a situation as transparent as *Maniacs*, we see the fear that the sectionalism and conflict that spawned the Civil War are still alive and well in the hollows and forgotten small towns of the Southern United States, and that intrusion on these spaces by outsiders threatens to disturb the tenuous balance of American liberty.

The same can be said for the gap-toothed, inbred hillbillies of *Deliverance*. In the same way that the past seems to spring up from the swamps of the South Carolina Lowcountry in *Two Thousand Maniacs*, these hillbillies live in a state of retrograde. Their lives, possessions, and views seem stagnated in the 1930s. These filmmakers situate the South as a place outside of time and outside of the rest of the nation. By doing so they alleviate the problem of identifying the issues of ignorance and racism as national problems and are able to write them off onto an abject place. Once again, the Southerner is situated as closely tied to the landscape, subsisting off of the forest and the river, connected inexorably to a place that is soon to die off, in favor of a new world, built for the urban, multicultural landscape. In this case, it is a river and a town that are to be flooded in order to provide the city with power and the dwellers of the city a place to build a home where they can go to ‘reconnect’ with their rural/naturalistic roots. As Allison Graham so astutely put it: “...*Deliverance* entered popular consciousness as a cautionary tale of the unrepressed savagery awaiting civilized white men just off the road in the southern wilderness” (182). The American public’s comfort with this idea—especially considering the positioning of the films main characters as Southerners—shows a willingness to move beyond the trials and tribulations of the civil rights movement and position the nation, including an urbanized section of the South, as civilized. The disappearing natural world of *Deliverance* is analogous to the disappearing backwardness of its inhabitants. Conceivably, the townsfolk and wild men of *Deliverance* will relocate to a more ‘civilized’ section of the region and in doing so become civilized themselves, or else retreat farther into the wilderness and take an even more marginalized place in the American mind.

In many ways, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* functions as the answer to what happened after the building of the dam in *Deliverance*. The impending ‘displacement’ of the river being

dammed becomes the ‘displaced’ family fired from a slaughterhouse. The semiotic shorthand is the same: a gap between the teeth, thinning hair, a grotesque sense of humor, and animalistic behavior. Once again, we see the formulation of Southern white degenerates as cannibalistic: the only major change has been that while the Confederate ghosts of *Two Thousand Maniacs* couch their monstrosity in the guise of Southern gentility, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*’s murderous cannibals wear theirs on their sleeve. In many ways we can see this as the grand legacy of civil rights. The rose-colored memory of the Old South has been torn away by the faces of vitriolic segregationists and replaced with a snarling, unwashed primitive.

Considering this congruity, we can see these films as three parts of a contiguous whole, reminding viewers again and again that what you bury will inevitably rise to the surface, what is repressed must always return. The obfuscation of racial oppression in the Jim Crow South and the prevalence of the Lost Cause created a mental schism that has haunted the nation. Nowhere is this more obvious in the horror film, which is based on the direct engagement of our fears and anxieties about our personal and national identity. Horror films can speak to our basest instincts, reveal things that we thought we had hidden away—under our bed, in our closet, or in the deepest wilderness—and allow us the opportunity to engage with it in a safe space that is free from real world consequence. The social strife of the 1950s and 60s combined with the dissolution of the Motion Picture Code in the mid-50s, advances in special effects, and the growing independent film market created a film culture that invited a new wave of authorship in horror film, giving filmmakers the ability to tell their stories their way. The boom in horror films from the mid-twentieth century to the present day gives a clear path from one film to another and allows us to see the ways in which moving pictures are shaped by the society that creates them, and then shape that society in turn. Perhaps this makes horror the most socially engaged genre in

cinema, or perhaps it is simply that it is the easiest to read what a culture is trying to say when they speak in hyperbole.

CHAPTER TWO

BLACK ZOMBIE/ WHITE ZOMBIE: RACE, HISTORY, SOVEREIGNTY, AND VOODOO IN AMERICAN HORROR

I. Introduction: Voodoo Power and Haiti in American Cinema

Zombies. Witch doctors. Cursed dolls. Mysterious jungle rites. These are the things that spring to mind when one hears the word Voodoo. The American imaginary is populated by these images—they represent something just outside of our worldview, a power that does not play by the same rules that we take as granted, something on the outside threatening to come in and, by doing so, undo civilization. Through their persistence, however, we can see our morbid fascination with our own destruction, a sort of cultural death wish. Perhaps we hope that we have been wrong all along: that there is magic in this world and it is not limited to our myths and legends. What is more, we fear that this magic may not like us, even resent us for not believing this entire time. Tropes like the zombie—the reanimated corpse—have taken on new life in an age where we have sought to explain it away: inventing viruses, writing them off as products of extraterrestrial “radiation”, all the while forgetting that the first zombie—the “zombi”—was black, a slave, summoned by the machinations of a sorcerer in order to do their bidding. Doing so amounts to a modern day elision of the spectre of slavery and reshapes the conversation towards discussions of things like consumerism, science, and government while displacing the idea from its Southern roots. In order to understand the true threat that the zombie represent for

the American horror film, particularly with regard to the South, we must look at the larger tradition of Voodoo in American cinema.

Even without consideration of this “zombie apocalypse” genre, American cinema has a long tradition of engagement with Voodoo. From the 1930s to the present day, Voodoo has been a way for filmmakers to discuss a broad spectrum of ideas and dichotomies that exist in the American imaginary. The urban/rural division, the conflict between science and religion, questions of race, US imperialism, and history—all of these come into the fore when considering the way that Voodoo has played out in the American cinematic tradition. From the early days of classical horror cinema with its notions of the threat of white racial subordination, to the 1970s desire for racial equality with its roots in the civil rights movement, to the modern day in which we see Voodoo playing on its old clichés in order to create more complex racial narratives.

In order to understand the way that these narratives construct the image of Voodoo, as well as the South, we must begin with Michel Foucault’s conceptualization of biopolitical power. To Foucault, ‘biopolitics’ is the establishment of a political entity through an understanding of its population: it is set of “processes—the birth rate, the mortality rate, longevity, and so on— together with a whole series of related economic and political problems... [which] become biopolitics’ first objects of knowledge and the targets it seeks to control” (243). Essentially, in order for a political force to form a notion of identity, of order within its population, it first needs to define its parameters, determine its scope by mapping that population’s status. “It can... be said that the production of the biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power” (Agamben 6). At the edge of these parameters lies what Agamben calls ‘bare life.’ Bare life, according to Agamben, is that which is “situated at the margins of political order” (9). As we have seen in the previous chapter, the ‘South’ (in this case, the Voodoo cultures in Louisiana and

Haiti) provides the American imaginary a place for that bare life to be examined. In the films discussed in this chapter, the Southern space is a rural one, marked by its distance (both literal and metaphorical) from the established social norms of urban society. Voodoo, with its roots in slavery, African displacement, and the plantation is an ideal signifier for that which society can no longer control—it defies virtually all conventional notions of order: scientific (since it offers a reality where magic exists), national (since it traverses the borders of the US and Haiti, as well as the space between North America and Africa), and racial/cultural (blurring the lines between white and black, European and African).

This idea of “sovereign power” manifests itself in the form of cities: particularly New Orleans, Louisiana and Port-au-Prince, Haiti. These locations represent the central aspect of sovereign power and as such—for these films—they represent safety: a place where the threat of Voodoo and its associated magic has no power. Yet, ironically they are also the source of Voodoo: the place where the initial act of cultural contact occurred during the African slave trade. Even now, urban areas represent locations of global exchange, in which a wide variety of cultures come together and participate in a trade—both on economic and cultural levels—in order to create a new, synthesized society from the old. In many ways, this suggests a notable shift in the way that we view regions in the United States. As Vasquez and Marquardt have suggested in their book *Globalizing the Sacred*, cities offer a new paradigm with which to evaluate place:

Rather than a system of nations divided according to core, semi-periphery, and periphery, we are witnessing the emergence of interlinked global urban centers offering the infrastructure and... resources to coordinate and control the spatial dispersal produced by flexible accumulation (Marquardt and Vasquez 45).

In short, with a world that has become increasingly focused on urban rather than national identification we can see how the conflict between a secular, urban worldview and a

marginalized, religious rural population becomes paramount to considerations of horror and Voodoo. In the South, this conflict ties back to the plantation and agrarian society, and their centrality to the regions construction in the American mind.

Voodoo itself is a byproduct of the plantation, the result of the transatlantic slave trade bringing untold numbers of Africans to places like Haiti and United States, where their religions—made monolithic by undiscerning slave owners—were mixed with the iconography and cosmology of western Christianity. In Haiti, the result was a synthesis of Catholicism with the Yoruba and Dahomean traditions (vodun) of Africa: Voodoo. In the centuries that followed the first African slaves arrival on the island, Haiti would play a major role in the American imagination. The revolution of 1791 and the ensuing diaspora of white slave owners fleeing the retribution of their former servants would mark the island as something of a warning for slaveholders on the mainland. As Matthew Guterl has noted, “The twin ghouls of Haiti and Jamaica suggested that the near future of the region would likely be violent and traumatic and that the distant future would be hellish” (80). Following the rebellion, Americans latched onto Haiti as a signifier of the bloody consequences of allowing African slaves to take control of the country, and further proof—in their mind—the inherent barbarism of the race. In the 20th century, Haiti would take on a new identity as a site of imperial occupation by the United States, with the American military occupying the country between the years 1915 and 1934. (Dash xiii-xv) During this time, W.B. Seabrook would publish *The Magic Island*, one of the quintessential Voodoo studies. As a prominent American living in Haiti during the occupation, Seabrook insinuated himself into the islands underground Voodoo practices (the religion was outlawed at the time and had thus retreated to the rural parts of the island away from colonial control) and result is a mixture of grotesque descriptions of sacrifices and one of the original literary

depictions of the zombie. Works like Seabrook's establish a literary precedent for depictions of Haiti as a site of magic that threatens to unravel the national stability. As Michael Kreyling has noted, Haiti in narratives "...contains, or attempts to contain, an 'Other' whose existence in fact presents a host of fears, contaminations, and challenges to normative identities" (Kreyling 47%). In the 1930s, these narratives met with the developing medium of cinema in a number of ways. By playing on racist ideas of primitivism inherent in black societies, they gave visual articulation to white supremacist ideologies. Over the course of the 20th century, the "Otherness" that Kreyling speaks of would shift along with the predominant racial climate in the nation, reshaping the role that Haiti and its products (like Voodoo) would play in the nation's media and culture.

Voodoo is the perfect device by which to examine this shift in that it provided a vast array of new topics that represented threats to an established hierarchy. Witch doctors and zombies, instead of springing from some remote island or European castle, are situated on the margins of the audience's own society—right at the borders of our world, implying that the threat is not simply present, but looming. What is more, Voodoo practitioners are not simply rebelling against and threatening white society but *dominating* it, turning the reality of slavery and systematic oppression around on the oppressors. This chapter will examine the ways in which this idea has persisted over the past 80 years of cinematic history. With the 1932 film *White Zombie*, directed by Victor Halperin, we will see the abiding influence that W.B. Seabrook's *The Magic Island* has on the American construction of Voodoo, as well as the ways that American imperialist interests manifest themselves in the early period of cinema. What is more, *White Zombie's* concern with the defense of white feminine purity is an ideal example of the racial anxieties that classical Voodoo cinema often manifests. These anxieties will shift as

we move to Paul Maslansky's 1974 film *Sugar Hill*, a 'blaxploitation' film featuring an army of zombie slaves. Through this film, we shall see the ways in which the civil rights and black power movements caused a notable shift in representations of African Americans on the screen. With the growth of a lucrative black audience for films, as well as a national concern over the destruction of racism, we can see how the avenging zombies of *Sugar Hill*, become in many ways, the heroes of a world steeped in racism. 2005's *The Skeleton Key* reveals a synthesis of white anxiety and black rebellion, in order to show the ways that the sin of slavery is passed down from one generation to the next, in an inescapable cycle of oppression and retribution. Through these works, spanning practically the whole of American cinematic history, we see the ways that Voodoo's conceptualization has evolved from a signifier of threat, to a symbol of resistance, to an abiding cliché, self-consciously wrapped in its own popular conceptions.

II. Occupying the Nation and the Body: *White Zombie* and the Horror of Imperialist Anxiety

White Zombie exists at a crossroads of several different mindsets: incorporating political, historical, literary, and cinematic traditions. The story of young man and his wife-to-be (both white) who travel to Haiti where they meet a young plantation owner who seeks to steal the young woman, Madeline, by turning her into a zombie. To accomplish his nefarious scheme, he enlists the help of a local sorcerer, Murder Legendre, who is found on his sugar plantation, where he rules over an army of zombie slaves. Unsurprisingly, Legendre, seeking to possess Madeline for himself, betrays the planter. Already we can see the prominent themes of the genre appearing, as the couple venture deeper and deeper into a dark and ominous jungle where the film begins. Madeline and her fiancée, Neil, ride along a dark road in a carriage. There is the sense that in many ways they belong here, representing a privileged upper class that not only can afford the ride from the port to a manor house, but also have the need to be transported such great

distances. Neil tells her that it is a “cheerful introduction for you to *our* West Indies” (emphasis added) and further writes off the opening funeral rite that we witness. This sensibility of the West Indies as belonging to the white upper class is central to understanding the film, especially when one considers the historical backdrop of its production: that of the United States occupation of Haiti.

The film owes a great deal of its imagery and narrative to the culture of imperialism surrounding Haiti during the 1930s. The United States occupied Haiti in 1915 in order to prevent the Germans from seizing the island during World War I. As such, this period represents a watershed moment in the relationship between the two countries, one fraught with oppression and controversy that would only further enhance the American anxiety for the small island. According to Robin Means Coleman, “The US’ occupation... took the form of a dictatorship marked by an extreme violence in which all forms of political dissent met with enormous bloodshed” (Means Coleman 49). The displacement of a states' sovereign powers in favor of another's serves to establish the complex interplay of societies that we see in *White Zombie*. Haiti, for the original audiences of the film, would have represented a site at the same time inside and outside of the United States. In the film itself, Haiti is depicted as a nation with a dual identity: on one hand “Americanized” Port-au-Prince and on the other the violent, threateningly bare existence of rural Haiti marked by plantations as conduits by which imperialist power was transcribed. In such a system, we can see how the more underground practice of Voodoo would have come to represent a threat to order. In many ways, this conforms to the idea of “bare life” put forward by Giorgio Agamben: “Bare life remains included in politics in the form of exception, that is, as something that is included solely through exclusion” (11). Haiti functions as both a part of the nation (being that it is controlled by the United States),

yet on the very edge of American politics. This division is what imbues *White Zombie* with terror, yet that terror carries with it cultural preconceptions about Voodoo that are overtly informed by a work that is literary in nature. In 1929 William Seabrook publishes *The Magic Island*; his expansive study of the practices of Voodoo, which he performed while living in Haiti. Seabrook's account, while filled with underlying racial prejudices, gruesome accounts of blood rituals, and subjective observations of native life has become one of the more influential studies of Voodoo in history. Seabrook's travelogue (considered by many to be responsible for the introduction of the zombie to popular conceptions) would find its way into many films in the next century, but perhaps the most obvious of these came three years after its publication: 1932's *White Zombie*.

