

ABSTRACT

Inventing Dixie: Literary Adaptation and the Hollywood Southern

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Many people have never visited the American South, but everyone has “seen the movie.” For nearly a century, American films have been the chief cultural arbiters of southern regional identity in the popular imagination. However, the movie industry has never created this image entirely from scratch. Instead, virtually all major film representations of the South have come from literary works. With this in mind, I employ adaptation theory to examine how the process of translating southern literature into film has continually invented and reinvented the region for audiences throughout the twentieth century and across a range of genres. Although this study can only begin to uncover the complex forces that shape these cultural perceptions, several interesting patterns emerge. In portraying the South, filmmakers have consistently sought authenticity while achieving only the illusion of it because they remain largely unaware of the constructed nature of the myths that films constantly reinforce.

Inventing Dixie: Literary Adaptation and the Hollywood Southern

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CHAPTER ONE

“No, But I’ve Seen the Movie:” Adaptation Theory and the Popular Image of the South

“Tell about the South,” Shreve orders his Harvard roommate Quentin on a cold January night in 1910. “What’s it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all” (Faulkner 174). If William Faulkner had set his novel just a few years later, Shreve might not have spent a sleepless night discussing those questions. He might just have gone to the movies for answers instead. For nearly a century, American films have been the chief cultural arbiters of southern regional identity, at least in the popular imagination. Like the allegorical story of the region that emerges in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the “cinematic South” is a crazy quilt of wildly different experiences, each informed by a unique set of prejudices and preconceptions, stitched roughly together into the semblance of a coherent whole. Facts, selected consciously or otherwise by storytellers, are liberally mixed with outright fiction to produce an artificially constructed image. Larry Langman and David Ebner suggest that it is impossible to fully answer “to what extent these stereotypes were the product of the movie industry or were arrived at independently.” Impossible or not, they concede that “to underestimate the influence of Hollywood in determining these images would be a mistake” (ix). Despite its undeniable influence over them, the movie industry has certainly never created the images that it propagates entirely from scratch. In fact, virtually all major film depictions of the South, beginning with *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915, have been adapted from literary works, which are also the inventions of a particular

cultural tradition. Peter Soderbergh quotes Faulkner as saying that “films of his works were outstanding pictures and faithful to the original,” and laments that “the question of how faithful the original might have been was one seldom considered” (18).

Southern literature, as Michael Kreyling attests, “is a cultural product, [...] a product culturally and historically fabricated to local specifications by narratives that are more or less cooperative [...] and more or less conscious” (ix). In other words, the “South” that exists in southern literature is a construct that has evolved and developed over time. Meanwhile, if southern literature is a fabricated “insider” account of the region, then southern films are often distorted “outsider” versions of that account, and may be that much less “true.” There are obviously many exceptions to this general rule, and the relationship between southern literature and film is more complex than this description suggests. Still, if the adaptation of these regional narratives does not necessarily result in a less nuanced representation of reality, then neither does it tend toward greater realism. The chief result of the adaptive process, ultimately, is an immediately recognizable set of basic conventions and stereotypes, stock characters and stories, controlling myths and master narratives; it is the brand that the nation collectively identifies as “the South.” While Hollywood is not the only manufacturer of this cultural product, its version is the most widely consumed. Many people have never visited the American South or read its literature, but virtually everyone can claim that they have “seen the movie.” Still, there are obviously significant connections between southern literature and films about the South. A critical discussion of these connections can reveal how and in what ways the process of adapting southern narratives into films has

continually invented and reinvented the region for movie audiences throughout the twentieth century and across a range of genres.

Several avenues for scholarly discussion appear once the viewer has been alerted to the fundamental artificiality of the cinematic South, and to its seemingly universal currency among filmmakers and the film-going public. There have been a small handful of attempts to comprehensively deal with cinematic representations of the South, but a surprising number of possible lines of inquiry remain largely untouched, including the relationship between southern film adaptations and their literary sources. In one early account, “Hollywood and the South, 1930-1960” (1965), Peter Soderbergh briefly surveys the previous three decades of filmic depictions of the South with an eye chiefly toward broad trends and their success with audiences. He divides his discussion in half, dealing first with the years before and during the Second World War and then with the post-war period. This chronological summary is further subdivided into different types of films: nostalgic stories which celebrated the Old South, and social “issue” films critical of the New South during the first period, followed by a similar division in the second period, but with the addition of the even more decadent “school of decay” portrayals of contemporary southern life. His chief interest is in the films’ critical and box office reception, both in the South and in other parts of the country, over the course of the period discussed. This yields some interesting insights into differences in regional perspectives, but ultimately says nothing about where these images come from or how and why they take hold in the public imagination.

The depth of Soderbergh’s analysis is necessarily blunted by his brevity, and by the sheer number of films that he describes. Nevertheless, he does pause for a few

remarks about particularly important films. His comments leave little doubt about the overall effects of southern film images: “But what of the role played [...] in the reinforcement and perpetuation of the common image [of the South]? Have our films made pictorial contributions toward the dissipation - or the longevity - of 'exaggerated views' of Southern society? The answer seems obvious” (15). More importantly, though, Soderbergh notes each of the many films he lists that are adapted from a literary source. Although he does not discuss any specific aspects of the adaptation process, he does observe that, when “one thinks back [...] it becomes all too evident that the novels and plays relevant to the South have with few exceptions made material available to the studios which has been anything but complimentary in the eyes of non-Southern elements” (18). It is particularly interesting that Soderbergh lays the blame for this result as much on the material being adapted as on the studios responsible for the final product, but he concludes the article before developing this line of thought any further.

Fred Chappell takes a similar approach to classification and description in “The Image of the South in Film” (1978). He begins by stating that “The film image of the south generally breaks down into two very broad categories: the south as Eden and the south as Hell” (303), and proceeds in those terms. The bulk of Chappell’s essay, like Soderbergh’s, is spent in dealing with the latter of the two categories. However, he offers even less description of individual films, instead supplying a lengthy laundry list of titles associated with each subgroup of films. Although there is some interest in the way Chappell groups certain films together in particular categories, what little analysis he offers is merely thinly disguised expressions of annoyance. The entire article could well be characterized as a blast of academic frustration, for which he offers “All this heavy

metaphor makes it hard to think calmly” by way of excuse. Even so, although he does not contribute meaningfully to the task himself, he does indicate the need for further inquiry:

There are other visions of the south as Hell that might be investigated. There is the Hell of Family (*The Little Foxes*), the Hell of Paganism (*Suddenly Last Summer, Deliverance*), of Poverty (*Tobacco Road*), of Debased Humanism (*The Glass Menagerie*) [...] These films and others lie in the canisters, awaiting the vigilant and intrepid explorer.

He also concludes with one particularly significant insight into the production of these films: “In most films about the south, the film makers are saying, ‘See, it's just as you thought. I told you so.’ And so they have, time and again” (311). Movie audiences see a South that matches their own perception of the region. However, just as the public goes to the movies and finds the South that they expect to find, filmmakers have often pointed their cameras at the South (or at a studio backlot) and captured what they expect to capture. What this article fails to grasp is that in many cases, perhaps more than Chappell would be willing to grant, filmmakers are largely as unaware of their own cultural assumptions as their audiences are, and in cases where they are filming a literary work (serving merely as “translators” of what is already there), complacency about regional stereotypes is more likely, not less.

Also in 1978, Jack Kirby completed a book-length study, *Media-Made Dixie: The South in the American Imagination*, which was later revised for a new edition in 1986. Kirby’s approach is the most complete discussion of the various media forces that have contributed to cultural perceptions of the South, and remains the definitive, and most frequently cited, treatment of its subject. As the title implies, Kirby deals with, not only film (though film receives the most attention), but also histories, literature, radio, television, music, sports, politics, and so forth. His emphasis is more on surface

connections between different media and their effects on the American imagination, rather than any extensive analysis of individual works. His book is a history of popular culture, and is chiefly concerned with movements and trends. Most of Kirby's chapters divide depictions of the region into categories (much as the previous assessments had), including "The Embarrassing New South," "The Grand Old South," "The Visceral South," and "The Devilish South." Like Soderbergh, he shows an awareness of the importance of southern literature with respect to film, but never seems to distinguish between a film and the novel on which it is based. For the purposes of his discussion, differences notwithstanding, they are effectively a single work.

Two more books appeared in 1981: *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth* by Edward Campbell, Jr., and *The South and Film*, a critical anthology edited by Warren French, to which Campbell also contributed an essay. French makes a valiant attempt to impose some larger, connective vision on the essays in *The South and Film*, but ultimately they are too disparate in focus, and many deal with topics (such as the difficulties MGM experienced in filming *The Yearling*) that are far too marginal to contribute to French's chief interest: the attempt "to create a Southern film genre" (13). This idea, outlined in some detail by French in his introduction, is the work's most interesting contribution to the conversation, but French's efforts are only rarely mentioned in later discussions of southern film. Campbell's work, on the other hand, is in many ways less dated than even Kirby's study because it focuses almost exclusively on an early period of film history, and on a genre that has faded into virtual non-existence. Campbell devotes the first four chapters of his book to films made before 1941, followed by a single chapter discussing the forty years afterward. As his subtitle indicates,

Campbell is almost exclusively interested in developments pertaining to “the Southern Myth”; that is, romanticized stories about plantation life in the Old South. Campbell’s book is invaluable with regards to its subject, but obviously limited with respect to the totality of southern literature and film. However, where most scholarly discussions have given the bulk of their attention to negative depictions of the South in movies, Campbell’s approach is entirely the reverse. He also makes some interesting observations about the relationship between a few novels and the films based on them, but he shares with Kirby a more general tendency to conflate the two.