The film also draws upon the aesthetic qualities of another film of its time: Tod Browning's 1931 adaptation of *Dracula*. In *White Zombie* Bela Lugosi, at the height of his career, portrays Murder Legendre—a generically European racial other (Lugosi himself was Hungarian)—and in both films his character seeks to subvert established western power structures by enchanting and virtually kidnapping a virginal white woman. In both cases, the central locus of power for the main villain is a gothic-style castle—effectively combining the gothic horror genre with the Voodoo film. This synthesis allows a relatively undeveloped film cycle (the Voodoo film) to draw on the artistic and aesthetic roots that brought it to this point. If we consider the opening sequence of *Dracula*, as the estate attorney Renfield enters into a small village in Transylvania, we can see the ways that both films are engaging with a notion of isolated, backward spaces populated by superstitious locals and visited by established middle and upper class whites. By taking this older narrative—an artifact of the British gothic tradition—

and transposing current cultural interests onto it, the filmmakers create a token-ly ‘American’ version of the more Euro-centric *Dracula*.

While Lugosi’s casting is certainly tied to his success as Dracula, the imagery surrounding his character, and *White Zombie*’s conception of the zombie, are lifted directly out of Seabrook’s book. A chapter in *The Magic Island* entitled “...Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields” tells the story of Seabrook’s encounter with several workers purported to be zombies as they toiled in a local sugar factory. An image found on page 99 of the book reveals a direct graphical match between the two works. A line of zombies marches against the sky overseen by what appears to be a version of Baron Samedi (in Voodoo traditions, the keeper of the dead and guardian of graveyards) who is dressed in garb that is directly reminiscent of Legendre’s costume. Further, Seabrook’s description of the zombies carries with it a certain level of historical gravitas: “... there was something about them unnatural and strange. They were plodding like brutes, like automatons” (101). This dehumanization of black bodies is central to the film’s notion of the zombie: workers, devoid of rest, devoid of notions of liberty and social mobility. They are the ideal slaves. As Daniel Cohen puts it: “...the zombie is sort of the slave’s nightmare. For the slave the only hope of release is through death and the possible promise of a blissful afterlife” (60). The sequences inside of Legendre’s sugar mill might as well have been from a documentary of the industry, with black faces laboring, deprived of life and souls, denied the rights of the living. These ‘creatures’ are the perfect allegory for the subjugation of not simply Haitian peoples under US occupation, but for deeper American concerns regarding slavery. Kyle Bishop, in his work on the film, has noted similarly:

The creation and (mis)use of zombies is the perfect realization of the imperialist hegemonic model: those in power (or rather, those who have power, like the Voodoo priest) can enslave and conquer others; those “others” literally lose their language as well as their autonomy—they are the ultimate iteration of the

slave (147).

This loss of identity becomes apparent in a scene in which two of Legendre's maids are discussing the zombie Madeline: "They never remember anything when they're like that... The past is cut off." The taking of bodies, the destruction of original culture and language, and dehumanization are simply an echo of the much less magically oriented Atlantic slave trade. The irony is that the aspects African culture managed to persist from that practice is now being used to reiterate it.

The scene in which Legendre takes Madeline from the cemetery where she is interred reveals a great deal about his own personal history as well as his relationship with the established power structures of the island. As he leads the plantation owner Beaumont into the graveyard, the young man spies a group of zombies standing beside Madeline's tomb. These zombies are Legendre's inner circle, and they each represent a different event in his rise to the position that he currently holds. The Witch doctor who trained him, a local man of considerable wealth, a former Minister of the Interior, and the governmental high executioner are just a few of the half dozen zombies which Legendre keeps close. They represent the sovereign biopowers of Haiti—imperial, economic, spiritual—and their control by Legendre signifies the threat that Voodoo poses to the structures of society. In many ways it could even be seen as echoing the displaced power of the Haitian government during the US occupation, but it is obvious that his position compared to Beaumont is that of a racial other, thereby undermining the possibility of his being a stand-in for American imperial control. Instead, Legendre has established his own personal kingdom; one that he admits is constantly on the brink of collapse. He openly tells Beaumont that if these zombies were to ever regain their souls, "they would tear me to pieces. But that, my

friend, shall never be." Once again, we see Legendre playing the role of the slave master, secure in his power, but aware of the danger that an unleashed oppressed population poses.

The film itself isn't interested in liberating these enslaved beings; they are simply the product of one man's desire to control all that he sees. The true threat is that a white body (particularly a woman's body) might be subjected to the same control. While Legendre is figured as racial other, black agency is nowhere in the film's narrative, even to the point that Legendre is not native, but rather a European outsider who has mastered the local practice of Voodoo. However, it is important that while he is not a member of the black lower class he is certainly figured in society as not white. As he turns the plantation owner Beaumont into a zombie, he reminds him: "You refused to shake my hand once." Legendre's power is based in the need for retribution against those powers that would seek to exclude him. In this we can see American imperial concerns of outside forces (as mentioned, the Germans in WWI) coming to threaten US sovereignty. As Robin Means Coleman puts it, "The real horror of the film... is the threat made against a White woman... In the upside down world of Haiti, white men can become evil Voodoo practitioners... and powerful whites can be turned into slaves" (52).

Giorgio Agamben's theories of sovereign power and bare life's role in the construction of society are spread throughout the film's narrative. The film begins with the leaving of western society behind. We never see Port-au-Prince, where Madeline and Neil leave from, and rather our entire attention is focused in the marginal rural landscape. While Port-au-Prince is never shown, its existence is strongly felt. The powers of society are present, organizing and constructing the social milieu of the film: Beaumont is obviously a person of some power, derived from the government, yet exempt—because of his distance—from the worries of oversight; while a local priest, Dr. Bruner, is a representative of the Church, and international

organization, yet his understanding of doctrine is complicated by his knowledge of local practices. It is Dr. Bruner's belief in zombies that allows the Neil the opportunity to believe as well. In a scene lifted directly out of Seabrook, the doctor shows Neil a excerpt from the Haitian code of law:

Article 249. Also shall be qualified as attempted murder the employment of substances which, without causing actual death, produce a lethargic coma more or less prolonged (Seabrook 103).

By introducing this fact into the narrative, the filmmakers do two things. Firstly, they legitimize the story (since something cannot exist if the government does not recognize it). Secondly, they add to the horror of the story, providing evidence of the zombie's existence (though it may be tenuous at best). The existence of this law presupposes the reality of the zombie, providing sanction in the eyes of the law, and therefore in the eyes of the narrative.

White Zombie represents a landmark in horror cinema. As a nuanced rumination on the results of imperial occupation, as well as the fears that the occupied could turn around and become the occupiers, *White Zombie* situates itself strongly in its historical moment. A 'reap what you sow' mentality abounds in the film, suggesting introspection on the part of American audiences currently engaged in an imperial act. Even in that, however, the film relies on the use of racial prejudice and an obsession with the fragility of white womanhood in the face of native and minority populations. In many ways, it is the heir to the throne of *The Birth of a Nation*, showing the ever-present threat that a racially complex society represents. Voodoo is central to this construction. It is the weapon by which white society will be undermined and destroyed and—more importantly—we are meant to fear this. The next decades would see the Second World War, the beginnings of the Cold War, the civil rights movement, the black power movement, and with them a more complex conception of what it meant to be an "American".

No longer could American society solely identify itself as “white”—a much more complex definition would arise and with it a new role for the Voodoo practitioner: that of racial avenger.

III. Taking It Back: *Sugar Hill* and the Race Revenge Film

Voodoo would again appear in the Southern Horror film in the 1970s, after the civil rights movement had effectively changed the cultural landscape of the United States. However, what is notable is that it no longer carries with it the monstrous underlying fear that this will mean a destruction of the status quo. 1974’s *Sugar Hill* is a film that functions in many ways as a break with the established racial order that we saw in *White Zombie*. The film, which takes its name from its main character but is also a reference to a prominent African American neighborhood in Harlem, is situated firmly in the tradition of blaxploitation cinema. These were films, often made by white filmmakers, but produced and marketed for urban black audiences. While they often included racial stereotypes such as black dialect and stock characters like gangsters and pimps, Robin Means Coleman defines it as

...an era of Black film offerings which drew their inspiration from black power ideologies while presenting themes of empowerment, self-sufficiency (though not always through legal means) and consciousness-raising (Means Coleman 120).

With this in mind, we can begin to see *Sugar Hill* as a Voodoo film made in order to reposition Voodoo in the context of black power, and the undermining of white supremacy as a positive rather than a negative as it was in *White Zombie*.

The film takes place in New Orleans and tells the story of Sugar, whose boyfriend is attacked and killed by a local group of white mobsters who are looking to extort money from him for his nightclub. Sugar, distraught and demanding revenge, seeks out the help of a local Voodoo queen, Mama Maitresse, who uses her powers to summon Baron Samedi to them. In exchange for her immortal soul, Samedi agrees to help Sugar take revenge. He raises for her an

army of the undead—corpses of slaves lost during a yellow fever outbreak and buried in the swamps of Louisiana. The rest of the film made up of a series of macabre deaths of the white mobsters at the hands of the zombies, Sugar, and Samedi. Again, we see the film engaging with the rural space as the site of Voodoo power. Mama Maitresse's mansion is set as the passage into this bare, swampy world, removed from the New Orleans cityscape. As in *White Zombie*, characters must leave the city, leave the confines of the ordered world and venture into the wilderness in order to encounter Voodoo and use its power. However, it is also important to note that *Sugar Hill* represents the invasion of this rural landscape into the urban. The zombie horde, having been buried and hidden in the swamps come into the city in order to help Sugar exact her revenge. However, while Sugar does not ascribe to the established legal structure of the city, this does not negate the legal system from having some role in the film. Her former lover, a local detective name Valentine, pursues Sugar. With the white power structure too wrapped up ignoring what are apparently a series of gangland murders, it is up to a African American man to solve the mystery. In doing so, the filmmakers make the story one of purely black justice—both through vigilantism and through established legal means

Unfortunately for Valentine, Sugar exists outside of this legal framework; her powers and her position put her beyond his jurisdiction. Her actions have the will of the divine behind them, as represented by Baron Samedi himself. In many ways, Sugar represents what Giorgio Agamben calls 'homo sacer': a term that has its roots in Roman law in which a man convicted of a crime would have a ban placed on his sacrifice to the gods, though not on his murder because his soul was in the hands of the gods. Put simply, Valentine cannot catch Sugar because she is already possessed by the gods, and is thereby outside of the prevue of sovereign power, destined for higher judgment. (Agamben 72-73) This would seem to be suggested by Sugar's surrender

of her immortal soul to Samedi in exchange for his help. This is, of course, complicated by the fact that Sugar is not taken by Samedi at the end, but rather exchanges her body for that of Celeste, the lead mobsters white girlfriend. Means Coleman sees this as a pointed moment on the filmmakers part: “The acceptance of the White woman by Samedi... is likely to be read as political, the apropos punishment for a ‘protected’ White woman.” (140) In the end, Sugar’s victory is righteous, and her trade is accepted by Samedi as a slight against all of the previous white female figures that were protected in exchange for black suffering. Sugar has succeeded where established power has failed, and by operating outside the law she has affirmed its existence.

Perhaps one of *Sugar Hill*'s most notable aspects is that it very much situates itself as a showing Southern African American urban community with a rich history and a connection to its roots. The opening sequence appears to be in a jungle setting but is later revealed to be a posh urban nightclub with a Caribbean theme—a reclaimed space made to connote the images of a past rooted in slavery, yet reclaimed generations later. The African American communities of *Sugar Hill* carry with them all of the traditions and historical connections to the black (particularly New Orleans) Southern experience. As mentioned, the zombies featured in the film are the bodies of dead slaves, who perished during an epidemic and then were buried informally in the swamps surrounding the city. They rise out of the mud like grotesque orchids: arms manacled, eyes cloudy, skin pale but obviously black. They are revenants of historical suffering. The Biblical adage “You reap what you sow.” becomes literal here—these zombies are like seeds that have been planted, and the sins that created them take root until they will no longer be obscured any longer, so they sprout up from the ground to take their revenge. The film’s engagement with slavery is quite expansive, these zombies/slaves are not so much controlled by

Sugar (which would make her a slave master) but rather function as her allies, she merely directs their anger towards where it will be most helpful. In doing so the film becomes the enacting of the age-old white anxieties about the threat that Haiti posed to Southern white power. Voodoo from Haiti becomes the empowering factor that allows for a successful slave rebellion against white oppression—albeit some hundred years too late. Certainly, we can see how the mobsters that Sugar targets become representatives of white institutionalized oppression through their characterization.

While the film focuses on a largely liberated, powerful, black middle class (affluent night clubs, high-ranking law enforcement officers) it is juxtaposed to a white mob that represents a reiteration of the plantation hierarchy. The don of this syndicate, Morgan, is the planter ideal—a well-off, white businessman who makes his living exploiting African Americans. He even has what is essentially a black manservant in Fabulous, the “token” black member of his gang. In one notable scene Fabulous sits shining Morgan’s shoes, to which Morgan says: “Oh come on Fabulous you can do better than that. We’ll make an honest negro out of you yet.” Most of Morgan’s characterization, and that of his henchmen, is spent situating him a virulent racist whose sole desire is to control and dominate those around him. Sugar’s rebellion against him is in essence the final unraveling of this racist white power structure.

Sugar Hill is important because not only does it undo the seemingly inescapable construction of the ‘black race monster’ into a heroic figure, it sets the stage for new tone of liberation and empowerment in the Voodoo cinema that followed. Films like *Angel Heart* (1987) and *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988) would open the discussion to a much more complex construction of Voodoo as both a positive and a negative force in both Haitian and American societies. Voodoo practitioners would become something of a mixed bag, with their

portrayals based more on their motives than their race. *Sugar Hill* could be seen as a prototype for all of this—the retaking of the Voodoo religion for the black community and using this image that has been used to terrify white audiences in ages past as a tool to galvanize black ones, and in doing so hopefully incorporate a white viewership that seeks an end to racial demagoguery. After the 1990s, we can see a desire to move beyond the racial dichotomies of the past to a more inclusive, complex racial image of America: one living in terror not of race, but of *the past* and the abiding *influence* of racism and slavery that is obscured in many ways by modern media.

IV. Papa Justified: The Past as Monster in *The Skeleton Key*

The Skeleton Key tells the story of Caroline Ellis, a hospice nurse in New Orleans who takes a job in the remote parish of Terrebonne (“Good Earth”) taking care of the ailing Ben Devereaux, who has been rendered nonresponsive by a series of strokes. She ignores the warnings of her friend Jill (an African American) that Terrebonne is “the freaking swamps” and that “they have gators in the swamp, and guys missing teeth” and journeys forth into the dark wilderness in search of a job in which she can have some level of autonomy (“my way” is her refrain). What Caroline finds there is “hoodoo”: a distinct branch from Voodoo dealing specifically with magic. Albert Raboteaux defines hoodoo as “a system of magic, divination, and herbalism widespread among the slaves” (Raboteaux 80). The journey from New Orleans sets the stage for the film’s general ambiance. The swamp of Terrebonne is a terrifying place, and Caroline is more and more removed from her safe life in New Orleans as she ventures out. The imagery of the place is devastated, post-apocalyptic in tone: at one point, Caroline sees a pair of locals—a blind white woman and a young black girl—pushing a baby stroller that is filled with groceries down the highway. Such images are not uncommon in the film. Backwoods

Louisiana takes on the mantle of the South as “decayed” or “rotten”. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Caroline’s destination: the Devereaux mansion.

The house itself recalls what was perhaps once the former grandeur of places like Twelve Oaks or Tara but has been left to rot and decay for decades and now stands as a monument to a way of life lost to modernity. All of this comes to the fore as Caroline meets Violet, Ben Devereaux’s wife, and her handsome lawyer, Luke Marshall. Violet is immediately suspicious of Caroline, complaining, “She’s not from around here! She’s not going to understand my house!” This is further complicated when Caroline admits that she isn’t even from the South, but from Hoboken, New Jersey. Caroline’s position in this case is an interesting one. In the urban landscape of New Orleans, she is accepted, assimilated into a new South, with racial equality and modern sensibilities, whereas in Terrebonne (“only an hour away” from New Orleans) she is a true outsider. To return to Agamben, we might see this as Caroline becoming separated from the biopolitics of New Orleans (the deathways that she encountered at the hospice and found impersonal and dehumanizing) and attempting to adapt on to a life on the ‘bare’ margins of society. Furthermore, what Caroline encounters on this margin is not simply Voodoo and alien religious beliefs, but history itself. The world of New Orleans is ahistorical, her friend Jill, while African American, is not initiated into the folkways of the region (her only connection to what the film refers to as “hoodoo” is familial), nor does she wish to be. Conversely, Violet Devereaux is often referred to as being part of the “Old South”, as further proven by the films climax.

Upon moving into the house, Caroline discovers a few distressing points: there are no mirrors, there is an attic that she cannot access using the skeleton key that was given to her by Violet, and Ben’s affliction seems to be the product of a curse laid on the house by two servants

who were employed there at the turn of the century. The house's former master abused these servants, Mama Cecile and Papa Justify, until one night that they were caught trying to teach the master's children a spell and the two servants were lynched. The fear of the master was that their beliefs and their magic would infect and taint his children's minds, unraveling the 'purity' of his white world. The story of this atrocity, of the reality of racial violence that abounded in the South at the turn of the century, becomes the true horror of the film. The curse laid of the house is symbolic of the curse placed on the South by the vengeful spirits of the dead. Unlike *Sugar Hill*, we cannot see a need for vengeance, since the realities of racism and racialized violence are so far removed from the world that Caroline and Jill live in. Its spectre, of course, is still there, supposedly staring back at them through the mirrors that Violet has removed from the house. The power of Voodoo in this case is in belief; if one believes in magic then one can be affected by it. Curses only work if the belief is there. Caroline comes to suspect that Ben's affliction is the because of his belief in it, and in doing so she comes to believe in the power of magic herself. Her journey from a young woman training to be a nurse to the type of person who visits root workers is the story of her separation from the normalizing power of the city and complete immersion of the bare life of Terrebonne parish.

All throughout the film, the city represents safety for Caroline. Terrifying events at the house are punctuated by her continual return to her friends and New Orleans. As we follow her into the world of Voodoo and hoodoo, however, the city takes on a more and more monstrous aspect. The hoodoo underbelly of New Orleans comes to life through a root shop located inside of a Laundromat. The peaceful façade of the city displaces the dark truths behind it. As she becomes more separated from the city and more a part of the world of Terrebonne, her safety is more and more in question. This becomes obvious in her relationship with Luke Marshall,

whom she comes to rely on for advice and counsel. His place as a white man who practices law—the very representative of the reliability of American democracy and sovereignty—is undermined when she discovers that he is a very real and tangible threat, working to curse her all along. The body that was the lawyer Luke Marshall is actually inhabited by the spirit of Papa Justify. This is also the exact moment in the film when she comes to believe, finally and completely, in the power of Voodoo.

The twist comes when we discover that bringing Caroline to this point was the plan all along. The ritual that Justify and Cecile were performing was not simply teaching the children how to practice hoodoo, but transferring their spirits into the bodies of the children so that when their old bodies were lynched, their minds could live on. Just as it was in *White Zombie*, we see the threat appearing as the control of white bodies by racial others: spiritual miscegenation. Yet here it is not the result of contemporary racial conflict. The modern world is shown being fairly peaceful, whites and blacks interacting on an equal playing field, but the threat comes from the abiding influence of racial inequality; obscured, buried on the edge of civilization, but still very much alive. As such, Caroline's journey towards belief requires her to take the same journey as many characters in Southern literature: she must uncover the history the region, of racial injustice. In doing so, in this case, she falls victim to it. The horror visited upon her is not simply the symbolic rape of the white woman, but the reiteration of racial injustice at the hands of those whom racial injustice was first visited upon. She is an innocent, but that will not save her from falling victim to the same violent theft of the body that slavery represents. Previous films have seen Voodoo as being the threat to racial superiority, or the cure to racial inequality; here the racial violence is the tragic reproduction of past sins. At the conclusion of the film, Mama Cecile, who has been inhabiting Violet this whole time, takes control of Caroline and

stares at herself in the mirror, saying to Luke/Justify, “I told you I wanted a black one this time.” At this moment, we see what could be construed as the racial reality of America. The myths of racial purity that were once espoused by films like *White Zombie* have fallen by the wayside, and every white body now contains black blood or a black soul.

V. Conclusion: Voodoo and the Repressed

In many ways, the history of Voodoo in American cinema mirrors the history of race relations in the United States. We begin in the early 20th century, with the construction of the violent race monster, a holdover from the days of slavery, when it was feared that an African rebellion would plunge the United States into anarchy, or—worse yet—build an African republic. Revolutions in Haiti and elsewhere created in the American slaveholders mind the very real possibility of one day being dominated by those who they had been dominating. As if in answer to these nightmares came Voodoo, and the idea of possession in a spiritual sense by a black soul. Indeed, most forms of Voodoo in popular culture lead back to this idea of foreign domination, that one cannot control oneself, and the inclusion of the racial aspect merely magnified the thought in the American mind.

The timing of books like *The Magic Island* with the development of classical monster cinema was serendipitous as it led to the formulation of a new trope in horror cinema. Voodoo became an American answer to the British literary monsters like those in *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. Because of this, *White Zombie* has become a classic—a fully articulated, fully American, expression racial fears and national anxieties of the 1930s. Yet it is Voodoo’s role after this that has been often glossed over in favor of more substantial studies of George A Romero’s *Dead* trilogy and other, similar zombie apocalypse films. The modern zombie genre has allowed Voodoo to be obscured, in some ways to its detriment. Films like *Sugar Hill*, the

Voodoo-noir *Angel Heart*, the cinematic adaptation of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, and *The Skeleton Key* reveal an abiding interest in not simply Haiti, but ideas about the occult in American culture. Even so, television series like *The X-Files* use images of Haitian refugees to further explore centuries-old fears of Caribbean tainting of American culture.

In the end, however, Voodoo offers another answer to the threat it once posed, the revelation of our similarities and elimination our differences. In films like *The Skeleton Key* and the television series *True Blood* we can see the ways that Voodoo is used for good, not simply the dangerous contamination of racial purity. An excellent example of this comes midway through *The Skeleton Key*, as Caroline visits a conjurer whose main concern is protecting the young girl. The main push of these films is this: it is not the practice itself that is inherently evil, but the practitioner. Voodoo films function for us a working through of national fears and anxieties about race specifically. As such, they have changed a great deal, and—inevitably—will continue to change as the national and international climate of race continues to evolve.

Voodoo always exists on the margins, though, even in the moments when it is shown in cities. As something outside looking in, threatening to unravel the normalizing power of biopolitics. It is a counter power to the sovereignty of American democracy. In doing so, it points out the inherent hypocrisy of the system—revealing and interacting with inequality. What this means has, of course, changed over time. The twentieth century represents a period in which American media looked towards the cultural experiences of the nation with a critical eye, causing the things that once scared us to be interrogated and, in some cases, become the things that would inevitably save us from ourselves because what we fear on the margins of society is what we hated in ourselves. Through examination of these sites of “bare life” we can see the things that have been expelled in order to build the world, and what has been forgotten in favor

of a homogenous view of society. More than anything, we see in Voodoo the twin spectres of institutionalized racism and slavery threatening to come back into our world with a vengeance. The repressed must always return, and it is up to us to determine how we face it.

CHAPTER THREE

BEYOND *DELIVERANCE*: SOUTHERN NATURE AS MONSTER IN THE AMERICAN HORROR FILM

I. Introduction: The South as Wilderness

We have already seen many of the ways that landscape and space plays a significant role in the construction of the horrific South. While this trope of ‘place’ (with all of its much-discussed vagueness and problems) is central to the idea of the South and its place in the American mind in general, it is especially important for horror. Horror derives much of its ambiance, tone, and suspense from the place that it is set in. Carol Clover, speaking of the slasher genre, points out that one of the central conventions of the genre is that of the “terrible place”: the monstrous house of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, the dream labyrinth of *Nightmare on Elm Street*, and the impenetrable forest of *Friday the 13th*. In many ways, the setting takes on the role of source for the horrific; it sets the audiences expectations, builds suspense, and upsets the order of existence. The setting of horror is the most important piece of the puzzle—it makes the terror believable. We’ve already seen several of the ways that this importance plays out in the Southern American horror film: the hellscape of the *Deliverance* river, the tropical wilderness of *White Zombie*, and the buried slave corpses of *Sugar Hill*. Yet these films all are constructed around the same conflict—man against man. They are iterations of racial and social conflicts that have played out throughout American history. There is, however, another major subgenre at

work in the construction of the Southern American horror cinema: that of the natural monstrosity, nature attacking man.

The South has long been imagined as largely unsettled, rural, backward. These stereotypes feed into the construction of the region as a frontier space—unconquered, unexplored, and wild. It is not my goal to examine the validity of these conceptions; certainly it is true that much of the region’s history has been defined by its rural aspects and its agrarian ideals. However, there is a point in which the conceptualization of the Southern wilderness becomes greater than the sum of its parts, and takes on a more mythical, symbolic persona than a factual one. For iterations of the horrific, the monstrous Southern landscape is often characterized as the swamp: an impassable wetland, overgrown, synonymous with decay. As Anthony Wilson points out in his study of the swamp in Southern culture, “More than any scientific definition, the swamps overwhelming burden of tropes has come to constitute its identity” (xv). Wilson’s study, both ecohistorical and literary, tracks the development of the swamp as a site of terror: from Dante’s descriptions of hell as a marsh, to Poe’s Gothic iterations of the swamp as symbol for the corruption of society, to its place as a sanctuary for escaped slaves where hunters could not reach them. All of these seem to link back to the swamp as an impassable place, unfit and unwelcome to human incursions. As Carter Soles puts it, “American fear of the wilderness predates the nineteenth century and is grounded in the ‘Puritan conceptions of wilderness’ which sees wild country as spiritually and physically dangerous...” (237). There are two sides to this coin, however: while the swamp is unwelcoming to outsiders, it is inevitably a sanctuary to plant and animal life, and historically a haven for the native peoples that were seen as threatening the European colonial way of life. With the growth of modernization in the

twentieth century, concerns about environmental impact, conservationism, and ecological studies would have a profound effect on the way that humanity viewed nature.

The 1970s, while still a volatile time for the racial and international conflicts, saw the growth of a mainstream environmental movement. Framed by many as “The Environmental Decade”, the 70s represents a shift in the conversation with regard to natural resources that included events like Earth Day (first celebrated in 1970) and the oil crisis early in 1973. As Carter Soles notes in his discussion of the role of the environment in 1970s slasher films,

Although this dramatic rise of public awareness of ecological issues was accompanied by ‘four crucial years’ of legislative activity in 1970-4... Nixon effectively attempted to re-appropriate and contain grassroots environmentalism, de-radicalizing it and separating environmental issues from broader race and class struggles in America (235-36).

This decade would prove to be a defining period for the conceptualization of the South in American horror film. *Deliverance* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (as well films like *The Hills Have Eyes*) were released in this period, with the role of the marginalized white degenerate as ‘racial other’ becoming more and more central. What Soles fails to note is that also during this period (and before) there was also a pronounced movement toward the use to the natural world as the actual embodiment of the horrific. While other films were trying to distance themselves from the “monster movie” genre as outdated and unfit for these modern times, some ran towards it. Soles uses Carol Clover’s concept of “urbanoia”, which he defines as “urban peoples’ fear of the rural and wilderness areas and their inhabitants” (237). While this concept works for films such as *Deliverance*, the underlying issue is much broader, connecting to the American notions of anxiety regarding Native Americans and that the natural world holds. We might begin to see how this anxiety functions if we consider the way that the natural world represents a threat of the organization that urban life.