Few major studies have approached the subject of the South and film since the flurry of interest in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Three more recent works, however, bear mentioning: J.W. Williamson’s *Hillbillyland: What the Movies Did to the Mountains and What the Mountains Did to the Movies* (1995), Allison Graham’s *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle* (2001), and *Hollywood’s Image of the South: A Century of Southern Film* (2001), compiled by Larry Langman and David Ebner. In the preface to their book, Langman and Ebner echo French’s ambition to “establish the ‘southern’ as a legitimate film genre” (ix). Their approach, though, could not be more different. Almost devoid of critical analysis, this is essentially a bibliography of southern films, listing titles with a brief plot summary, occasionally supplemented by further historical context, production information, or critical and popular reception. The book includes several hundred titles, all listed alphabetically within 20 chapters organized by topic. Each chapter begins with a short description of its topic. This method of organization leaves a great deal to be desired. A small scattering of films appear twice, but the logic behind why a particular film belongs

in one category more than another remains frustratingly obscure. For instance, *Jezebel* (1938) appears under both “Southern Aristocrats” and “Southern Belles,” but not under “Plantation Life,” “Slaves and Slavery,” or “Social Conditions.” *Gone with the Wind* is listed with “Plantation Life” and “Family Survival” (only one entry mentions the Margaret Mitchell novel), but not “Southern Belles,” “The Civil War,” or “Reconstruction and the Carpetbaggers.” The book would be far more navigable if all titles were listed alphabetically, and the themes in each film included as part of the summary. Nevertheless, the comprehensiveness of this volume is impressive and obviously useful as an aid to further analysis.

Williamson and Graham have produced more topical approaches to southern film representations. Williamson, obviously, deals with how depictions of the hillbilly (or “cracker,” “redneck,” “white trash,” etc.) stereotype have evolved over time. Like most, he divides his study into distinct topics: “The Hillbilly as Fool,” “The Hillbilly as Social Bandit,” “Hillbilly Gals,” and so forth. Although Williamson deals with almost no film adaptations in his study, he delivers excellent critical insights into those few that he discusses. Meanwhile, Graham delves deeply into how a variety of different media (television, film, journalism, etc.) have dealt with race in the South, focused mostly on the decade following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision by the Supreme Court in 1954. The first four chapters of her book are devoted to the framework of racial depictions she describes as having been established during this period. The final chapter briefly traces the legacy of these depictions through to the mid-1990s (her analysis culminates with a discussion of the popularity of *Forrest Gump* in 1994, but she also mentions films released as late as 1999). Her approach is most reminiscent of Kirby’s in

that it is wide-ranging and impeccably researched, but she also gives more attention to analysis of individual works, whether of novels, television shows, or films. Her purpose in doing this is to draw attention to “specific aspects of the cinematic redemption of whiteness” (16), rather than to illuminate the translation of individual narratives across media.

This is essentially how academic approaches to cinematic depictions of the South have proceeded since the 1960s, with very limited attention paid to the role of adaptation and the nature of the process. And, if these discussions of films have only a little to say about the role of literature, analysis of literature has even less to say about film. This general rule applies as much to scholarly articles as to longer studies. Critical discussions of literature almost never mention any existing film adaptations, while critical discussions of films only occasionally explore literary sources in any depth. However, in instances where both a novel and the film based on it have achieved some popular or critical success, scholarly discussions of the adaptation process exist, albeit focused on the individual work in question with limited attention to larger genre or regional contexts. Discussions of individual works relevant to this study are addressed in specific chapters. The theoretical framework for many of these individual approaches, as for this study, has its origins in *Novels into Film* (1957), George Bluestone’s seminal exploration of adaptation theory.

Examinations of adaptation between novel and film require a unique set of assumptions, and must be prefaced with some words of explanation and qualification. Critics frequently cite two quotes as part of the foundation for their inquiry into adaptation theory. In the preface to *The Nigger of Narcissus* (1897), Joseph Conrad says,

“My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the powers of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*” (qtd. in McFarlane 3). This sentiment was echoed by filmmaking pioneer D.W. Griffith in 1913: “The task I am trying to achieve is above all to make you see” (qtd. in McFarlane 4). Griffith’s words, though probably drawn consciously from Conrad, seem to highlight an early confluence of intent between the artistic ambitions of the modern novelist and those of the narrative filmmaker. Despite this obvious connection, and despite the fact that motion pictures turned immediately to literary sources for much of their material, serious attempts at a comprehensive theory to discuss the process of transformation from written word into projected image only really began with Bluestone in 1957. Bluestone’s approach dealt for the first time with the delicate process by which a narrative is translated between two very different art forms. However, in spite of this foundation, the most common critical method of discussing a film that has been adapted from a novel continued to center on detailed discussions of the given film’s alterations to the original text for the purpose of evaluating the film’s faithfulness to its source. This is known as fidelity criticism.

Film scholar Brian McFarlane’s 1996 work on adaptation theory, *Novel to Film*, sought to reassess the usefulness of fidelity criticism. Arguing that the question of fidelity is misplaced as the course along which adaptation studies has developed since Bluestone, McFarlane claims that this approach falsely assumes that any given text has a single, agreed-upon meaning which the filmmaker has either represented faithfully or not. Inevitably, however, this sort of assessment is “a doomed enterprise” and “unilluminating” because a film can only be faithful to a single reading of a text; a reading which is unlikely to coincide with the views of most of the audience (9).

Ultimately, adaptation criticism can never fully escape the fidelity question; it is simply unavoidable. Any discussion of an adaptation must at least begin by examining what has been altered. However, in contrast with fidelity criticism, here “differences are no longer treated as [...] unfaithfulness toward the literary source. They are studied as the symptoms of other norms and models which [...] have overruled the model of the literary novel” (Cattrysse 224). The convention that dictates the average runtime of a feature-length film, requiring a novel’s plot to be condensed, is one example of such a norm. McFarlane advocates an approach that 1) stresses the intertextuality at work in any convergence of distinct art forms, 2) can successfully differentiate between literary elements that are directly transferrable and those which must be adapted to film, and 3) can identify the cinematic and cultural contexts which influence a film version without having anything to do with its source. McFarlane also suggests that critics develop an awareness of different forms of adaptation, and be able to differentiate between whether the filmmaker is attempting to *transpose* a literary work directly onto the screen, to deliberately alter the work in order to *comment* on it, or to use the work as a point of departure for a different work of art entirely (*analogy*). However, it is possible that a film adaptation might represent a combination of more than one of these forms.

Meanwhile, although useful as a point of reference, McFarlane’s own semiotic focus is far too rigorously structured. While rightly cautioning against allowing subjective criticism to define critical assessment of an adaptation’s success, McFarlane fails to allow enough flexibility for critical exploration. His most useful contribution is in suggesting principles rather than prescribing methods. Drawing on the approach of McFarlane and others, Maureen Quinn defines adaptation as “an expression of a novel in

which we are allowed to see the collaborative vision of others” (20). Quinn proposes a method which views adaptation as an invitation to engage in a critical dialog with both the film and the novel. Central to this approach is the assumption that, with respect to adaptation, any consideration of a film and its literary source as completely separate offers only a limited perspective on each; only by considering them together can there be a dialog that emphasizes both works as an intertextual unit, allowing each the potential to modify or illuminate the other. More importantly, an open examination of multiple approaches to the same material can reveal more clearly what each work is intended to accomplish, which can in turn help to indicate why a given telling was undertaken in a particular way. The application of Quinn’s view of intertextuality shows that a literary work’s only inherent advantage over an adaptation is in having existed first. This need not be considered an advantage at all. Once a novel has become a film, neither text can exist in a vacuum anymore. Privileging novel over film in a discussion about adaptation should be regarded as a pointless exercise in recreating the circumstances from before the film existed. The greater an adaptation’s success *as a film*, the more it will be able to bring to a critical conversation with its original source about the narrative they both share. Any useful application of adaptation theory, then, must consider literary and cinematic narrative as basically of equal importance for the purposes of analysis.

However, despite the importance of intertextuality in achieving a balanced reading of both novel and film, it is equally important to account for the extratextual forces that have influenced the film, and perhaps even the novel. This requires that the critic understand both novels and films as works which “have histories and are in turn *grounded* in history” (Larsson qtd. in Kline 74). John Ellis’s description of the contrast

between the generally *assumed* aim of a given adaptation and its *true* aim points to this essential dimension in considerations of the relationship between the adaptation process and stereotypical film images of the South. The assumed aim of adaptation is, of course, “to reproduce the contents of the novel on the screen.” This is the basic assumption both of fidelity criticism and of fans of the novel: “The whole marketing strategy of adaptations from literary classics or from ‘bestsellers’ encourages such an assessment.” The reason for this encouragement lies in the *true* aim of adaptation. Ellis explains that, in actuality:

[A]daptation trades upon the memory of the novel, a memory that can derive from actual reading, or, as is more likely with a classic of literature, a generally circulated cultural memory. The adaptation consumes this memory, aiming to efface it with the presence of its own images. The successful adaptation is one that is able to replace the memory of the novel with the process of a filmic [...] representation. (3)

This explanation clearly reveals the chief source of audience and critical frustration with adaptations of which they disapprove; the film has failed to successfully replace the memory of the novel. This process can even work the other way in the case of reading an obscure novel on which a particularly beloved film is based. Furthermore, Ellis may well have accounted for the previously discussed tendency of analysis of southern films to conflate them with the novels on which they are based. The films in question have successfully replaced the novels in the critics’ memories, at least with respect to general perceptions of the South. In actuality, though, these perceived similarities can be completely misleading, indicating a blind spot in the current academic understanding of what has actually transpired at those critical cultural points of contact where adaptation happens, and pointing again to the significance of adaptation theory in guiding a balanced assessment.

With respect to southern film, an adaptation may trade as much on “a generally circulated cultural memory” of what the South is “really like,” as it does on the memory of the novel. In fact, the filmmaker’s ability to portray the South as audiences expect to see it is much more likely to successfully “efface” the novel’s images with the presence of the film’s images. This indicates that additional sources of inspiration for a film generally exist, even if it has been adapted from a novel, and even if that adaptation is considered essentially “faithful” to the novel. With regards to southern film, whether cultural memory as an additional source is a product of audience expectations, filmmakers’ perceptions, or (more likely) some combination of the two, if it remains entirely unaccounted for, the subsequent analysis will inevitably be distorted.

This explanation of the critical theory of adaptation indicates several practices with respect to methodology. In the assessment and discussion of individual works, the approach in this study remains chiefly concerned with: 1) describing how the process of adaptation took place, 2) accounting for specific elements of the literary and filmic texts and identifying extratextual sources for points where the two differ, and 3) suggesting possible reasons for this divergence with respect to the various cultural traditions within which these narratives operate. The most obvious way to go about these tasks differs somewhat with respect to each work. However, each case requires a discussion of the critical context of both novel and film, and their immediate historical and cultural context. In addition to discussing different works, each chapter also develops its analysis in connection with a different general approach. The purpose of this is twofold: First, to select the approach that is best suited to revealing the cultural mechanisms driving texts that have very little in common beyond a shared connection with the South. Second, to

attempt to indicate the vast space in southern studies that has yet to be explored. The former is simply an obvious and necessary component of good scholarship. The latter must serve as a corrective to the necessary brevity of a study which can only qualify as an introduction to a line of inquiry in which much remains to be done.

One additional facet of adaptation theory that requires awareness is the question of authorship. A novel, though analyses of it may often describe the influence of previous authors or other people, has a clearly identifiable author as its creator. Films are, by their very nature, much more collaborative endeavors, involving screenwriters, producers, directors, performers, cinematographers, and a host of additional creative and technical personnel at work behind the scenes. Ever since the 1950s, auteur theory has held that the director is a film's primary author. More recently, the Schreiber theory has attempted to shift primary credit for the creative vision to the screenwriter. However, under the studio system during the early days of Hollywood, a film's producer often exercised primary control. The reality is that authorship will vary from film to film, and while some have a clear primary author, others involve many people equally, making it difficult or impossible to determine who contributed the most to the finished film. The discussions of individual adaptations in this study seek to take this into account wherever authorship is relevant, identifying the primary creative force behind a film when possible, and at least identifying any additional people who may have contributed significantly to the work.

Chapters Two through Five are organized more or less chronologically with respect to the filmic texts that they discuss. However, of greater significance is the larger "narrative" to which each chapter contributes as part of a historical delineation of the

major trends in dominant cultural depictions of the South and of the varied roles that adaptation has played in support of those depictions:

Chapter Two explores the national development of a mythic South which began after the Civil War, and in particular this mythology's significance to a genre of American films prior to the Second World War. The key texts considered are *The Clansman* by Thomas Dixon, Jr., D.W. Griffith's 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, and the novel and film versions of *Gone with the Wind*. The analysis of these four works seeks to interrogate the general assumption that they are ideologically homogenous; an assumption which tends to obscure their essential dissimilarities, and consequently, the external cultural forces which both altered them and made them appear monolithic in their depictions of plantation life and the antebellum South. This chapter also deals with the nature of claims of historical accuracy in films about the 19th-century South.

Chapter Three discusses the cultural reversal which led to a sharp decline in the popularity of stories glorifying the South in favor of stories of southern abjection which depicted the region as a cultural other with respect to the rest of the nation. The argument centers on the region's growing connection with the horror genre, and pays particular attention to the novel and film versions of *Deliverance* as the culmination of developing depictions of the South that made it the ideal cinematic setting for a distinctly American form of horror film. In doing so, this examination highlights some of the ways in which films seek to create and shape reality.

Chapter Four turns from broad trends and genre discussions to examine John Huston's 1979 adaptation of Flannery O'Connor's 1952 novel *Wise Blood*. This serves both as a contrast with *Deliverance*, and as an interesting case of clashing regional and

ideological perspectives between two major artistic personalities that resulted in a surprisingly anomalous film. The discussion also explores a different side of the cinematic objective of verisimilitude via the director's search for a compromise between his vision, the author's vision, and reality.

Chapter Five describes the crisis of cultural identity experienced by southern characters in novel-to-film and historical adaptations that emerged out of a period of heightened interest in the Civil Rights Movement and stories of racial conflict. This chapter highlights the way that these stories prompt their southern characters to reject their own identity, and accounts for the way that the narratives both resurrect and rewrite the region's past, blurring the line between fact and fiction. The novel and film versions of *A Time to Kill* and *The Chamber* are the main focus of the discussion, but some attention is directed towards other films which form the context in which these films were made. The chapter concludes by questioning the cultural implications of turning to frequently and vividly to the region's darker past for film representations.

One major connective thread that emerges from analyzing the adaptation process is the wide variety of ways in which filmmakers have consistently sought, or claimed to seek, authenticity in their portrayals of the South. The result, over and over, is that these films have usually achieved only the illusion of authenticity because their creators remain largely unaware of, or indifferent to, the constructed nature of the myths that films constantly reinforce, and even sometimes create. However, the question each chapter seeks to address is to what extent these constructions are a product of perpetuation by film depictions (knowingly or not), and to what extent these films merely transmit ideas from their literary sources.

CHAPTER TWO

Moonlight, Magnolias, and Movies: Adapting the Mythic South

The “southern” and the “western” are both genres of American film intimately connected to distinct regions of the country. However, where westerns have long since transcended the geographical boundaries of the American West, the southern does not venture outside the group of states located below the Mason-Dixon Line. The obvious reason for this is that the myth of the American West is one of progress, opportunity, individualism, and of the adventure and excitement of life at the margins of civilization. Meanwhile, the myth of the American South is a pseudo-historical epic of lost innocence and of the extinction of an idealized way of life. Its equivalent to the lawless frontier town setting is the stately antebellum plantation, its heroes are the refined southern gentleman or belle, and its villains are the Yankee soldier or carpetbagger, the poor white scalawag, and the black freedman. Unmoored from its historical or regional trappings, the “southern” simply isn’t southern anymore. Still, despite this inherent lack of mutability, southern films have captivated enormous audiences for over a century. *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), based on Thomas Dixon’s novel *The Clansman*, was the most profitable film ever made until the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937. Two years later, *Gone with the Wind*, based on the Margaret Mitchell novel, was released to thunderous acclaim and shattered all previous records, remaining the most widely seen film of all time to this day. While the novels these films are based on were also popular bestsellers in their day, as Edward Campbell explains, “For the most part the

[romanticized] interpretation has been presented in film [...] which makes the antebellum society impressively real to an audience no writer could ever hope to influence” (4).

Indeed, these films have left a deep impression in the popular imagination, depicting an antebellum South that embodied virtues like courage, grace, hospitality, nobility, and respectability; all while glossing over the effects of slavery on both master and slave. Both films, and other less significant examples of plantation fiction, adhered so firmly to genre conventions that they replaced the historical reality in the minds of contemporary audiences, and cast a long shadow across cultural perceptions of the South as it existed before, during, and immediately after the Civil War. Campbell goes so far as to attribute most of the “modern misunderstanding of the region, by natives and outsiders alike,” to “a persistent mythology willingly accepted by countless audiences” (14). The success of both films has also somewhat supplanted the novels on which they are based. Who today has ever heard of Thomas Dixon, let alone read his work? And who could read Mitchell’s novel without picturing Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable in the roles of Scarlett O’Hara and Rhett Butler?