In his study of the role that the sublime plays in ecological narratives, Lee Rozelle says, “interactions among living things, water, air, and substrate can exist outside of language and culture, that the landscape garden and the forest are not transposable” (2). This purely affective notion of the natural world as resisting the boundaries of definition and identification lends itself strongly to thinking of nature as a monstrous beast. Rozelle’s apt analysis that the confrontation with the natural world leads to a breakdown of identity and worldview offers us the opportunity to begin to see how the wilderness plays out in the viewing of film. These films use swampy wilderness as an affective space for the construction of terror. Through photography, the confrontation with the vast, inescapable world of untamed nature becomes a thing that viewer cannot grasp, and therefore can fill with anxieties about the world that they live in—fear of their own environmental impact, of the failures of Western science, or of the lasting effects of the historical violence—that may be lurking beyond the tree line. Considering photography’s ability to dislocate the viewer’s perspective, Wilson’s notion of the “swamp” as consisting of the tropes more so than any actual physical description takes on a deeper impact. The swamp, particularly the Southern swamp, contains the enduring national fear of the unknown, unclaimed parts of the American landscape.

In his analysis of *Deliverance*, Jhan Hochman delineated the role that forest played in the film as being threefold: ghetto (home to the under-classes of society), hell (for Dante), and site (in which rites of passage are enacted). While there is certainly an argument to be made for a purely ecological reading of *Deliverance* (and, indeed, many before have attempted it), let us instead take these three notions and begin to examine the way that they play out in other films. For the films discussed in this section, we will see the way that ecocritical and conservationist politics played out in the American horror genre through the end of the 1960s and the beginning

of the 1970s. More often than not, these representations of wild ecosystems will take the form of the “Dantean hell” of the “seventh circle that contains The Violent” (Hochman 77) and is represented by a black, grotesque forest. Similarly, these films show a forest (or a swamp) that is hellish. In this case, the instead of becoming a repository for man’s violent nature, nature itself becomes an counter expression of that violence, revenging itself on the men and women who seek to defile or control it.

As we saw in *Deliverance*, the South became a stage for the ever-growing effects of industrialization and development. These factors, along with deforestation and pollution, eventually would take root in narratives that depict mankind’s destruction in the by the natural world. In these films, nature rises up and invades mans dominion, upsetting and undoing the status quo. Whether this takes the form of native curses, savage animals, or mutated creatures the result is always the same: man loses his place at the top of the food chain. Plants and animals become major threats to human (and thus capitalist) progress, and films sought to take advantage of this concept by telling stories that would be seen as having an ecological concern, but ultimately showing nature as monstrous and threatening. In doing so, these films serve two masters: the liberally minded filmmakers and the market. The horror film, as one of the most profitable genres available, becomes also a tool for liberal guilt about the vanishing wetland and the inevitable price we will pay for it (nature’s revenge). Put simply: the films are easily sold but still are allowed to retain a political message.

In order to investigate the myriad ways that South plays a role in the American natural horror film, the three films we will examine are *The Death Curse of Tartu* (1966, dir. William Greffe), *The Legend of Boggy Creek* (1972, dir. Charles B. Pierce), and *Frogs* (1972, dir. George McCowan). In each of these films, the main protagonists are attacked and (in most cases killed)

by creatures that represent a world out of control. While the source of this violence is invariably the forbidding, unconquered wilderness (usually a swamp or marsh), in each film it takes on a different form and function. In *Death Curse of Tartu*, nature is a way to connect to the lost history of Native American tribes, with popular notions about their close relationship with the landscape and archaic religious practices. The natural world in *The Legend of Boggy Creek* is an enigmatic landscape that is unable to be penetrated except by the most skilled outdoors men, but one that hides an enduring and terrifying American legend: Bigfoot. *Frogs*, as the name suggests, tells of murderous swamp amphibians in the Deep South that rise up against polluters who threaten their ecosystem. In each of these films, we see the landscape of the South constructed as untouched, lightly populated, and thereby the space where man and nature exist in a tenuous relationship that is at all times in danger of being thrown out of balance. The result is, for urban and suburban audiences, an image of the world just beyond the boundaries of civilization that is both awe-inspiring and terrible.

II. You Can Take the Indian Off of the Land, But You Can't Take Him Out of It: *Death Cruse of Tartu* and the Terror of Native Vengeance

1966's *The Death Curse of Tartu* can best be considered something of a precursor for the environmental films released in the 1970s. The plot of the film tells the story of a group of archeologists and students who venture into the Florida everglades in order to investigate an isolated Native American burial mound. Our first introduction to this comes in the form of a middle-aged white man named Sam Gunter arriving on this island in a canoe with his native guide. The guide, whose name is Billy, refuses to leave the canoe stating that the land is cursed, and that men who disturb it die. The archeologist discounts his concerns, calling them "myths" and comparing them to "witches and goblins"—examples of European folklore. This sequence sets the tone of the movie. Sam's hubris in the face of the guide's experiential knowledge is the

central sin that characters in the film commit. The Native American stereotype of a people more connected to the land, able to speak with it and control it, becomes the central concern of the film. By disregarding Billy's warnings, culled from not only his own experiences but the tales of his people, Sam repeats the sins of white Europeans that took the first steps towards Native American removal and the creation of the United States; his belief in man's dominion over nature leads to his death at the hands of the spirit of Tartu, a long-dead Native American witch doctor who has laid a curse on the island and in death has the power to shapeshift into whatever form he sees fit.

The rest of the film centers on the expedition that follows Sam into the Everglades made up of one of his colleagues and a detachment of oversexed research assistants. As their leader tries to unravel the mystery of Sam's disappearance, the students venture down to the shore to cavort with one another. This sequence is indicative of the film's chief audience: the camera is focused on the bikini-clad women's bodies as they gyrate to the music on the radio, and then later go swimming. Their sexual transgressions, despite the audience's lust, mark them for death at the hands of Tartu. A shark attacks and kills two of the students, which perplexes Ed, the archeologist. "Sharks don't live in fresh water," he says with as much gravity as he can muster. This shark, of course, is simply another form of Tartu, who proceeds to hunt the other members of the expedition down. Their only chance is to try to escape; unfortunately the remote nature of the island makes the journey impossible, and the only boy who attempts it is quickly lost in the surrounding wilderness. Here we see the landscape itself becoming man's chief enemy: refusing to be conquered, incapable of being circumvented, and inevitably swallowing up those who dare to try either.

Tartu's ability to change his shape allows him to exact his personal agency through the land. Tartu, as a representative of the native cultures that have been displaced in order to make room for the development of American society, stakes his claim to this last site power. This power, however, is inextricably linked to the land: his connection with it, and the Native American reverence for it. Tartu's very nature is tied to this idea of the unexplored wilderness as a place of ancient powers and curses. As David Ingram has noted in his discussion of the "myth of native purity": "The romanticization of the American Indian depends on a conceptualization of nature as benevolent, because the ideal of humanity living close to nature is unappealing if nature is a place of savagery and violence" (45). Tartu seems to be engaging with this dichotomy—by playing into the stereotype of Native Americans as pure and connected to land, yet also playing on fears of violent savagery dating back to pre-colonial days. Drawing on this concept, the filmmakers also employ a number of common fears of wildlife to serve their purposes. Snakes, alligators, panthers, and sharks are among the more ferocious animals that a mind can conjure up, even if they do not fit into the ecosystem of the Florida everglades. As a choice of the filmmaker's own imagination and not an expression of the Florida environment, their threat represents man's inevitable impotence in the face of the natural world. Tartu also controls the soundscapes of the island, with Native drums sounding throughout the film as an indicator of Tartu's presence. The oppressive nature of this repetitive drumming on the viewer further gives the sense of the swamp as swallowing one up. This creates what Rozelle might consider an "ecosublime moment": when mind is so inundated with the expansive nature of the swamp and its inescapable qualities, that the only response is awe and the dissolution of the self. The terror, therefore, becomes very tangible and real to the viewer, whose mind has been shaped

by the films aesthetic choices into feeling overwhelmed by the landscape, with its terrifying noises and beasts.

It is important to note that in the end the only thing that can kill Tartu and put an end to his curse *is nature*. The prophecy that Ed uncovers says that the “only thing that can silence Tartu is Mother Nature”. The finale of the film finds Ed and his wife being chased through the marsh by a fully corporeal version of Tartu (that is, he has taken a human form complete with stereotypical Native American face paint and loincloth). This shift to human form is what allows them to defeat Tartu, chasing them through the forest, the terror that was once signified by the spectral drumming shifts to a standard orchestral score. Tartu’s mystique, his true power, came from the ability for him to hide in plain sight, to blend in and control the forest. This justifies, in the films world, the idea that in actuality man is the weakest animal, with none of the adaptations that make surviving in the wilderness possible. As Ed and Tartu have their final row in a pit of quicksand, Tartu succumbs, and is sucked down into the mire. The image is of his body being fully absorbed into the earth, and in the process going through the stages from man, to skeletal mummy, to nothing. It was not until Tartu was in human form that such an end is possible. This image reveals the inevitable breakdown of humanity’s relationship with nature. Regardless of one’s place in the world, or power over it, in the end nature wins out. Nature represents death, a place beyond the world, one that swallows up the body as it decays. Tartu’s powers allowed him to fight this process, but inevitably it caught up with him.

Much of *The Death Curse of Tartu* can be seen as expressing a sort of “white terror” about the powers that primitive cultures possess that European civilization has lost access to. As Ed says towards the end of the film, there are “things exist on this planet that we have no answer to... true, we send our astronauts into space, but right here on our planet, there are still

hundreds of questions left unanswered.” Tartu is therefore a symbol for the rupture in knowledge that events like forced removal of native cultures have caused. If native magic can be used to change a man into an animal, what other terrible and awesome things could it do? As the first inhabitants of the continent, the North American landscape can be seen as belonging to them, effectively making the culture established by white Europeans who settled on the continent “unnatural”. There is a mentality, with a nation as young as the United States that there is still much about this “New World” that we do not understand or have yet to discover. Inside of this mindset lies the fear that what is out there in space beyond the borders is a dangerous power that is as ancient as the wilderness itself. *The Death Curse of Tartu* represents one such fear—that the cultures that existed on these lands before settlement understood and controlled in ways that have been lost to modern conceptions of the world.

III. Everything Old is New Again: *Frogs* and the Re-Appropriation of the Plantation

Frogs owes a great deal to Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds*. Directed by George McCowan in 1972, the story takes the conceit of *The Birds* (animals rising up against humans) and recasts the film with reptiles, amphibians, and arachnids, setting the backdrop as a generically Southern swamp. What is more, the film incorporates an explicit environmental message from its opening scenes. A great deal of time is spent throughout the film situating the narrative in its landscape. Long, drawn-out montages of the wilderness and its denizens occur over and over as the film plays out. Perhaps none of these are more noticeable than the opening credits of the film. The main character, Pickett Smith (already we begin to see references being made to the Old South and the Confederacy), canoes through this swampy, foreboding landscape taking photographs. His subject matter seems to be a mix of nature and the deplorable amount of pollution that we see in the swamp. Soda cans, discarded wrappers, and other general litter are juxtaposed to an

otherwise pristine natural environment. The film, however, does give the first hints of a growing threat including shots of snakes slithering through water and hanging from vines. Many of these animals are displayed in such a way that they are not noticeable at first glance, making their appearance all the more ominous, while others are shot at such close quarters that they appear gigantic and even more monstrous. The idea of animals as set pieces for jungle or wild locales is not a new idea, and they are to be expected when one is in such a place. These animals, however, because of their perceived gigantism and camouflage, take on an uncanny air to the audience. These ominous images do not faze the seasoned outdoorsman—as Pickett Smith appears to be in the opening of the film—does not expect the danger that is hiding in plain sight.

The quiet, pre-modern images of Smith's canoe are disrupted by the loud, raucous, modern image of a motorboat, driven by a young man with a beer in his hand. In his attempts to joyride around a lake, the driver upsets Smith's canoe, capsizing it and causing him to lose all of his film. The conflict between this simple canoe and the motorboat is virtually representative the conflict of the entire film: a heavy-handed metaphor for the conflict between natural and modern. The driver's name is Clint Crockett and he is a member of a wealthy family who keep a mansion on the lake. Inviting Pickett to join them as an apology, he takes him home to meet the rest of the family. On the Crockett family's private island, Smith meets their patriarch, Jason, who—bound to his wheelchair—exerts an almost despotic control over the comings and goings on his island estate. In many ways, Jason Crockett represents an attempt to critique capitalist wealth and its effect on the environment by equating it with the idea of the Old South plantation. The Crockett home, with its stately neoclassical columns and African American servant staff overtly calls to mind antebellum ideology. Placing such an obvious reference inside of an eco-disaster film such as *Frogs*, the filmmakers are clearly marking the two forces as being related. This

relationship is further proved by Jason Crockett's decorative choices, adorning the walls of his mansion with hunting trophies, symbolizing his dominance over the natural world. These trophies, however, are not the only way that this dominance manifests itself in the film. One of the family members is obsessed with catching and trapping butterflies, while others concern themselves with the cultivation of plants inside of a greenhouse. This desire to control, display, and destroy nature becomes the family's undoing. Coupled with the initial images of litter and pollution, these moments of disregard for the creatures of the world become the touchstone for the revenge plot that defines the film. When Pickett Smith arrives, frogs are beginning to overtake the island, and their guttural vocalizations are slowly driving the family mad. As the film goes on, these creatures (along with lizards, snakes, spiders, and even birds) start to kill off the members of the family through almost absurd methods. Nature, and the creatures living in it, will no longer be controlled or dictated by humanity, and—presenting a united front—seek to overthrow human civilization.

The apocalyptic weight of the film builds off of a coalition of animal life and plant life. At multiple points throughout the film, it is as if the trees and plants themselves are rising up against the Crockett family. At one point, a man is killed by a group of tarantulas after shooting himself in the leg. What is incredibly disconcerting is the fact that these tarantulas never actually appear except in close up. Probably owing the film's limited budget (or the actor's anxiety about being covered in spiders), the filmmakers choose to have the spiders "hiding" in a large mass of Spanish moss that falls on the crippled victim. The moss seems to take on a mind of its own in many ways, wrapping the victim into an inescapable coil of crawling nature. The spiders in this case are almost incidental, an idea inserted in order to provide an excuse for how the man actually dies; the true terror is the moss itself, and its suffocating properties. This is certainly not

the only example of a sentient wilderness working with the creatures in it to facilitate the deaths of their “oppressors”. At one point a group of reptiles in a greenhouse actively break bottles containing insecticide in order to produce noxious fumes to kill a member of the Crockett family. In doing so, the reptiles use the greenhouse—a cage of sorts for plants—in order to trap the man (the Crockett family’s obsession with containing nature becomes the thing that kills them). As absurd as some of these instances might be, they situate the film as an expression of biological imperatives of the planet itself. In many ways, we can see these animals and plants as actors in the Earth’s immune system, expelling a threatening contagion. The fact that these two sides of the natural world seem to be working in conjunction with one another suggests a consensus on their part regarding the effect that humanity has on the environment. In doing so, *Frogs* becomes something of a revolution against an oppressive force, a theme furthered by the choice of the South (with its history of racial oppression) as its setting.