Furthermore, on the surface, discussions of all four narratives (both novels and both films) have long reduced them to the similarities that contributed to their enormous cultural influence over the larger regional mythology. However, closer analysis reveals important differences in the way each novel deals with matters such as history, politics, gender, race, and southern identity. These subtleties are significantly muted by the film versions in favor of appealing to the expectations of a wide national audience, and have remained largely ignored by audiences and critics alike. Despite their obvious involvement in perpetuating misconceptions about the region, the cultural significance of

these novels as interpretations of the southern myth cannot be fully understood without an examination of the differences between them, and of the adaptation process that realigned them with normative cultural images of the South.

Considering the circumstances which led Thomas Dixon, inspired by strong cultural, historical, political, and personal forces, to write *The Clansman*, its production seems almost inevitable. Born in North Carolina in 1864, he was five years old when he witnessed his first lynching, carried out with the active participation of his father, older brother, and two uncles. His maternal uncle, Colonel LeRoy MacAfee, was a local leader in the Ku Klux Klan, in charge of all of the chapters in the surrounding counties, and Dixon claimed to have played the key role of messenger for his uncle during several important Klan-related activities. Most of his childhood transpired during the years of Reconstruction, and the memories of that time recounted in his autobiography mirror incidents from his novels almost scene-for-scene in some cases. Interestingly, many of the major plot points from *The Clansman* resurfaced in *Southern Horizons*, Dixon's unpublished autobiography, composed late in his life.

However, by the time he began to apply his own unique spin to the glowing mythology of the Old South early in the twentieth century, much of it was already well-established by decades of popular regional fiction written in a spirit of reconciliation and post-war nostalgia. Many of the genre conventions were popularized, if not established, by the widely read regional fiction of Joel Chandler Harris and the best-selling sentimental novels of Thomas Nelson Page. Ironically, though, one of the most prominent influences on plantation fiction was the anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Thanks to the absence of copyright, dramatic versions of

Stowe's novel were being staged while the novel itself was still appearing in serial form in 1851-2. "Tom shows" went on to become one of the most wide-spread and popular forms of American entertainment throughout the rest of the century and into the early 1900s, with unexpected repercussions. As Eric Lott explains, "for every one of the three hundred thousand who bought the novel in its first year, many more eventually saw the play. [...] but even in the version most faithful to Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was itself a compromise between antislavery politics and established entertainment conventions" (212). The message of the story, as it was imagined, re-imagined, and even parodied on stages across the nation, proved surprisingly malleable, and according to Lott, the "Tom show" depiction of antebellum life (including kindly masters and contented, well-kept slaves) is likely the single most important contributor to popular depictions of southern plantation life. In addition to setting the scene for plantation fiction, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* played another role in inspiring Dixon's work. In 1901, Dixon was driven to become a novelist in order to tell the "real story" of the South after he had witnessed a Tom show and "wept at its misrepresentation of Southerners" (Slide 21). The next year saw the publication of his first novel, *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden 1865-1900*.

Dixon's historical fiction, where not directly inspired by his personal experiences, was reinforced by historians of the so-called "Dunning School" of Reconstruction historiography. This account described a time of chaos, brought on by a Radical Republican quest for political power through enfranchisement and manipulation of blacks and disfranchisement of whites. Although heavily fictionalized and openly didactic, Dixon insisted that his novels were completely faithful to historical fact. In a note

introducing *The Leopard's Spots*, he declared, "The only serious liberty I have taken with history is to tone down the facts to make them credible in fiction. [...] It will be a century yet before people outside the South can be made to believe a literal statement of the history of those times" (x). However, a quote from a character in one of his later novels reveals a clearer picture of Dixon's philosophy of history: "It's what we call fiction, but I think fiction's the very best history we can read. It may not have happened just that way but it's true all the same" (qtd. in Slide v). By the time he published his best-selling second novel, *The Clansman*, in 1905, he had perfected this literary formula and was ready to conquer new audiences, quickly overseeing the production of a stage version as well.

Picking up immediately after the Civil War has ended, *The Clansman* follows the interrelated fortunes of two families, the Stonemans from the North, and the Camerons from the South, through the tumultuous and terrifying effects of Reconstruction on the Camerons' hometown, culminating in the formation of the Ku Klux Klan and its subsequent salvation of civilization itself from black rule imposed by vengeful northern politicians. The story is didactic above all else, and dialogue that does not serve to make some explicit point for the author is rare. The novel's central characteristic is its racial discourse, and criticism of it has proceeded almost exclusively in racial terms. Dixon's essential message, here as in many of his other novels, is that two distinct races cannot coexist in a single nation, and that racial mixing is a path to destruction for both black and white (but especially white). His rhetoric consistently elevates white civilization, culture, and accomplishments, while associating blacks with bestial terminology again and again. Furthermore, the consequence he envisions of complete freedom and equality

for African Americans is the wanton sexual desecration of white womanhood. Dixon conflates southern identity with white male identity, and his explorations of history, portrayals of gender dynamics, and use of established tropes about southern culture are all directed in support of his racial, patriarchal ideology.

Dixon's play toured the nation successfully, journeying throughout the South, West, and Midwest before arriving in New York early in 1906, and finally brought his dreams of answering *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to fruition just a few short years after he had sworn to do so. Dixon had harbored ambitions of being an actor years before, and he was initially thrilled by the experience of touring with his play, frequently availing himself of the opportunity to address the audience before the curtain rose or after it had gone down, and reveling in the immediacy of their approval. However, he eventually began to feel that even this medium could not offer him the exposure he so desperately wanted, and his attention was drawn to the fledgling art of motion pictures. He had already noticed that "Few people read the [...] histories" and even though *The Clansman* "was a best seller ([...] about a quarter million copies)," he now saw that "movie theaters drew millions" (Kirby 8). Meanwhile, D.W. Griffith, already a successful director, was looking for an appropriate subject on which he could base a feature-length film, something which had not yet been seriously attempted by American filmmakers. Griffith was a southerner as well, born in Kentucky, the son of Colonel Jacob "Roaring Jake" Griffith. Growing up, Griffith's father had regaled him with wild stories of his adventures in the Confederate Army. Dixon's story immediately captured his imagination with its possibilities, and he set to work conducting the historical research which would be necessary to bring their combined vision dramatically to life.

No historical detail was too small not to merit Griffith's attention, but his quest for authenticity was a deceptive one. "Inordinate attention to minor details provided authenticity for an interpretation which was itself not accurate. Time was devoted not to the thesis but to its trappings, and the surface detail simply obscured the interpretation's underlying weaknesses" (Campbell 49). For example, a scene depicting the state's black-dominated legislature is preceded in the film by a title card which declares the scene to be "AN HISTORICAL FACSIMILE of the State House of Representatives of South Carolina as it was in 1870. After photograph by 'The Columbia State.'" However, many of the individual incidents in the scene that follows, which include a black representative removing his shoes and placing them up on the desk in front of him, were drawn from political cartoons of the era rather than from accurate historical accounts. In any case, the prevailing historical interpretation of the time only confirmed Griffith's and Dixon's own assumptions about the period they were portraying, leading them to accept and perpetuate it without question. In the end, the finished film "amounted to a completion of a great historiographical tour through the media of the day" (Kirby 7). However, Campbell highlights the conflict between historical fact and cultural fiction presented by this cinematic approach to the region, and raises a troubling question:

[O]n one level a film's concept of the South was an attempt to convince the general public of its veracity. On another level, the cinematic portrayal took into account the desires of the audience and played upon the viewer's preconceptions. Hollywood's conceptualization and the public's imagination eventually became mutually supportive. Once caught in the reciprocal exchange of beliefs, did either the film industry or its audience realize that they were reinforcing the myth? (Campbell 20)

In this case, of course, the origins of this reciprocal exchange of beliefs extend even further into the past than the beginning of cinema, and it seems unlikely that either

Griffith or his audience could have been aware of their role in the process that Campbell describes.

Meanwhile, despite Dixon's outspoken admiration for *The Birth of a Nation*, and the obvious confluence between his and Griffith's approach to the material, noteworthy differences exist between the film and *The Clansman* which illuminate the mythmaking process outlined above. Adaptations of written works into silent film are unique in that they require the translation of the purely literary into the purely visual, and only a very small percentage of a novel's dialogue or exposition can be carried over. In the case of Griffith's vision for *The Birth of a Nation*, Dixon's essential message was stripped of his shallow characterization and inflammatory use of language, and transformed into a powerful affirmation of Aryan brotherhood populated by strong archetypes representing good and evil. Part of the difference between the two narratives stems from the fact that the cinematic constraints which produced Griffith's film images allows them a greater effect than Dixon's florid prose can achieve. Thus, where Dixon describes the villainous Gus with absurd grotesqueries ("his lips so thick they curled both ways up and down with crooked blood-marks across them [...] sinister bead eyes [...] gleamed ape-like [...] enormous cheek-bones and jaws seemed to protrude beyond the ears") (216), Griffith merely shows Gus (a white actor in blackface) behaving in ways that inspired his white audience to feelings of hatred and disgust. However, *The Birth of a Nation* also adds a great deal to Dixon's story and simplifies character relationships in order to add weight to its own thematic approach and to depict the South of Griffith's imagination.