In addition to working off of notions of the region as “undeveloped” or “wild”, *Frogs* also uses the South as a site where white patriarchy, which has grown old and stale, must be washed away in order to make room for a new world order. One of the key indicators of this is the way that Jason Crockett views nature and the people in his employ. As already noted, the house in *Frogs* resembles that of wealthy planters that audiences would already have been familiar with (think *Gone With the Wind*, or *Mandingo*). With this in mind, it is no great leap to ask where Jason Crockett’s crops are? Or where his money comes from? The film never bothers to explain such questions. Crockett is obviously wealthy, the product—most likely—of capitalist industry, probably oppression, and the rape of the land. This is further indicated by the walls of his home, which are adorned with the heads of animals that he has personally killed all over the world and his greenhouse is filled with exotic plants and animals. In many ways, these are

signifying replacements for a vast plantation. They indicate his almost obsessive desire to shape the world as he sees fit. Crockett's disability (he is confined to a wheelchair) does not lessen his need for dominance. His status as patriarch goes unquestioned until the end of the film, and his insistence on the keeping to the schedule of the days Fourth of July activities despite the murders of several of his family members shows a focus on the importance of tradition. This strain of traditionalism—with its connotation in conservatism (both social and racial)—situates him as firmly in world that is ruled by the desires of (white male) humanity.

Perhaps the most telling indicator of this conservatism is the role that African American characters take in the narrative. Charles and Maybelle, the Crockett family's black servants, have been with the family for generations and in many ways seem to suggest the enduring position of African Americans as a subjugated people in the American South. Placing them in this large white columned house explicitly places Jason Crockett as a bastion of white supremacist ideas. While his dialogue shies away from the use of any and all racial monikers for his servants, his attitude towards them is forceful and domineering. This servant class is juxtaposed to Bella, a freethinking African American model who is dating one of the Crockett brood. Her place as an outsider among the family is palpable, yet never explicitly stated to be because of her race, the dialogue in the film goes out of its way to not mention it, instead downplaying the idea that an interracial couple might be in violation of some taboo (the only reference to this is when her boyfriend Kenneth mentions that they have "shaken [Jason] up"). The racial theme of the film is there, however, in a short scene between Maybelle and Bella as they share a quiet moment in the dining room after dinner. Bella tells the housekeeper that Maybelle is her name too, and shares that she was "born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi". Maybelle responds with a warmth that suggests that their racial commonalities transcend their

class differences: “There’s hot coffee, and a friendly conversation in the kitchen... if you ever need it.” The role that race plays in the film can therefore best be seen as something of an “elephant in the room”, the thing that no one talks about. The only reference that it gets are when two characters, both of which acknowledge their place in the racial hierarchy of house, are alone together away from the social performances of class.

This is far from the end, however, as the racial aspect of the film rears its head towards the end, and becomes a central turning point in the film’s narrative. A long series of deaths and strange occurrences lead Pickett to announce the need for them to leave the island. Jason’s response—“I control these people, not you!”—shows his need to maintain his dominion over his house and property despite the danger. Bella is the first to pipe up, and Charles and Maybelle join her. Of course, Jason’s reaction is one of insult scolding his servants for “contradicting” him, demanding their “loyalty”, and accusing them of cowardice. Ultimately it is Bella who breaks the underlying tension that the audience has been living with the entire film: “Maybe you haven’t heard about it stuck out here in vacationland, but five score and seven years ago they just started letting people make up their own minds.” This cues a reenactment of emancipation, with the servants and Bella leaving the island. However, it should be noted that their departure only allows them to be killed by a horde of birds on the mainland (a not-so-subtle reference to the Alfred Hitchcock film). While they fail to achieve survival to go along with their freedom, we can see this moment of conflict as being inexorably tied to the whole of the film’s work, by paralleling and thus suggesting a larger connection between the horrors of slavery and the horrors of pollution and environmental catastrophe. In both cases, we have a group rebelling against a structure that seeks to control it, and in doing so destabilizing that structure.

There are many ways in which *Frogs* seems to equate the horrors of slavery and racism with the horrors of pollution. By situating the film in the South, the filmmakers are making an overt statement about the role that environmentalism plays in American life. As a standard-bearer for social and ecological progressivism, a (literally) blue-collar hero, Pickett Smith ventures into the swamp in order to take photographs of pollution and its effect on the natural world. In the end, however, he liberates the land and its people from the grasp of an aging dictator. He becomes a modern-day answer to the abolitionists of the 19th century. Unfortunately, his work does not guarantee that he will survive. By the end of the film, as he helps one of the Crockett daughters and two small children escape the island, there is little promise for the world outside. They trudge through the wilderness until they find a road and civilization. The entire time they pass empty houses, seemingly abandoned. The final scene of the film sees Pickett and the rest of the survivors picked up by a passing motorist and her son, who is incredibly excited to show them his new frog. This moment, in connection with previous allusions that the catastrophe may not be limited to the island, gives the film an apocalyptic tone. By implication, mankind will be purged from the world by nature, and what is more all of it will happen on the Independence Day. In many ways, *Frogs* serves as a warning to an American public facing modernity and industrialization on a massive scale. If the 1970s truly was “The Environmental Decade” then films like *Frogs* are an expression of what is to come if nothing is done to preserve the sanctity of the wilderness and its untouched splendor.

IV. Remembrances of Bigfoots (Bigfeet?) Past in *The Legend of Boggy Creek*

The Legend of Boggy Creek is in many ways a unique film. As something of a half-documentary, the film uses many tropes of the nature documentary, including footage of the wilds of southern Arkansas bottomlands, with soothing narration played over it telling of the

ecology and culture of the place. The opening title card of the film reads “THIS IS A TRUE STORY—Some of the people in this motion picture portray themselves—in many cases on actual locations”. Much of the film is spent selling this idea of an authentic Southern space, filled with characters either so eccentric or so folksy that a Hollywood screenwriter could not have invented them. Within the first few moments of the film, however, this pristine world of Fouke, Arkansas (the movie’s central location) is disturbed by the terrifying cry of an unseen beast. We see a small boy running, barefoot, through a vast field to a general store, where he tells the old men there (exactly the type of men you would imagine spending their afternoons in a small general store in Arkansas) that his mother has just seen a “wild man in the woods”. At this, the film is off and running, throwing away standard conventions of plot in favor of a documentary-esque narrative that recounts the anecdotes of rural Southern characters that have come into contact with a strange creature living in the swamps around Fouke.

When it comes to national legends, Bigfoot is perhaps the most enduring. Dating back as far as Native American traditions, witnesses have reported seeing the creature all over the country. In the South the beast is something of a folk mystery—having been spotted all over the “deeper” parts of the region (northern Florida, all along the Mississippi River, and as far west as Texas). As such, the incidents in Fouke are not particularly special. However *The Legend of Boggy Creek*, produced and directed by Charles Pierce in 1972, is a fascinating departure from standard tropes of Bigfoot films or other natural monster films like discussed in this chapter. Indeed, it seems to be a once-in-a-lifetime effort, as the film’s sequel *Boggy Creek II: The Legend Continues* (1985—also directed, written, starred-in, and produced by Pierce), and its more recent remake *Boggy Creek* (2011) return to standard narrative conventions. Pierce goes to great lengths in the original film to engage with the idea of a truly accurate depiction of the people of

Fouke to problematic ends. Locals have their interviews interwoven throughout the film, often played over vignettes in which they themselves attempt to recreate their experiences with the creature, played in this case by what amounts to a man in a gorilla suit. The end result, as one might expect, does not turn out well for the 350 residents of town of Fouke. A combination of low-quality film and poor special effects give the film an atmosphere more suited to the 50s or 60s than the early 70s. The South, therefore, becomes a place where time has stood still, where the untouched wilderness and its secrets are the domain of male-dominated trapper culture and other groups that make their living from being able to traverse an inhumane environment.

The prototype for this form of Southern manhood is introduced in the film in the form of “Smokey” Crabtree. He and his son Travis become central to the film's narrative, representatives of the area's population of low-income whites who make their living where they can. The narrator (ostensibly Pierce, who was the writer, though played by Vern Stierman) identifies himself as an insider to this society, positioning himself as a resident of Fouke, and continually referring to the area as “our” land: “This country is rich and fertile. Our land is veined with a great network of branches, creeks, river, and lakes. Fouke is a right pleasant place to live... until the sun goes down.” Many of the main interviewees are male, telling of various run-ins with the creature that have occurred during hunting excursions into an area known as Boggy Creek: the narrator intones, “In the sulfur river bottoms, the water spreads out for miles across the bottom land, a lot of which is so densely thicketed that only few hunters and trappers have the skill to make their way deep into this wild, swampy country.” For the film, characters like Crabtree and others are the initiated, able to engage and live close to the land and in doing so come into contact with the beast. In many ways, they are Bigfoot's double. As David Daegling suggests in his study of Bigfoot, “...Bigfoot is a pliable signifier to our relationship with nature and our

primal being; it serves a very basic purpose for the human psyche” (251). This almost Agrarian outlook positions the South again as a place of untouched nature, in which unknown terrors lurk, beyond the reach of modern urban society. In much the same way as *The Death Curse of Tartu* positioned Native Americans as intrinsically tied to the land through their primitive culture, *The Legend of Boggy Creek* performs much the same operation for the residents of the Arkansas bottomland. However, there is definitely an argument to be made that this only applies to the male members of the community, since the film's primary scenes of horror occur when the creature comes into contact with women.

While many of the interactions that the film recreates occur at a distance—a noise in the woods, a sighting by a hunter, a hog that has been mutilated—the most terrifying moments of the film are close quarters interactions between young women who are home alone late at night and have their homes assaulted by Fouke monster. One scene—early in the film—even features a trio of young teenagers in their nightgowns being terrorized by the monster in their most private moments. Continuing this, the final act of the film abandons its broader discussion of the area and chooses to focus on two couples that have decided to share a home with one another. Over a period of time, while the men are at work, the women and children are threatened by an ever-escalating series of attacks by the beast (creeping around the house, trying to come in, ultimately breaking in through the window). The implications for the fragility of female sexuality and the threats to purity are central in these scenes. This creature wants to get inside, implicitly so that he can drag these women away and have his way with them. While the film never overtly draws attention to this recurring theme, it becomes obvious when we consider the central role that masculinity plays in every other section of the film. The hunters and trappers, armed with rifles and dogs, have the ability to hunt and dominate the creature, while the “weaker sex” is trapped

and helpless inside of the home. The issue becomes more overt in the films 2011 'remake', in which the Bigfoot of Fouke are responsible for the gruesome murder of several men, yet (drawn, explicitly by the smell of menstruation) drag women into the forest in order to procreate with them and perpetuate the species. This idea of the constructions of civilization being the only thing standing between nature's intrusion of the wilderness on the sanctity of human sexuality builds onto this idea of the wilderness as a place that must be separated from the world that we live in.

However, *The Legend of Boggy Creek* chooses to avoid its more sexual themes in favor of a decidedly environmental message. The narrator concludes the film with an examination of the personal journey that he has taken as a resident of Fouke. For him, the fear and trepidation of his youth have become a fond memory, something that reminds him that there are things in this world that he does not, cannot, fully understand: "I'd almost like to hear that terrible cry again... Just to be reminded that there is still a bit of wilderness left, and there are still mysteries that remain unsolved, and strange unexplained noises in the night." This sentiment articulates an emotion that pulses through the movie: nostalgia. The aesthetic (the feeling that the film is made in the 50s or 60s), the music (mostly folk ballads), and the narration, all recall time gone-by. The narrator's anxiety about the monster's existence becomes synonymous with the unknown that age obscures and knowledge destroys. The creature contains, for the narrator, the essence of the ecosublime moment; it allows him to "experience infinite complexity and contingency of place... [and] recalls crucial links between human subject and nonhuman world" (Rozelle 1). This is far from an isolated reaction to such creatures. Daegling notes that "[o]ne of the primary emotions emerging from a Sasquatch encounter is a sense of awe" (250). *The Legend of Boggy Creek* encapsulates this idea of "awesome" and "sublime" nature. Through the combination of

documentary and narrative elements, Charles Pierce manages to create a nature documentary that allows nature to keep its secrets, and in doing so recreates his own sublime moment.

V. Conclusions: Horrific Nature and the Nature of Horror

What makes us fear the wilderness? Many, like Pierce, see the wild, untamed natural world as representing a moment before knowledge, before civilization—a time when our society had not developed the modern conveniences that we take for granted today. Pierce's musing about his childhood remind the viewer of a time in which they too could stare into the face of the world and see nothing but limitless possibilities. The forests, swamps, rivers, and hollows of the world become spaces that hearken back to man's primitive state, offering an opportunity to escape the trappings of civilization. However, these places also contain limitless possibilities for threats to unravel the fabric of modernity. In each of the films discussed here, we see the natural world threatening to engage mankind in a primal battle for survival, to undo the supremacy that man claims over the landscape. Each time something different is threatened: Tartu uses the land to reclaim his people's place in the world by refusing to be removed, the amphibians of *Frogs* seek wipe away the stain of humanity and in doing so to return the world to a primitive state, the bigfoot of *Boggy Creek* reminds us that there are still unmapped parts of the world that need our protection. In the end, all of these films represent the same thing—the undoing of the current social order of the world, effectively reverting it to the primordial state.

For the United States of America, the South has long represented a space that threatens the national narrative. Many novels, films, and television series offer up a South that threatens the nations integrity and humanity: a site of violence and prejudice for the nation to fill with all of its anxieties. For the 1970s—a decade recovering from much of the violence of the civil rights movement, yet concerned with the nation's effect on the environment—the South

represented a space where the issues of industrialization and development took center stage and the ramifications of misuse and pollution could be visibly represented. Southerners were people who lived in concert with the landscape, who were tied closer to a more primitive lifestyle—trappers, hunters, farmers, ranchers—and thus were the first line of defense against a natural world filled with wrath over its devastation. In these films we see the nation’s frontier as it exists in the later part of the 20th century: the space in between cities, the vast expanses of unclaimed territory that has not been settled yet. As Ed in *The Death Curse of Tartu* says, “Things exist on this planet that scientists have no answer to... True, we send astronauts into space, but right here on our own planet, there are still hundreds of questions left unanswered.” This sentiment expresses a modern anxiety that despite advances in science and technology, we have missed some vital piece of the puzzle that will open up our world to us. These films postulate a South where legendary beasts roam the wilderness, spirits take the form of animals, and the land itself is takes on a mind of its own. This mixture of hope and fear, of awe and terror, takes the form of a sublime expression that is both revelatory and anxious about the region and its environment. This mixture of opposites becomes an exercise in reconciliation, with the South now taking a more synecdochic place in the American mind. This shift is indicative of the complex nature of the relationship that had developed, in the post civil rights era, between the national imagination and the South.

CHAPTER FOUR

DIXIE'S STILL-BEATING HEARTIFICE: POSTMODERNITY, INTERTEXTUALITY, AND THE MEDIA-MADE SOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY HORROR FILM

I. Introduction: The Media-Made South in the Post-Modern Age

Up until this point, we have been examining the myriad ways in which the South has been formulated in the American imagination in order to situate the region as a site of horror and otherness. These tropes—a land of monstrous white degeneracy marked by racism, a place of “black” magic and Voodoo, a region of unclaimed wilderness—have all experienced shifts of their over time, with constant revisions and reformulations as historical and cultural periods change. Look anywhere in the American film landscape and you will see similar narrative—genres bend and shape themselves to serve their historical moment. As with literature, as we approach the contemporary moment we enter a period of postmodernity which represents a new understanding of the role that the South plays in not simply American horror cinema, but American film as a whole. While it is gross understatement to say that the idea of “postmodernity” resists definition (even openly balks at it), the best place to start is to consider it a state in which previously held conventions, structures, and narratives can no longer hold meaning. The ‘post-modern’ world is one that has been so touched by the exponential growth of industry, media, and networks that it has attained a form of self-awareness and self-referentiality. This perspective rationally lends itself to genres, where in the postmodern age established narratives and conventions are revisited and deconstructed. Works no longer simply carry with

them an expectation of representation of reality (or even believability), but rather seek to discuss the very idea of media itself and the expectations that have become so commonplace that their existence becomes the very subject of the work.

Countless projects by a wide range of scholars have examined the role that media has had in common constructions of the South. Karen Cox, Edwin D. C. Porter, and Allison Graham have seen these constructions as media-made engagements with the historical and cultural need for the South to play its role in the national narrative. What about when these constructions have been so overused that they become clichés? When does the post-civil rights moment become the postmodern moment? When globalization and technological development have drained regional identification of much of its significance, how do we begin to think about the South as a “place”? A host of literary theorists, including Michael Kreyling, Scott Romine, and Martyn Bone, have taken to calling such a period the “post-Southern”. For Kreyling this transition is represented by the collapse of the twin forces of history and memory into a continuum in which neither has much meaning. Scott Romine has explored the way that the fictionalized, mythical South has become the primary force by which “Southern-ness” is defined. Martyn Bone sees the advance of modernization as affecting the Southern idea of “place” and draining (or at the very least shifting) its meaning. While each of these scholars thinks of the this moment in different ways, all of them seem to work off of the preconception that the time for a mythologized, ”media-made” South has given way to a period where our consciousness is so aware of these ideas that we use them to create stories and spaces that feed off of such tropes for effect.

The result of these theories (and indeed the marked shift in the ways that narratives in and about the South are formulated) is one possible manifestation of what postmodernism *can be* (particularly in reference to Southern narrative). First and foremost, it is built—many times—off

of the use of cultural and textual signifiers in order to make something of a hypertext, a work that serves multiple narratives, with branching systems of meaning. These “hypertexts” are based in the audiences mind, and built out of the cultural literacy that they possess. According to Cristina Degli-Esposti, the postmodern text (either film or literature) is intensely tied to the cooperation and cultural literacy of the audience:

There is awareness that each postmodern text/film expresses itself on several levels and that each one requires a different look, a different degree of attention and cognitive competence from the spectator... One of the most distinctive characteristics of a ‘postmodern text’ is the over demand on the attention of the spectator whose active and indispensable participation is summoned... in various levels of ‘interpellation’ (6).

In many ways, post-Southern narratives require much the same process, relying on the reader or viewers previous knowledge of the world around them in order to discern complex references to previous works. Such texts often take the guise of parody in order to do this, undermining and recasting the past in order to reanimate it. Michael Kreyling, writing about the legal battle over Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone*, has said, “If the parody changes cultural perception of the original deeply enough, then the memory-and-history ‘normal’ would have to change” (62%). Roughly, Kreyling is seeing a revision of previous constructions of the South as having a rippling effect on the broader cultural perceptions of the region. Such a claim is vital to understanding the role that such works play in the deconstruction of Southern tropes and stereotypes in a broad context.

The cinematic horror genre has developed in a similar fashion to that of Southern literatures, with new works not simply shifting expectations, but openly engaging with them. This transition is perhaps best illustrated in a case study: Wes Craven’s 1996 film, *Scream*. As a slasher film, *Scream* develops on a standard pattern: an initial kill sets up the murderer’s modus operandi, a period of mounting tension with individual murders peppered throughout, and a final

climactic bloodbath in which the killers identity is revealed and the “Final Girl” must defeat him. However, *Scream* draws from a vast archive of cinematic references and genre awareness in order to blend the basic formula with a nuanced discussion of the genre. From the killers raspy voice asking his victims “Do you like scary movies?”, to video store clerk Randy’s drunken rant about the “rules” of horror films, to a high school janitor named “Fred” in his distinctive hat and striped sweater (a reference to Freddy Krueger from Craven’s own *Nightmare on Elm Street*), *Scream* is steeped in its own desire to undo audience expectations by openly discussing them. Whether *Scream* represents the first such attempt at self-reflexivity in the genre is open to debate, however its commercial success and openness paved the way for many films that followed. In the years since, the horror genre can be seen breaking into two distinct lines of reasoning: smaller films that examine the role that convention and expectation plays in the genre and either affirm or deconstruct it, and stringently formal larger-budget films that are geared toward exploiting the ravenous hunger of audiences for a formulaic film in a familiar genre. The films featured in this chapter are derived from the former of these two categories, and while the latter certainly offers a range of new perspectives on the Southern horror film (*The Skeleton Key*, for instance). These works represent revisions and reconstructions of portrayals that we saw in Chapter 1 of this study.

Working off of Scott Romine’s assertion of that Southern narrative is “an archive of improvisations grounded in space and time, a register of imagined relations to artificial territorialities, themed spaces, virtual terrains, built environments, localities, and ‘the global’” (17), I will examine the ways in which American horror films have re-examined and re-encoded tropes and conventions from earlier iterations of the genre for a new, more culturally literate, audience. To do so, I will suspend my attempts at a chronological organization of the chapter in

order to mirror Chapter 1, since each of these three films speaks directly to those of the previous generation. The first of these films, *2001 Maniacs* (dir. Tim Sullivan), as the title suggests, is something of a sequel to the 1964 film *Two Thousand Maniacs*, based in the same town of Pleasant Valley yet produced in 2005. Utilizing a higher budget and advances in special effects, this film does not function simply as a dialogue on the enduring influence of the Confederacy in the Southern United States but rather as a collage of Southern stereotypes that have been produced in American media since the release of its predecessor. The next film, *Tucker and Dale vs. Evil* (2010, dir. Eli Craig), is a parody of the “hillbilly gore film”, focusing on two lone West Virginia mountain men who are attacked by a group of college students while on vacation. By inverting the portrayal of *Deliverance*-esque hillbillies from “attacking” to “attacked”, the film plays with the notion of expectation and media culture’s affect on reality. Finally, 2006’s *Hatchet* (dir. Adam Greene) is a multifaceted homage to the slasher cycle that followed the release of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Set in the swamps of southern Louisiana, the film engages openly with Southern tourism and the construction of the South to meet the public’s perceptions. In each of these films there are actors, characters, and situations which are encoded with references to Southern-set media and its place in the American imaginary. By incorporating a vast cinematic lexicon, they allow the viewer to separate the media-produced images of “Southern-ness”, as well as genre tropes of the horrific, from a tangible, “real” world. By mixing elements of comedy, stylized gore, and cinematic references, each of these three films offers an image of the South that is decidedly separate from notions of authenticity and historical constraints. The South becomes a fantasy space, where the over-the-top and the monstrous converge in a cinematic arena.

II. “Guts and Glory” at the Sesquicentennial: The Old South and The Lost Cause in *2001 Maniacs*

2001 Maniacs seeks to fill the gap left by its civil rights-motivated predecessor, though perhaps not in the way one might expect. The story is similar, though in this case the victims are a group of college students on their way to celebrate spring break in Florida. Following a trio of white fraternity men (from an unnamed school in an implicitly northern state) as they encounter the same “detour” sign and (with a few aesthetic changes) the same town in the backwoods of Georgia. As opposed to the original, the fellow victims that the main characters meet after their arrival are a diverse blend of races and creeds: an interracial couple (a black man and an Asian woman), a homosexual, and two sexually liberated women. The mayor of the town, in this case, wears an eye patch that is emblazoned with the Confederate flag and—in a thoroughly postmodern turn—is played by noted horror actor Robert Englund, best known for his portrayal of Freddy Krueger in *Nightmare on Elm Street*. The inclusion of Englund immediately invites fans of the horror genre to engage in a complex series of cinematic signifiers that hearken back to previous, seemingly unrelated films. Another of these occurs in the first moments of the film, before the boys arrive in town, when they encounter a hyperactive, unnerving hitchhiker while on a back road in the South. The hitchhiker, played by the film’s producer Eli Roth, is a reprisal of a character that was featured prominently in Roth’s own film *Cabin Fever* (a cabin-in-the-woods gore film set in Tennessee and released in 2002). Roth’s role in this case can be seen as an inversion of the beginning stages of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, in which another mysterious hitchhiker appears. However, this reference is undercut (and thus made parodic) by the fact that instead of picking him up the trio of college students drives away, leaving him stranded. This is

only the first of a many references that the film will engage in order to position itself in the genre's history and canon.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the film's project, however, is its open engagement with Lost Cause ideology. The film begins with a credit sequence rolling over a series of images from both the Civil War and from filmed reenactments. In both cases, the imagery is overlaid with blood and fire, not simply implying the bloody nature of war, but foreshadowing the gruesome film to follow. The first scene takes place in a college history class, as a professor lectures to his students:

Although the popular media usually portrays the Civil War as a series of battles for honor and glory, the reality is far from either. General Sherman's march through South Carolina alone cost almost 8,000 innocent Southerners their lives... So while you are on spring break next week down in Florida, you might better understand why so many Southerners are still angry with the North and their rampage of death and destruction.

The professor's invocation of the infamous "Sherman's March", as well the description of the Southern citizenry as "innocent", sets the stage for a film that is decidedly reverent of the Southern cause. The protagonists of the feature, who are all students in the class, are unfazed and disinterested in the lecture, waiting for their vacation to begin. This opening history lesson situates the film's outlook on the War (and history in general, for that matter) as sympathetic to the Southern cause. This case is made again and again throughout the film as one of the main protagonists (whose name is Anderson Lee) reveals himself to be something of an "undercover Southerner", schooled by the aunt who raised him in the ways of Southern gentility and manners. The finale of the film pits Anderson against the mayor in a duel for his life (in true gentleman style), but not before each member of the town has been given a chance to tell some semblance of the story of their death at the hands of the cruel Union: one priest in the town cries, "Vengeance is mine sayeth the lord!"; while others scream "You'll never kill me again!";

perhaps most pointedly, a woman wielding a hatchet says, “Bring back my baby!” (most likely a reference to a child she had lost in the war). Even the conclusion of the film promotes this quasi-Lost Cause mythos, when the characters led to the Pleasant Valley cemetery and memorial by a local sheriff who calls them “Northern heathens”. This shift towards sympathy for the monstrous other is not unheard of in the postmodern horror film—the ascension of horror monsters from the 1970s and 80s (Jason, Freddy Krueger, Michael Myers, etc.) to almost mythic status has caused a clear movement towards sympathetic portrayals of these characters in sequels and remakes. In his 2007 remake of *Halloween*, for instance, Rob Zombie shifted much of the narrative to an exploration Michael Myers’ psyche, and in doing so humanized what had formerly been a wordless, skulking force of nature to someone with a clear motivation and back-story.

While *2001 Maniacs* focus on “Southern manners and gentility” ties back into the original film’s engagement with Southern stereotypes, *2001 Maniacs* takes this one step further, populating the film with referential characters who hearken back to cinematic and literary references to the Old South. At a gas station early in their journey, the protagonists encounter a small, blind child who engages one of them in a musical exchange, a direct reference to *Deliverance* (though in this case—in an interesting racial inversion—instead of playing bluegrass on a banjo, the boy plays the blues on steel guitar). Instead of the generic Southern signifiers of *Two Thousand Maniacs*, the town is instead populated by fully realized caricatures, who are then subverted into being the diametric opposite of what their character should represent. In one such instance, a matriarchal figure named only “Granny Boone” delights in serving lemonade and welcomes the visitors into her house, but ultimately proves to be the most blood thirsty of the lot as she licks the blood off of a spit that has just been rammed through one

of the town's victims. The rest of the women of the town are similarly portrayed: stereotypical Southern Belles who lure in victims with their unbridled sexuality, but ultimately murder them as their relationship is finally (sexually) consummated. In one such instance, a busty "milk maid" character forces the boy she has just mounted to guzzle her "moonshine" (another classic Southern cinematic stereotype) which turns out to be acid which eats away at him from the inside out. In another example, a character named Peaches—who functions as something of a grotesque revision of the "farmer's daughter" similar to the "Jo" sisters of *Petticoat Junction* or *Daisy Duke*—castrates a man while performing fellatio on him. Such sexual misconduct is not limited to the female characters, however: Harper Alexander—a burly farm boy in the original who has now been revised into a lanky, effeminate Southern gentleman—enacts a similar disruption of sexual congress when he lures Kat (or "Miss Pussycat" as he calls her) into a barn where she is tied to four horses who rip her apart. As we can see in these cases, the film openly incorporates classic Southern cinematic tropes in order to create a comedic atmosphere involving sex acts that end in over-the-top, stylized violence.