The Birth of a Nation begins its story much earlier than *The Clansman*, although many of these scenes depict events that are merely described via dialogue in the novel.

An early title card declares that “The bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion,” followed by images of a Puritan minister speaking a blessing over a group of newly arrived slaves. In the novel, Ben Cameron declares, “When a slaver arrived at Boston, your pious Puritan clergyman offered public prayer of thanks” (124). In the novel, however, this line is part of a lengthy expository scene in which Ben is explaining the history of slavery in order to correct Elsie Stoneman’s misconceptions about him and his region, hoping to win her hand. Griffith (with the collaboration of co-screenwriter Frank E. Woods) disconnects it from this context and uses it as the starting point of his grand historical narrative, tracing all of the conflict which will follow over the next three hours back to this point. In this conception of history, the victims of slavery are also guilty of the conflict slavery will later cause, and the presence of the black race on American soil serves to drive members of the white race apart. Griffith builds this idea throughout the next several scenes, modifying the novel so that Ben Cameron and Phil Stoneman know each other and are good friends before the war begins. Griffith also invents additional siblings for both men, making them friends as well. This allows for a series of scenes in which the Stoneman boys visit the Cameron family during the days before the war, and establishes an important context which is absent from the novel. Here Griffith makes the story’s stakes clear; this is what the characters stand to lose as a result of racially provoked conflict.

These early scenes, in which the Stonemans tour the Cameron’s plantation, “where life runs in a quaintly way that is to be no more,” are not drawn from any description of Dixon’s, but from previously established antebellum stereotypes.

Recollections by Griffith's assistant camera operator, Karl Brown, point to the significance of this tradition in the realization of the antebellum plantation sets:

There was no question as to what the town should look like or how it should be dressed. I doubt if there was a man on that work crew who hadn't been out with a 'Tom' show [...] Stage crews had been constructing Tom shows for so long that there wasn't a detail of the Civil War period, inside or out, that they hadn't built. (qtd. in Williams 97)

In fact, according to Brown, the men constructing the set included hinges on the scenery so that it could be easily packed up and transported, even though it was only being used for the film. This account makes it clear that, for example, in the scene where the happy slaves entertain Ben and his friends with a dance outside the slave quarters during their two-hour lunch break, Griffith is drawing his inspiration, not from history, or even from images originated by Dixon's novel, but from long-standing cultural depictions of slave life. In fact, it is not at all clear from *The Clansman* whether Dixon would have agreed with Griffith's glorification of slavery, particularly given his outspoken condemnation of it elsewhere. A much clearer example of disagreement between Dixon's and Griffith's depictions of the South appears in the character of Ben Cameron. In the film, Ben is the very image of a southern Cavalier, idle and aristocratic. In the novel, he scoffs at this stereotype: "Cavalier fiddlesticks. There are no Cavaliers in my country. We are all Covenanter and Huguenot folks. The idea that Southern boys are lazy loafing dreamers is a myth" (Dixon 129). These subtleties, while not affecting the larger point of the narrative, reveal the context in which such elements rose to the surface of Griffith's milieu.

In addition to bringing the narrative in line with audience expectations, Griffith's modifications to the characters and their relationships further strengthen his theme of white brotherhood, and heighten the emotional intensity of its violation. Having

established the friendship between the Cameron and Stoneman siblings, Griffith has the younger brothers of both families meet on the battlefield, and die in each others' arms. A few scenes later, when Elsie and Ben meet in a northern hospital where Ben lies wounded (the scene that begins the novel), the significance of the encounter is heightened by their mutual relationship with Phil, who commends his wounded friend to the care of his sister in a letter. Ben, for his part, has carried Elsie's picture, taken from Phil, with him throughout the war. Their romance flourishes almost instantly. In the book, by contrast, this development is delayed not only by the fact that the two are strangers to each other, but because Ben already has a sweetheart back home: Marion Lenoir (who, we gather, was only 10 years old when Ben departed for the war). Ben eventually realizes that he cares for Elsie instead, and Marion, now 15, steps aside (although she still loves him). However, she is later raped by Gus and commits suicide alongside her mother in order to conceal the blight upon her virtue. Griffith simplifies this love triangle by transforming Marion into Ben's "pet" sister, Flora, without changing the essential dynamics of their relationship or its effect on the story. If anything, the change causes Flora's suicide to carry more weight for the audience than it does in the novel.

The climax of both stories is much the same, although the film significantly raises the stakes of the rescue by the Klan, dividing the danger among multiple protagonists and placing the black population fully in control of the town while the white families cower in their homes. The film also carries the story well beyond the conclusion of the novel, following through with the implied victory of the Klan in regaining political power in the South. Finally, regional reconciliation is symbolically achieved with a double wedding. Ben Cameron marries Elsie Stoneman, Phil Stoneman marries Margaret Cameron, and

the couples share a honeymoon by the sea, where they imagine a utopian world without war, where white Americans live together in harmony and peace, “one and inseparable, now and forever.” *The Clansman* ends on a note of relief that white civilization has been successfully saved from black tyranny, and more specifically, with “the South redeemed from shame” (374). *The Birth of a Nation* “sacrificed blacks to the nationalist cause,” following through on the reunification of North and South with the defeat and expulsion of the black race (Kirby 7). This shift in emphasis was presumably what led Dixon to suggest changing the film’s title to *The Birth of a Nation* after he attended the first screening. The film, much more than the novel, represents the “interlacing of Southern and national politics” (Müller-Hartman 54). Dixon’s racist rhetoric is rewritten to appeal to the entire nation, in part through Griffith’s introduction of mythic elements into Dixon’s narrative framework, without changing the fundamentals of his political message. The result was a resounding success, both critically and financially, and something of a cultural watershed. The film’s popularity is considered a significant factor in the major revival of the Ku Klux Klan, which began around the time of its release, and Griffith is generally credited with the national recognition of film as a serious art form. Thus, “American movies were born [...] in a racist epic” (Rogin qtd. in Williams 100). Furthermore, John Hope Franklin, writing in 1979, judged that “the influence of ‘Birth of a Nation’ on the current view of Reconstruction has been greater than any other single force” (52). Dixon and Griffith, to paraphrase Woodrow Wilson’s famous reaction to their film, had rewritten history with lightning, and now “rode a historiographical and political juggernaut which swept all before it” (Kirby 6).

All, that is, except for one particularly important demographic. African Americans, represented by the newly formed NAACP, rose up in loud protest against the film, battling its release in every city where it threatened to appear. The outcry they produced was so great that it forced President Wilson to retract his former praise of the film, and they succeeded in getting the film censored in several locations. The organization's crusade against *The Birth of a Nation* became something of a *cause célèbre*, and they continued to oppose it through several re-releases for decades. Most importantly with respect to future films, these protests managed to brand Griffith as a racist, a label he deeply resented. Stereotypical depictions of African Americans continued, but films about either the Reconstruction period or the Ku Klux Klan remained practically nonexistent until the release of *Gone with the Wind* in 1939; a powerful statement, considering the financial success of *The Birth of a Nation* and the formula-repetition business model of the film industry. Perhaps it simply made more sense to focus on the happier days of antebellum life rather than court controversy by depicting the downfall of the Confederate South. By the time "talkies" arrived and the Great Depression had begun, audiences were clamoring for two things: opulent musicals and uplifting stories with happy endings. The Old South, populated with bright, beautifully dressed belles, gallant gentlemen, and comical, singing slaves, promised them just that. So, for instance, Bing Crosby croons his way from town to town via riverboat in *Mississippi* (1935), and an all-slave choir serenades Bette Davis' catty southern belle in *Jezebel* (1938).

Meanwhile, southern plantation fiction and its attendant mythology, which had continued to appear steadily alongside the stark new face of southern literature

exemplified by authors like William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell, exploded once more with the 1936 release of Margaret Mitchell's exhaustive "encyclopedia of the plantation legend" (Cowley qtd. in O'Brien 153). That, at least, was how one reviewer labeled *Gone with the Wind* upon its release, and this view characterizes a significant portion of scholarly opinion. For many critics, the novel and the film epitomize everything that is hackneyed and ridiculous about the popular image of the South. They are correct inasmuch as Mitchell's conventions are inescapably a product of the plantation romance tradition; but (as some have pointed out) it would be a mistake to assume that this understanding of the novel's meaning is complete. Mitchell makes her debt to earlier authors clear in a 1936 letter replying to Thomas Dixon's praise of her work. She writes, "I was practically raised on your books, and love them very much," recounting how, as a young girl, she adapted Dixon's novel *The Traitor* (a sequel to *The Clansman*) into a play performed with the neighborhood children (52-53). However, what Dixon, and much of Mitchell's audience, seems to have missed is that she has told Dixon's story, but produced something radically different.

The contrast between Mitchell and Dixon (et al.) is most apparent with regards to race, and in the treatment of interracial rape that appears in both novels, as explored at some length by Kenneth O'Brien. This departure includes Mitchell's extended description of Reconstruction and of the Ku Klux Klan, which represents a digression of several pages of pure exposition. This portion of the novel manages to include every stock description of the period one might expect to encounter in Dixon's fictionalization of Dunning School historiography: "Now" we are told, "[Scarlett] knew what Reconstruction meant [...] as surely as if the house were ringed about by naked savages"

(429). Here in Mitchell's novel, as in Dixon's and in countless other novels and histories, are "the former field hands" who find "themselves suddenly elevated to the seats of the mighty" where "they conducted themselves as creatures of small intelligence might naturally be expected to do," while the "better class of them, scorning freedom, were suffering as severely as their white masters." Here, too, is a Ku Klux Klan that arises out of a "tragic necessity" and in response to "the large number of outrages on women and the ever-present fear for the safety of their wives and daughters" (434, 435). However, as O'Brien points out, the rote manner in which Mitchell trots out these well-worn clichés is indicative of her departure from convention: "Race relations—inseparable from the earlier novels—are largely background material for Mitchell. [...] Thus, in the sections on Reconstruction, politics and racial affairs are not at all integrated into the narrative but exist as long descriptive passages [...] backdrop against which Mitchell projects Scarlett O'Hara's story" (163).

Unsurprisingly, Scarlett's story also includes an instance of sexual assault, but the episode does not at all resemble the parallel scene as imagined by Dixon or Griffith. There, the Marion/Flora character is assaulted by Gus, a well-established character, who attacks the girl alone in the film, and with a gang of black friends in the novel. His crime is motivated entirely by lust for a girl that he already knows, which has been provoked by disruptions of the social order that have placed him in a position of power. In *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlett's attackers include both a black man and a white man from the shantytown she is driving past. They are nameless strangers, motivated initially by a desire to rob her, and she is rescued from the attack by the intervention of Big Sam, a black man and a former field hand who (in a Dixon novel) might well have been the

perpetrator rather than the savior. Even more significantly, Scarlett as victim is accused by India of being at fault for what happened through her continued insistence in defying gender-based restrictions of good breeding and good sense by driving herself through dangerous areas as she conducts her business: “What happened to you this afternoon was just what you deserved and if there was any justice you’d have gotten worse” (529). In this scene, Scarlett learns for the first time that her husband is a member of the Ku Klux Klan (of which, in contrast to Mitchell’s own narrative voice, she does not approve), and that they have gone out to avenge her honor and clean out the slum from which her attackers emerged. The significance of this Klan adventure is simply as a plot device to propel the story on to its next development by causing the death of Scarlett’s second husband, Frank Kennedy, and allowing Rhett Butler an opportunity to win back the respect of the local southerners when he steps in to cover for the surviving Klan members, thus opening the way for Scarlett to finally marry him. This is a major departure from *The Clansman*, in which the doings of the Klan are the narrative center around which everything else revolves.

Another obvious difference between Mitchell and Dixon, and a major source of the novel’s continued popularity, is in the nature of Scarlett’s character. Her ongoing “struggle [...] against the confines of Southern womanhood” (O’Brien 163) has led some critics to view *Gone with the Wind* as a feminist text, albeit a complicated one. Mitchell certainly uses the restrictions of gender to call the southern ideal into question, noting early on that “at no time, before or since, had so low a premium been placed on feminine naturalness” (54). This criticism could almost be a description of Thomas Dixon’s depiction of female characters in his novels. When Ben Cameron first begins to woo

Elsie Stoneman in *The Clansman*, she is a budding proto-feminist, determined to live her own life: “I deny your heaven-born male kingship. [...] I have a personality of my own. You and your kind assume the right to absorb all lesser lights.” To which Ben replies, “Certainly; I’m a man,” laughing openly at her dreams “of a life that shall be larger than the four walls of a home” (127). Later on, however, Elsie declares that, “When I first met you [...] I was a vain, self-willed, pert little thing [...] Now [...] I have grown into an impassioned, serious, self-disciplined, bewildered woman” (333). With southern patriarchy “under attack from the growing movement for female emancipation” (Müller-Hartmann 57), Dixon envisions female submission as a happy side-effect of black suppression. In addition, in the omnipresent threat of black rape envisioned by Dixon, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall sees “a fantasy of aggression against boundary-transgressing women” (qtd. in Müller-Hartmann 58). Scarlett flips this movement from independence to submission on its head, growing increasingly impatient with the restraints placed upon her, and actively finding ways to behave as she likes by gaming the social system under which she is forced to operate, frequently through collusion with Rhett, her male double and future lover.

Scarlett is consistently contrasted with her binary opposite, Melanie Wilkes, just as Rhett contrasts with Melanie’s cousin/husband Ashley. Melanie represents the ideal of southern femininity: courageous, unselfish, unquestioningly devoted to her family and her region, and virtuous to a fault. Mitchell presents Melanie, the ideal, as a character to be admired and respected. However, Mitchell undermines what Melanie represents at every turn. Although Melanie is the perfect image of southern womanhood, she is also almost a complete anomaly in the novel. Other southern women are catty (India Wilkes),

judgmental (Mrs. Mead), weak (Aunt Pittypat), and whiny (Suellen O'Hara), and those are just the upstanding southern women. Other prominent female characters include the promiscuous, ill-bred Emmie Slattery and the wealthy Atlanta prostitute Belle Watling (who frequently reveals greater strength of character than most of the other women). As for Melanie herself, despite her appeal as a character, she is presented as blindly naïve and physically weak. In contrast with Scarlett's strength and fertility in bearing a child to each of her three husbands and surviving a terrible fall which kills a fourth baby in the womb, Melanie ultimately dies as the result of a miscarriage. Mitchell, then, insists that southern womanhood is effectively a myth that does not exist in reality, and could not survive or reproduce if it did. Scarlett, on the other hand, shares a deeply symbolic connection with the vibrant, youthful city of Atlanta, which (we are told) was founded in the year of Scarlett's birth. Scarlett finds the city appealing because, "Like herself, the town was a mixture of the old and new in Georgia, in which the old often came off second best in its conflicts with the self-willed and vigorous new" (94).

This privileging of the new over the old is the key to Scarlett's success, and to her superiority. Shortly after Scarlett vows to do whatever she must in order to never experience hunger again, Mitchell describes the significance of what sets Scarlett apart: "Throughout the South for fifty years there would be bitter-eyed women who looked backward, to dead times, to dead men, evoking memories that hurt and were futile, bearing poverty with bitter pride because they had those memories. But Scarlett was never to look back" (Mitchell 283). Throughout the novel, Scarlett overcomes tragedy, heartbreak, and disappointment by putting them out of her mind; "I'll think about that tomorrow." Her attitude represents a sort of denial, but more importantly, it indicates a

refusal to dwell continually on the past which Mitchell sees as both destructive and as representative of prevailing southern attitudes. However, Mitchell also envisions a different, but equally problematic, form of self-deception, as Scarlett finally discovers at the end of the novel. Melanie's death moves her to self-reflection, leading to a series of startling epiphanies. She realizes that Melanie, whom she has always hated for her silly idealism and for standing in the way of Scarlett's love for Ashley, has been the only genuine female friend she ever had, and a source of strength for her throughout her life. More importantly, she realizes, just too late, that her love for Ashley, the representative of chivalrous, well-bred southern masculinity, has been terribly misplaced. Ashley, like his wife, is weak, and even cowardly, lacking the courage to tell her that he can never love her as he loves Melanie, thus preventing her from moving on to find happiness with someone else. This realization provides her with a rare moment of insight into Ashley's character, and her own:

He never really existed at all, except in my imagination [...] I loved something I made up, something that's just as dead as Melly is. I made a pretty suit of clothes and fell in love with it. And when Ashley came riding along, so handsome, so different, I put that suit on him and made him wear it whether it fitted him or not. And I wouldn't see what he really was. I kept on loving the pretty clothes—and not him at all. (Mitchell 675)

Ashley has filled an important role in Scarlett's fantasy life, but in doing so he has prevented her from finding fulfillment in reality. This realization, arriving in the final pages of the novel before Scarlett rushes to declare her love to Rhett (he abandons her anyway), fully reveals Mitchell's attempt to refute the southern myth from within in *Gone with the Wind*.

Like Scarlett, Margaret Mitchell's fellow southerners have dressed the Old South in "a pretty suit of clothes" of their own imaging, and have refused to see the region for

what it “really was.” Southerners, Mitchell warns, must free themselves of this illusion before it is too late for them, as it may be for Scarlett by the novel’s end, which finds Rhett escaping in search of respectability, and Scarlett returning to the comforts of Tara. Unfortunately, in the novel’s conclusion as elsewhere, Mitchell fails to “create a pointed and consistent reworking of the Southern tradition. In too many ways, she relied on that tradition and escaped confronting its implications” (O’Brien 165). Like a rocket intended for space travel, but unable to break free of Earth’s gravitational pull, *Gone with the Wind* cannot quite transcend its genre trappings. Still, the novel clearly retains more than sufficient nuance and ambiguity to lead perceptive readers to question the historical myth that it recreates so completely. However, as Jack Kirby points out, “Novel readers and moviegoers may, but probably do not, thoughtfully contemplate the use of stereotypes. They are entertained and go on their way, never tidily segregating history from vivid written and/or pictorial imagery” (72). This is especially true of the film adaptation of *Gone with the Wind*, a process which presents an interesting comparison with the adaptation of *The Clansman* a quarter of a century before.