What makes such a move so postmodern, however, is the inclusion throughout all of these sequences of characters who are incredibly aware of how mediated this space is. At one point, driving through the backwoods, one of the boys says, "We're in deliverance country now, boys!" Later, a character being fawned over by Southern beauties says to his friends, "Have I ever told you guys how much I love Civil War tourist attractions?" Such overt references to the controlled, mediated Southern image ground the viewer in a world in which representations of Southern-ness espoused by Civil War tourism and films are the norm. One of the interesting tropes of this engagement is that the town of Pleasant Valley itself seems to exist *inside* of such representations. Characters are over-drawn, silly, and generally nonsensical: one young man

spends most of the movie with his pants around his ankles chasing a sheep (named Jezebel) that is “Just playing hard to get.” In this case, the child in the original who strangles the cat is now a fully formed character named Hucklebilly who has stepped right out of the pages of Mark Twain. Perhaps one of the most troubling of these, however, is the inclusion of a slave character that assists the town’s cook in his preparation of the bodies for consumption. His performance is evocative of a minstrel show, with overwrought dialect, a submissive attitude, and a desire to see his master’s wishes enacted regardless of historical issues.

This is only one of several moments in which the film engages with minorities’ position in the South as well as in media. As noted earlier, the film features several victims who are members of minority groups (a black man, an Asian woman, a homosexual man). These characters, because they originate from outside the town, are exempt from being part of this hyper-mediated landscape. Instead they simply react to it. Early in the film, as the bellhop shows the African American man, Malcolm, and his Asian American girlfriend to their room, he makes a racist comment, to which Malcolm asks, “Ain’t y’all ever heard of the civil rights movement?” True to form (and stereotype) the bellhop responds, “Is that anything like a bowel movement?” The film is peppered with exchanges like this, with the town’s racism never passing beyond the level of dialogue until the time comes to kill the minorities. Race, as a subject that the original obscured, becomes central to much of the dialogue in *2001*—with the townsfolk actively working to hide racist attitudes and often times failing, while the characters become more and more uncomfortable (at one point, Malcolm points out that Pleasant Valley has a shortage of “hot black bitches”). The curtain is finally pulled away when Malcolm meets his doom, however. Confronted by the mayor and the rest of the townsfolk, Malcolm is given an all-too-familiar speech: “We done took him in, fed ya, gave you a place to call home. And what’d

you do to repay our gratitude, hm? You done run away.” In a short-lived moment of historical justice, the modern, free black man comes face to face with the slaveholding white from yesteryear and is allowed to tell them “Kiss my black ass!” before being crushed in a cotton press. This conflict between the town’s racist attitudes and outsiders multiethnic liberalism continues into the realm of sex, as Ricky—the groups token homosexual—becomes sexually involved with one of the sons of the mayor who has been recruited to seduce him. This subversion of white, masculine, heteronormativity undermines the mayor’s control over the situation, until it is finally rectified when Ricky is impaled on a spit for roasting. Moments like these, even with their tongue-in-cheek brand of violence and death, speak to a deracialized target audience. While its predecessor focused on the threat that neo-Confederate sympathies in the South posed to Northern liberal ideology, this film—with its multiracial cast, dark sense of humor, and complex notions of what constitutes a ‘Southerner’ (ranging from Anderson’s Southern roots to the caricatures of the townsfolk)—offers a decidedly multifaceted view of the region. By incorporating so many archetypes and stereotypes into a self-aware framework, the film allows its audience to make fun of such essentialized images while still using them to tell a story. As such, the bluegrass song “The South’s Gonna Rise Again” which played over the opening of *Two Thousand Maniacs* is not missed when it is replaced with a heavy metal version that closes *2001 Maniacs*. The shift is indicative of the two films differences, and the way that the South functions in them.

III. Good Ole Boys vs. Evil: Tucker, Dale, and the Redemption of the Hillbilly

Following a shocking found-footage sequence in the modern tradition of films like *The Blair Witch Project* and *Paranormal Activity* (a self-reflexive nod at the act of filmmaking itself), Eli Craig’s 2010 film *Tucker and Dale vs. Evil* begins as so many before it. Flashing

back three days to a group of college students on a road trip in “Appalachia, West Virginia”. Within the first moments of their presence on screen, one of them—a prep with his collar popped named Chad—begins quoting John Boorman’s 1972 film *Deliverance* by screaming “Squeal like a pig!” Chad’s irreverent commentary on the culture of Appalachia is broken when the students’ SUV is passed by a pickup truck driven by two hillbillies. The entire scene takes on an eerie silence as the camera shifts to a shot of the trucks occupants whose unbroken gaze out of a shadowy cab unnerves the co-eds. Tonally, the sequence resembles the film that Chad was just referencing, as a group of outsiders in search of rest and relaxation come face to face with the monstrous underbelly of their own society. Audience expectations are immediately situated in a long tradition of the monstrous hillbilly, waiting for these educated, modern fraternity men and their female companions to be assailed by a primitive monstrous underclass. Judging by the first few moments, *Tucker and Dale* appears to be simply another formulaic entry into the genre of the hillbilly horror film.

However, this opening is an exercise in audience misdirection and subversion of genre expectations. Building off of the film’s established connection to *Deliverance* as its precursor, the perspective is quickly inverted from the point-of-view of the college students to that of the hillbillies: a goofy, neurotic duo named Tucker and Dale. This transition is accomplished through the familiar trope of the Southern gas station, where the students stop to buy beer and again encounter the hillbillies who have stopped to buy supplies (at first a terrifying collection of hammers, saws, and nails which are revealed later to be supplies for the renovation of their new “vacation home”). From this point the entire narrative shifts to their perspective, and in doing so allows the filmmakers the opportunity to reshape the Southern degenerate hillbilly stereotype from the monstrous other to something of an everyman. Their conversations border on the banal

as Dale expresses his anxieties about talking to girls, and Tucker tries to encourage him to “be himself”. In the end, the pairs dynamic bears a closer resemblance to an Abbott and Costello film than to a horror film, with one of the titular duo as the dopey, shy nerd and the other as a scheming, confident pragmatist. This way, the backwoodsman is endeared to the audience in a way that few other films have done before it. As the film goes on and their character traits are fleshed out, Tucker and Dale reveal themselves to be much more than essentialized stereotypes of Appalachians. Dale is a savant, capable of remembering everything he has ever seen or heard, while Tucker is concerned about the image that he projects, hoping that his new “vacation home” will function as a class signifier and allow him to escape his blue collar roots. Regardless of first impressions, Tucker and Dale occupy a space in cinematic canon that represents a rehabilitation of the hillbilly from grotesque outsider to lovable relative. However, this rehabilitation in the *audience’s* mind does not make them immediately welcome in *film’s* world. The college students—marked from the beginning as being affected by the image of the South from *Deliverance*—are unwilling to identify themselves with Tucker and Dale and this leads to conflict between the two groups.

The film unfolds as a series of Rube-Goldberg-esque deaths of college students as they attempt to rescue one of their number, a girl named Allie, after Tucker and Dale have rescued her from drowning. At various points throughout the film, the students run themselves into limbs of trees, impale themselves on their own makeshift spears, and (in a reference to the Coen’s *Fargo*) fling themselves into a wood chipper. Ultimately, the main killer in the film (though not the only one) is fate, with virtually none of the deaths happening intentionally. The driving force of the narrative is the conception that these students hold of Tucker and Dale as “freaks”, a notion further perpetuated by Chad’s story of something called the Memorial Day Massacre. In a

sequence that is created in order to resemble slasher films of the 1970s and 80s, Chad recounts the events surrounding a similar group of partying students who were attacked and killed by a bloodthirsty hillbilly in “this very spot”. Other more direct references to the films cinematic archive seep in as well: at one point, when the kids see Tucker and Dale taking Allie’s unconscious body away, one of them says, “It looked like one of the guys was eating her face off!” This reference to cannibalism (and, by extension, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Two Thousand Maniacs*) drives the separation of Southern poor whites from the rest of modern society. In effect, *Tucker and Dale vs. Evil* follows two distinct narrative arcs: on the one hand there is Tucker and Dale’s version of events, a buddy comedy starring two hapless hillbillies (a standard genre in its own right), and, on the other hand, a gore film in which a group of college students tries to defend itself from the assault from two bloodthirsty hillbillies. The combination of these two films creates a postmodern expression of the inherent ridiculousness of previously held Southern stereotypes and their effects on the nation’s conception of the region.

Central to the perpetuation of their ideas about the South is the college students’ de-facto leader, Chad. Chad initially occupies a generic space as something of a caricature of fraternity men. His initial sexual aggressiveness towards Allie, trying to force himself upon her shortly before she becomes injured, marks him as a character that *should* be killed early, however his vehement hatred of hillbillies carries him throughout the first two acts of the film. By the final act, however, Chad’s position in the narrative is revealed to be something more than the audience initially suspected. His story of the Memorial Day Massacre is revealed to be part of his personal history, since his mother was the sole survivor of the murders. What is more, in a decidedly gothic turn, this father was the killer, who sexually assaulted his mother before she got away (“You’re half hillbilly!”). This revelation of his true parentage (which comes at the climax

of the film) devastates Chad's notion of "self", and effectively makes him an outsider to both Tucker and Dale's premodern hillbilly world and Allie's modern collegiate one. When Tucker and Dale's vacation home is engulfed in flames, Chad's place as the true "monster" of the film becomes expressed physically, as half of his face is burned away and scarred beyond recognition. In the end, *Tucker and Dale vs. Evil* becomes exactly what it always appeared to be; a film about a murderous hillbilly, yet the true "hillbilly" is the one that resides in the hate-filled mind of a college student. This revelation unravels the very notion of hillbilly monstrosity, by undoing the perceived genetic differences (incestuous backwoods degeneracy) between the two camps into a simple difference of good vs. evil. In the end, Chad is the quintessential slasher monster—reliving the trauma of his childhood (Jason), grotesquely disfigured (Leatherface), and even meeting his end by falling out of a top floor window (Michael Myers). This, of course, leads us back to the film's opening, when an unknown assailant assaults the reporter and cameraman as they film a story on the murders of several college students. While this initial sequence could have been construed as some unknown 'other', it takes on new life when the viewer realizes that the creature attacking the camera at the beginning was Chad, and the threatening force of the film has always been Chad's own self-hatred.

Conversely, Dale must claim the very identity that Chad thrust upon him. Donning a chainsaw (yes, a chainsaw) and a pair of overalls, Dale proclaims, "You want a killer hillbilly, I'll show you a killer hillbilly." At this point, the image of the hillbilly has become truly rehabilitated in the cinematic mind, protecting Allie's position of feminine purity, fighting against that which would unravel the status quo. The Southerner, once a degenerate white monster who can never be redeemed, now has become the redeemer, not simply for his region or his (albeit imagined) race, but for his nation as a whole. Like North-South reunion romances of

the postbellum era, *Tucker and Dale vs. Evil* repositions the threat to society as not arising from any one group or region, effectively distancing the backward, white Southerner of the twenty-first century from his racist antecedents of the civil rights era. Instead, the film seeks to reunite the Southern hillbilly and the rest of society in order to counter the threat of prejudice and ignorance arising from a modern American worldview that can no longer be contained to the South and instead infests every corner of American society.

IV. Victor Crowley Lives: Tourism and Commercialism in *Hatchet*

While *Tucker and Dale vs. Evil* offers a reoriented image of the white Southerner by inverting conventions in order to deconstruct the way the South has been portrayed in popular media, a film like Adam Green's *Hatchet* (2006) openly looks at the way that the South constructs itself as a site of the horrific and the haunted. Set in and around New Orleans, Louisiana during Mardi Gras, *Hatchet* is an homage to the slasher films of the 1970s and 80s, using a vast array of parodic and conventional set pieces in order to tell an entirely new story, introducing a new monster to an already crowded pantheon of slashers: the grotesque, undead Victor "Hatchetface" Crowley. Crowley was a deformed boy growing up with his father in a remote section of the Louisiana bayou when a prank trapped him in his own house, leading to his father accidentally burying an axe in his face while trying to free him. Now, some several decades later, Victor 'haunts' (though it is perhaps possible to assume that he still lives in) the area around the burned out relic of his house, using his inhuman strength and a variety of weapons in order to kill anyone who intrudes on the property. There are many aspects of this story that suggest their roots in classic horror films, yet the most obvious parallel is with the story of Jason Vorhees—the hockey-masked killer of the *Friday the 13th* series. Both characters are deformed from an early age. Both meet their (supposed) ends due to the carelessness of a

group of youths: Victor's house catches fire as children throw firecrackers at it, and Jason drowns while his summer camp counselors have a tryst when they should be watching him. Both have a strong connection to a parental figure (Jason has his mother, Victor his father). Perhaps most interestingly, the same actor plays both characters. In something of a subtextual reference to the classic series, Kane Hodder (the only actor to reprise the role of Jason, having played the character in *Friday the 13th* parts 7-10) was cast as Crowley for *Hatchet* and its two sequels.

Hodder is far from the only such cameo: Robert Englund appears in the film's opening scene as an alligator hunter who is killed by Crowley (alongside one of the stars of the *Blair Witch Project*), and Tony Todd (famous for his role as the Candyman) appears later in the film as the proprietor of a Voodoo shop. Cameos like these, obscured under makeup or out in the open, tie the film explicitly to the tradition of classic slasher films that it seeks to emulate and subvert. Dan Harries calls this process 'Reiteration': "evocation or quotation of particular elements from the targeted text to both create an association between the prototext and the parody as well as establish conventional narrative expectations" (43). As we saw in *2001 Maniacs* as well, appearances by known horror actors establish a visual connection to previous texts. *Hatchet* also utilizes the artifice of the South in order to *subvert* the films genre conventions by calling attention to the construction of the region as horrific.

The filmmakers position the South as central to the film's narrative from its opening scenes. Two hunters—a father (Englund) and son—sit alone in a boat in the middle of a desolate swamp, sipping on cheap beer, and exchanging verbal jibes about the father's disappointment in his son. Their lighthearted back-and-forth, with the father teasing his son for his lack of masculinity (calling him "queer", suggesting he needs to sit down to urinate), is demolished by

their gore-heavy murders. By initially offering these caricatured images of Southern manhood, only to literally rip them apart in as over-the-top way as possible, the film suggests that the comedic interchange between these two characters and their gory fate should be equated. By doing so, the audience is asked to see these bloody murders as cartoonish, providing a flexible and useful definition of horror when we consider the way the rest of the film treats notions of the “South” and “Southern-ness”. The film abruptly cuts to its credit sequence, with a jarring introduction of heavy metal music replacing the ambient sounds of the swamp.