Hollywood producer David O. Selznick, famous for the complete control he often exercised over his film projects, purchased the rights to *Gone with the Wind* shortly before it was published, but complications and Selznick’s commitment to perfection (particularly in light of the book’s immense popularity) delayed the start of production for over two years. One of the chief difficulties (among many) lay in translating Mitchell’s instantly beloved and enormous tome into a screenplay that was sufficiently brief while preserving everything that audiences expected to see after reading the novel. Presumably Selznick could only achieve one of these goals, for the final cut of the film

runs to nearly four hours, longer even than the abnormally protracted *Birth of a Nation*. A note from Selznick to his screenwriter reveals much about how he viewed the process: “One never knows what chemicals have gone to make up something that has appealed to millions of people, or how many seeming faults of construction have been part of the whole, and how much the balance would be offset by making changes [. . .] in our innocence, or even in our ability” (qtd. in Leff 107). Nevertheless, at over a thousand pages in length, even four hours would prove woefully insufficient to include every character and incident from the novel. Some things would simply have to go, and given Selznick’s overpowering vision and recognition of his audience, it should come as no surprise that the version which emerged from Mitchell’s source reflects those parts of the novel which conform most closely to well-established southern myths. Without adding significantly to her narrative, Selznick “purged *Gone with the Wind* of Mitchell’s ambiguity” about the South (Wood 131). So, for example, in contrast with the elaborate metaphor Scarlett pictures in connection with her destructive love of Ashley Wilkes, in the film she simply murmurs, “I’ve loved something that doesn’t really exist, but somehow, I don’t care. Somehow, it doesn’t matter.” In addition to eliminating Mitchell’s questioning of the constructed nature of southern identity, the dismissive “it doesn’t matter” directly contradicts Scarlett’s annoyance and regret in the novel: “What a fool I’ve been [...] And now I’ve got to pay for it. [...] I’ve got him round my neck for the rest of my life” (676). Even though she has finally understood the artificiality of her image of Ashley, he will remain a burden to her.

Furthermore, much like D.W. Griffith had done with *The Clansman*, Selznick imbued Mitchell’s story with a glorification of a romanticized past which simply wasn’t

there before. Selznick's "nostalgia contrasts sharply [...] with Mitchell's ambivalent vision" (Wood 131), a development which is clear from the opening titles of the film. The film begins with a shot of slaves hoeing a field of cotton, and the words "Margaret Mitchell's Story of the Old South." As the credits announce the cast, crew, and characters, we see a series of images of slaves picking cotton, of blossoming trees, of the Mississippi River, and of other things clearly selected to evoke the South. Finally, before continuing with the scene which begins the novel, there is a series of shots showing slaves returning home at sunset as a choir hums along with a slow, instrumental rendition of "Dixie" and a brief prologue crawls upwards across the screen:

There was a land of Cavaliers and Cotton Fields called the Old South . . .
Here in this pretty world Gallantry took its last bow. Here was the last ever to be
seen of Knights and their Ladies Fair, of Master and of Slave . . .
Look for it only in books, for it is no more than a dream remembered. A
Civilization gone with the wind . . .

This introduces the entire myth of the Old South in brief, and has a great deal more in common with Dixon's style of writing than with Mitchell's, but above all it is reminiscent of Griffith's ability to appeal to audience expectations, and sets the tone for Selznick's version of the story. Like Griffith's, Selznick's attention to historical minutiae was painstaking, but lacked any solid sense of overriding historical truth: "The problem [...] was that the studio's obsession with detail extended only so far. Whether or not oral thermometers could be used for the hospital scene had to be carefully verified, but Selznick's sweeping conception of the Old South was accepted without question" (Campbell 125).

As African Americans began to voice criticisms of Mitchell's novel, however, Selznick grew wary of suffering Griffith's fate. Pressure both from outside groups and from the black actors working on the film led Selznick to reluctantly eliminate the word

“nigger” from the script, first the instances of its use by whites, then of its use by blacks as well. Much easier to cut were any overt references to the Ku Klux Klan; as Selznick explained, “A group of men can go out to ‘get’ the perpetrators of an attempted rape without having long white sheets over them” (qtd. in Leff 107-108). Many of the people who had expressed concerns appeared satisfied with Selznick’s removal of overt negativity toward black characters in the film. Nevertheless, the black characters are a source of comedy in the film in a way that they simply aren’t in the novel. For instance, in one completely new (and quite purposeless) scene, Uncle Peter unsuccessfully stalks a rooster, all the while begging it (in his exaggerated dialect) to cooperate so that he can serve it for dinner. Even the scenes of Atlanta in the midst of Reconstruction take on a slightly comical tone. As Scarlett walks by a white man standing above a group of black men, she hears him declare, “We’re going to give all of you 40 acres and a mule!” To which one listener replies with an immensely exaggerated, “And a *mule*? Gee!” And, in a scene which could have been transplanted directly from *The Birth of a Nation*, Mammy shoos a group of black men blocking Scarlett’s path with a wave of her umbrella and an angry, “Get out of the way, trash!” Other unpleasant stereotypes emerged as well. Butterfly McQueen has received harsh criticism for her portrayal of Scarlett’s shiftless maid Prissy, who complains loudly about everything and comes across as cowardly and extremely foolish. In the novel, however, Prissy is only a little girl behaving in character for her age, not a full-grown woman being infantilized.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese believes that what *Gone with the Wind* accomplishes (similar to the purpose previously described with respect to *The Birth of a Nation*) is to transform “a particular regional past into a generalized national past.” However, where

Griffith's film accomplishes this by repeatedly emphasizing the brotherhood between white men of the North and white men of the South, Fox-Genovese describes how Mitchell's South, even before the war, is "infused with the blood of Irish immigrants" (398). These include Scarlett's father Gerald, whose rise from penniless fugitive to wealthy planter is briefly chronicled in the novel, though his origins are only slightly alluded to in the film (his thick brogue does all the work). In direct contrast with the rest of the southern aristocracy, Gerald is a self-made man who exemplifies the American dream. Through the character of Gerald, Selznick captures the agrarian spirit of the novel and increases it several-fold. Gerald's passionate declaration early on in the novel that "Land is the only thing in the world that amounts to anything [...] the only thing worth working for, worth fighting for—worth dying for" (23) is repeated and reinforced throughout both novel and film, as Scarlett struggles to hold onto Tara. However, where the novel ends with Scarlett continuing to draw strength from her personal mantra ("I'll think of it all tomorrow"), the film shifts the emphasis considerably. After Rhett departs, Scarlett collapses onto the staircase and sobs, but a chorus of voices intrudes upon her thoughts, including her father, Ashley, and Rhett repeating lines heard earlier in the film. Her father reminds her of the importance of land, Ashley informs her again that she loves Tara even more than him, and Rhett identifies "the red earth of Tara" as the source of her strength. The voices build to a crescendo, finally repeating "Tara! Tara! Tara!" as Scarlett experiences another epiphany and realizes that she must return home, to Tara and the land and all of the conflicting ideas that they represent. As Wood insightfully observes regarding the contrast between the two influential southern film epics, "while

Birth of a Nation would have an insufficient past serve a glorious future, *Gone with the Wind* offers the past as a refuge from a hopeless present” (134).

Kirby declares that “*Gone with the Wind* was another generation's *Birth of a Nation*, although apparently a far greater proportion of the population was entertained, educated, reinforced in their southern imagery by *GWTW*” (72). In the final judgment, a film's effect on its audience often carries the greatest weight, and whatever else it communicated, Selznick's troubling southern masterpiece, like Griffith's before it, resoundingly confirmed audience assumptions about the South and its history. So, too, did *The Clansman* and Margaret Mitchell's novel, but the latter represents a clear departure from the romantic tradition as its author intended, while the former remains too concerned with its strident regional polemics to achieve a national audience. Only the film versions, constrained by apparently inescapable, and perhaps even unconscious, conformity to southern mores, bring the full weight of the southern myth to bear on an audience caught in an echo chamber of self-perpetuating expectations. Nevertheless, despite its popularity, influence, and staying power, *Gone with the Wind*'s understanding of southern regional identity represents the climactic apotheosis of essentially positivistic cultural approaches to the region. Slowly but surely, a cultural backlash was building that would ultimately replace the cultural dominance of romantic depictions of the South with its darker, gothic cousin.