Within moments, the perspective has shifted from the deserted bayou to the frenetic crowds of Bourbon Street on Mardi Gras. From this intensely globalized, tourist-centric space filled with debauchery, the film follows Ben, a young college student who drags his best friend along on a “haunted swamp tour”. Their search for a tour takes them from one Voodoo parlor to another, all of which are constructed based on stereotypical notions of Voodoo and its practices. At one point, thinking they have found the place, the two meet Reverend Zombie (Tony Todd), whose attire and behavior suggests a foreshadowing of darker times ahead. Zombie’s insistence that he doesn’t “do night tours anymore” immediately draws the audience in with the expectation of some gruesome reason. However, again we see horror expectations subverted for comedic effect as Zombie tells them that his refusal to give tours is tied to a pending lawsuit.

Ultimately, Ben and his friend find a tour that they can join. Located in “Marie Laveau’s House of Voodoo” (an actual New Orleans Voodoo shop), the pair encounter a bizarre collection of postmodern aspects. From the first images of the interior of the store, the audience can begin to see the ways in which the film begins to engage with the multitude of realities (the audience, the filmmakers, the characters, the film itself) that exist between the viewer and the film’s world. One of the first shots of the interior is a t-shirt, emblazoned with the phrase “Victor

Crowley Lives”. Such a set piece—merchandise that might well be sold as part of the promotion for the film—blurs the line between the film’s world and the viewer’s world and points out the artifice that the narrative creates. We, as the audience, become acutely aware of the film’s desire to “sell” us on the idea that Victor Crowley lives, and through the incorporation of this shirt into the narrative, we can see the ways in which the space of the South is being constructed for both the viewer and the characters. This hyper-aware construction of space continues throughout the scene, as Ben and Marcus are introduced to their fellow tourists—which include a one-man film crew for a version of *Girls Gone Wild* and his two starlets, one of whom claims to have been trained at NYU, as well as their tour guide, Shawn, an Asian with a thick Cajun accent. As the tour continues, these characters are revealed to be merely masquerading, literally acting out parts inside of the film: the NYU educated actress is nothing of the sort, the filmmaker is lying in order to get video of girls without their tops on, and Shawn the 'Casian' (Cajun + Asian) only dons his accent in order to make the tour seem more authentic. Shawn's performance is perhaps the most intriguing of these, since his involves donning the mask of Southern-ness itself. With his slathered-on accent, top hat, and cape, Shawn's performance seems ridiculous: he tells them outdated stories of swamp gas and Louisiana burial rituals, each time getting the story just wrong enough to make the viewer cringe. Once the tour group’s boat sinks and Victor Crowley is attacking them, Shawn's guise shows signs of cracking. First breaking into a Chinese accent and admitting that he just took this job after moving to New Orleans from Detroit, and later, in the final act of the film, even this accent is revealed to be a ruse as he takes on a non-regional American dialect. Shawn's performance of Southern identity, indeed most of the film’s concept of “Southern-ness”, is a fiction, a cobbled-together collection of stereotypes and tropes that are

packaged and sold to the public by entities looking to profit off of the idea of Southern authenticity.

These characters are set in contrast to the only “true” Southerner on the tour—Marybeth, the daughter and sister of the two men from the films opening. As the film's Final Girl, as well as the only actual Southerner in the tour group, Marybeth functions as the counterbalance for the films relationship with its Southern setting. As a Southerner who does not try to capitalize on her regional identity, Marybeth is in stark contrast to the fictionalized Southern-ness of Shawn, and thus offers an image of the South that is normalized and capable. Marybeth is a Southern woman who can (and does) carry a gun, and for whom the swamp is not a place of novel terror but rather a space that she is familiar with, having grown up as the daughter of an alligator hunter. She becomes the only character that does not wish to engage with the commercial South, but rather simply needs a boat with which to search for her lost father and brother. These factors allow her to persevere, eventually escaping with Ben so that they can, presumably, live “happily ever after”. She is—in some ways—a reiteration of the stereotypical rural Southerner, initiated in the ways of the land and filled with the grit needed to survive. However, as is the basis for much of the films work, viewer expectations and presumptions are subverted in favor of a surprising outcome. The films final scene, in yet another homage to *Friday the 13th*, finds Ben and Marybeth getting away in the safety of a boat. Whereas in *Friday*, Alice escapes on a boat and survives till morning, when the desiccated corpse of Jason rises out of the water and drags her down with him; in this case Marybeth falls into the water after they are attacked by an alligator, only to be rescued by Ben's hand, which is now detached from his body and held by Victor Crowley. Once more, expectations are subverted as the film cuts suddenly to credits, leaving Marybeth's fate in the hands of the sequel.

In the case of *Hatchet*, the constructed image of the South is a mixture of the Souths we have already seen appear in American horror. The haunted South of the tour, in which spirits inhabit the Southern space, relics of history and memory of a region with a troubled and bloody past. The unclaimed wilderness of the swamp, where the line between fantasy and reality is blurred and the threat is all around you. The gory, monstrous South of Victory Crowley inherited from *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Deliverance's* images of monstrous white backwoodsman. The magical, primitive South of the Voodoo shop, with its ties to the Caribbean slave societies. Each of these is present in *Hatchet*, drawing on a long-standing tradition of American horror film's engagement with the region. From actors, to set pieces, to an understanding of the South as a constructed environment in the American imagination, *Hatchet* seeks to engage with these ideas in order to tell what is ironically a highly original story that is built using the building blocks of films that have come before. In the end, it is both reverent and critical of these tropes, placing them in what is essentially a comedic story, with all of the major beats of a horrific one. *Hatchet* becomes a major step in the direction of a new Southern horror cinema, one that is openly engaged with the films that have come before, yet seeks to revise the way in which the South is constructed in relationship to itself and the nation at large.

V. Conclusion: Historical Trauma and The Post-Southern Horror Film

As the world's media landscape grows increasingly interconnected and available and new generations have greater and greater access to the works of those that have come before, it is no great surprise that a hyper awareness of those works would come to be the defining aspect such a heavily mediated society. The result is a media ecology that is populated by references to what can roughly be described as a canon, though it may bear no similarity to any definition of "canon" that has existed previously. Instead, we have many canons, pertaining to a wide range

of subjects. In particular, we have examined the way in which the canon of “Southern film” interacts with that of “horror film” in an age where these archives are a means to challenge a culture’s worldview in as many ways as possible. This process, in many ways both critical and reverent, has led to a new generation of horror films set in a South that has lived for years in the eyes and minds of film makers and viewers, but has gained a degree of self-awareness in the postmodern era.

Films like *2001 Maniacs*, *Tucker and Dale vs. Evil*, and *Hatchet* exist in many ways in a world where regional differences and conflicts of yesteryear have given way to a nation that is increasingly concerned with its role in the world. The events of September 11th, the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the tumultuous national political climate, the nation has become intensely aware of its own attempts to work through trauma and violence. To the South these two things have always had a special meaning and importance. Throughout the past 150 years, the region has fought both for and against itself, trying again and again to balance the work of remembering and forgetting, of commemorating and moving on, and now it joins a nation that is trying to do the same thing. The massacred Confederates of *2001 Maniacs*, Chad’s violent family history and obscured lineage of *Tucker and Dale*, Victor Crowley’s mutilation at the hands of his own father in *Hatchet*—each of these seem to suggest a renewed importance of the revision and reincorporation of past trauma into both personal and national histories. As such, the South has become a playground for storytellers attempting to engage with the need for the nation to confront and deal with the violence that defines its existence.

While this is by no means the end of the story of the South in American horror cinema, it suggests an increasingly national interest in themes that the region has been obsessed with for over a century at this point. While post-modernity suggests for some a waning of regional

identity in the face of forces of globalism and information technologies, films like these show that not only is the South alive and well, but is of increasing importance as a site where the contemporary concerns of the nation have long held sway. This newfound focus on Southern myth, stereotypes, and tropes opens new doors that are no longer constrained by an attempt to simply separate the region from the nation as a whole. Rather, they show the ways that the South, for all of its historical problems, can help the United States look at and learn from itself.

CODA

THE SOUTH IN AMERICA HORROR

This project began late one night seven years ago, in the basement of a fraternity house at Emory University. A friend and I, both Southerners still deeply entrenched in the Lost Cause as a way of defending our identity from northern classmates who saw our university's location as incidental, were up late perusing the premium satellite listings that our positions as residents of the house provided. Cinemax, home of a the brand of late night programming that attracts those seeking the salacious (and earned the channel the nickname "Skin-emax"), was broadcasting a film whose description immediately piqued the interest two Georgia boys anxious for anything and everything Southern: a film called *2001 Maniacs*. As the late night stretched on into the early morning, we watched as young college students were slaughtered by a group of Confederate revenants eager for blood and justice. It was easy (for a moment, still full of naiveté and uncritical devotion to the South) to picture myself as part of those ghosts, fighting against a nation that had long ago invested itself in dehumanizing and marginalizing that region which we called home. There was more to it, however, and as we watch we both came to the conclusion that this was the ideal expression of that complex duality that goes along with identifying oneself with a region marked not only by its racist tendencies, but by its beauty, its culture, and its humanity. *2001 Maniacs* represented for both of us the inability to escape from the evils

committed not by our ancestors (both of our families had arrived after the war) but by people who shared a similar understanding of the place in which they (and we) lived.

For me, the South had always been a haunted place. Growing up, I used to delight in reading and listening to tales of the abiding terror: the spectres that still inhabited decayed plantation houses; the vengeful ghosts of slaves; and the creatures that exist just beyond the light of the campfire. What I have come to understand in the course of this study is that it is not simply the South that is a haunted place, but the nation: haunted not by the region, but by the ghosts of injustice, racism and threats that those things pose to American ideals. We have seen, in each of the iterations of the Southern horror film discussed here, the ways in which the South has been a shifting, evolving idea in the past century of American history. It has been the monstrous abject other, the vengeful rebel, the terrible landscape, and the media-soaked image of a world beyond reality. We tremble, scream, and laugh at these images because we cannot help but try to work through the terror that the South represents as we watch these stories unfold. In its way, cinema is a national therapy session that allows us, as a community, to confront the darker angels of our nature.

Like most therapy, the nation's issues with the South can never be wholly resolved. Since the beginning of this project, a new generation of Southern horror film has continued to shape the cinematic legacy of the region. One such film is *Cabin in the Woods*, which features an ominous character known as 'The Harbinger', a degenerate white Southern gas station attendant whose role in the film's vast meta-narrative (the film itself is a complex rumination on the horror genre) places the Southerner as a terrifying prophet of doom, using the set-piece of the rural gas station (already a common trope) to establish the characters' departure from the safety of society. Other, more recent, films include *Haunting in Connecticut 2: Ghosts of Georgia* (arguably the

worst-titled film since *Death Bed: The Bed That Eats*) tells the story of a the vengeful ghosts of slaves who were murdered by the manager of a safe house used in the Underground Railroad in order to feed his collection of person-shaped taxidermy. During the final phases of the process, Lions Gate released *Texas Chainsaw 3D*, which is a successful reinterpretation of the original, though in this case the monster is not in fact Leatherface, but the abiding influence that lynch violence has on the region. The film successfully recreates the opening act of the original, with a group of young adults making their way to an ancestral home. In this case, however, the home is actually that of the last survivor of the Sawyer family, the other members of which were massacred themselves by a mob of bloodthirsty townsfolk. In the end, the death of the Sawyers has been avenged, and the murderous (this time non-cannibalistic) Leatherface not only continues to live but is virtually adopted by the films *Final Girl*, who is his cousin. These films, while lucrative mines for scholarly inquiry, were released too late to be included in this project. Considering just these examples, it is obvious that Southern horror film, and-for that matter—the South itself, is in no danger of disappearing.

In the end, I guess, my journey through the world of Southern horror film mirrors that of Charles B. Pierce in *The Legend of Boggy Creek*. Both of us, driven by the memories and anxieties of our youth, have sought to find our place in the world through an analysis of what scares us. My own conclusion is probably colored more by desensitization than an embrace of the unknown, these films no longer scare me because the stories and their tropes have become so clichéd at this point that I cannot be scared of them. Instead, I simply love them. The terrible and grotesque images of this haunted South are what I think about when I'm driving down Highway 17 in South Carolina, they are what I see when I eat lunch overlooking Atlanta's Oakland Cemetery, and it is those images that I am chasing on midnight journeys to the grave of

William Faulkner. It is as if this morbid fascination with death, murder, and monstrosity has let me confront the monstrous aspects of my region and move past them. The more I think about, the more I realize that that is role of these films in American imagination. By creating articulated caricatures of our darker aspects, we banish them to the screen and page. That which is on the page and screen we can control, we can change, and we can destroy. These monsters—whether they take the form of Bigfoot, cannibalistic hill folk, or treacherous European witchdoctors—are expressions of one simple thing: that which we fear, or perhaps more accurately that which we allow ourselves to fear. They are not the man down the street who hates someone because of the color of their skin, not the relative who took part in a lynch mob, not the brutal overseer that participated in the subjugation of an entire people. Instead, these monsters are expressions of the fear that we have for those things.

I began this project with one simple word: Fear. Why to we have an obsession with subjecting ourselves to fear? Truthfully, there can never be just one answer to a question like this one. Like the genre of horror itself, fear shifts, changes, moves to fill the vessel that it is in, adapts to serve the culture as it is in order to allow them the opportunity to confront the things that threaten it both inside and out. Especially for a relationship like the one between the South and the rest of the United States, this has allowed a rehabilitation of sorts, allowing the national mind to move past recent troubles and displace any lingering resentment or distrust onto cinematic avatars that can certainly take it (since they do not exist). The mediated image of the South is one that not only is the home of the national dream of a life of leisure on a vast plantation marked by opulence, it is also a place where all of our terrors and anxieties live, a place that has the distinction of being wherever-you-are-not-at-the-time. As someone who lives much of his life in imagined spaces, these images of the South are a space to work through my

own demons, my own personal Southern identity. For the nation they work in much the same way, affirming our own unified American-ness in opposition to something that we (Southern and not-Southern alike) can define ourselves as not being a part of. Whether it threatens to destroy, destabilize, or consume us is incidental because in the end we know that they are fiction. For all of the fear that we allow ourselves to have by watching these films, the social contract of horror protects us from actually believing, once the show is over, that we are in any real danger. And that makes all the difference.

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