CHAPTER THREE

City Monster, Country Monster: Southern Horror and the Adaptation of *Deliverance*

Although the first few generations of American films had portrayed the antebellum South as an Edenic paradise, later film audiences would learn that Dixie is in fact a very scary place. This idea is one of the dominant cultural metanarratives about the American South, with origins nearly as old as southern regional identity and a currency that remains firmly entrenched today. Existing in the popular imagination as an unregenerate region terrorized by ghosts of the past and monsters of the present, its inhabitants characterized by every conceivable form of degradation, it is not to be toured lightly. Visitors who venture across the Mason-Dixon Line soon learn that the renowned warmth of southern hospitality is a thin veneer, beneath which beats the heart of American darkness in the form of violence, racism, sexual repression, sexual perversion, ignorance, superstition, genetic deficiency, and any number of buried secrets best left undisturbed. Anyone familiar with American literature or film is aware that this perception has proven extraordinarily popular as a source of fiction, but may not understand why. According to Teresa Goddu:

The South's oppositional image—its gothic excesses and social transgressions—has served as the nation's safety valve: as the repository for everything the nation is *not*, the South purges contrary impulses. [...] the imaginary South functions as the nation's "dark" other. By so closely associating the gothic with the South, the American literary tradition neutralizes the gothic's threat to national identity. As merely a regional strategy, the gothic's horrifying haunting [...] can be contained. (76)

As Robin Wood explains, the concept of otherness (here applied to the South) functions both as “something external [...] to the self” and “what is repressed [...] in the self and projected outward in order to be hated and destroyed.” This is, for Wood, the true subject of horror: the emergence of the repressed other as something monstrous (27-28). It is unsurprising, then, that for over two centuries, southern gothic horror has consistently depicted “the collective unconscious of the American experience, the nightmares, fears, monsters and demonic anti-myths of American life that lurk below the optimism and confidence that have characterized our culture” (Frank ix). One of the most significant examples of this tradition is the 1972 adaptation of James Dickey’s novel *Deliverance*, a film that both influenced the horror genre and came to represent southern abjection in the national consciousness. A brief exploration of the development of southern horror, and an analysis of *Deliverance*, will reveal the cultural mechanism behind the othering of the South as the result of a confluence between the growth of particular regional stereotypes and a much older genre tradition.

According to Rick Worland, gothic literature is one of the foundational traditions of modern horror, but arriving at a precise definition of “gothic” remains notoriously contentious. Just as “horror movies were not indigenous to the American screen” during the early years of cinema, gothic literature was first shaped elsewhere (Clarens 37). The form emerged in eighteenth-century England (originating with *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764), during “a time of change, upheaval, and uncertainty” (Worland 28). Usually set in decaying mansions or castles, its superficial elements also include characters who encounter frightening and mysterious supernatural occurrences. After a few decades, when gothic literature began to appear in America, American authors faced certain

challenges in making the genre their own. First of all, of course, there is a decided lack of aging castles on this side of the Atlantic. On a more fundamental level, though, gothic literature requires a national history, a dark past that becomes terrifyingly embodied within the narrative so that it can be confronted by the characters. To many observers, the United States, which was being formed alongside the appearance of the gothic in England, seemed to have no past from which to draw. Some American authors simply transplanted European castles onto American soil, while others initially looked to the Indian as a source of gothic horror. However, other voices were developing the gothic in a different direction. Frederick Frank observes that where “the English Gothic had dealt with physical terror and social horror, the American Gothic would concentrate on mental terror and moral horror” (xii).

America’s seeming innocence had in fact already been compromised in its infancy by the evils of slavery; evils powerful enough to feed the dark appetite of gothic imagery. Goddu notes that “the rise of the gothic novel in England (1790-1830) occurred during a period of increased debate over [slavery ...] The terror of possession, the iconography of entrapment and imprisonment, and the familial transgressions found in the gothic novel were also present in the slave system” (73). In America, too, the blackness of slavery connects with the “blackness” of gothic literature, lurking just beneath the surface of the nation’s literary tradition:

American gothic literature criticizes America’s national myth of new-world innocence by voicing the cultural contradictions that undermine the nation’s claim to purity and equality [...] the gothic tells of historical horrors that make national identity possible yet must be repressed in order to sustain it. (10)

American cultural voices were quick to locate these contradictions within the South. As early as 1782, in *Letters from an American Farmer*, Goddu finds St. John de Crèvecoeur

making use of gothic language to describe his encounter with the South's "peculiar institution," disrupting an otherwise glowingly idealized portrait of early American culture with "slavery's abject presence" (13). By the 1830s, the South had developed a "minority psychology," and had become both a distinctive region apart and a national problem, with slavery as the catalyzing force (though by no means the only one). Instead of dying out, as some early southern leaders had hoped, slavery had become the context for the southern version of the American dream, and a major source of tension (Wilson 586-587). Amidst this growing turmoil arose one of the major gothic voices of American literature: Edgar Allen Poe. In 1940, Richard Wright proclaimed that "we have in the oppression of the Negro a shadow athwart our national life dense and heavy [...] if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him" (462). Given the historic connection between gothic literature and social turbulence, perhaps horror truly did invent Poe instead of the other way around. In any case, it is ultimately through Poe "that the South and the gothic become inextricably linked" (Goddu 76). Later critical readings repeatedly tie his work to racial symbolism, while the southern literary tradition claims him by virtue of his southern heritage and his enormous influence on the writers of the 20th century Southern Renaissance.

The South's problematic regional identity only grew more pronounced following the Civil War, in ways too numerous to detail thoroughly here. Historian C. Vann Woodward suggests that the "irony" of postwar southern history is that "the South had undergone an experience that it could share with no other part of America [...] the experience of military defeat, occupation, and reconstruction" (190). Just as the history of slavery undermines the myth of American innocence, the history of the Confederacy

undermines the “American legend of success and victory” (188). Meanwhile, issues surrounding race continued unabated and racial violence frequently spiraled out of control. As the region continued to resist change, in contrast to the rest of the nation (i.e., industrialization and social reform in the North, rapid expansion and development in the West), its inhabitants came to be regarded as singularly backward in their ways. Each passing generation discovered new vices to ascribe to the southern states. In 1920, H.L. Mencken created a sensation (and a lasting image of the South as “benighted”) with his hyperbolic “The Sahara of the Bozart,” “arguably the most famous and influential single essay ever written about the American South” (Flora 754). Mencken described the South as an intellectual and cultural wasteland, controlled by charlatans and white trash, in every respect uneducated and unrefined. In 1938, President Roosevelt famously stated his conviction (based on a government report) “that the South presents right now the Nation’s No. 1 economic problem. The Nation’s problem, not merely the South’s. For we have an economic unbalance in the Nation as a whole, due to this very condition of the South” (qtd. in Snavely 406). The South would take center-stage as the nation’s number one problem again throughout the 1960s thanks to its staunch opposition to desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement.

By the 1930s, there could be absolutely no doubt that the South had enough of a past to sustain what Cathy Davidson calls “the Gothic’s generic challenge to history, its rewriting and unwriting of history” (qtd. in Goddu 9). The region even had a few decaying castles (or at least reasonable approximations). Major writers of the Southern Renaissance were quick to adopt the gothic form as a means for taking a hard look at their native land. Chief among these was William Faulkner, whose 1936 novel *Absalom*,

Absalom! constructs a setting reminiscent of Poe to tell the sweeping story of a southern family's slow disintegration during the period surrounding the Civil War. The novel features themes of miscegenation, incest, homosexuality, and murder, reaching deep into the troubled past to explore the South's destructive failure to reconcile its black children with its white children. By 1960, use of the gothic was universally recognized as the predominant mode of southern literature.

By contrast, the American film industry had spent its first three decades "producing romantic, sentimental and nostalgic images of the South." It wasn't until the 1940s that Hollywood finally caught up, and "the studios began to shift to the Southern gothic [...] using the [...] scripts developed by leaders of the Southern literary renaissance in the preceding two decades" (Langman 109). It soon became clear that the South was the ideal American setting for horror. In 1943, Universal Pictures released *Son of Dracula*, the second sequel to the popular *Dracula* (1931). In the movie, the first of the series (and the first vampire film) to be set in America, Dracula's son works his wiles on a wealthy southern belle at her family's plantation. 1943 also saw the release of *Revenge of the Zombies*. Featuring the first appearance of zombies on American soil, it too is set on a southern plantation. Meanwhile, Tennessee Williams would soon become the most prominent source of gothic depictions of the South, both on the stage and on film. After achieving success as a playwright during the late 1940s, Williams began adapting his plays for the screen in 1950. Portraying a fallen southern aristocracy typified by madness and aberrant sexuality, his characters grew increasingly grotesque throughout the decade, culminating at last in the "sheer gothic horror" of *Suddenly, Last Summer* in 1959 (Kirby 94). In the film, a southern matriarch plots to have her niece

lobotomized in order to preserve the reputation of her predatory, homosexual son after he is literally devoured by a group of boys in a Spanish village. At the film's climax, a friendly psychologist helps the niece recall the full terror of what she has witnessed in a lengthy, gruesome flashback. The fallen aristocracy vogue continued into the 1960s with *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (1964). In search of a follow-up to the successful formula of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), producer/director Robert Aldrich settled on a contemporary story about the madness of a faded southern belle (played by Bette Davis) in a crumbling southern plantation. The film begins with a startlingly graphic sequence set in the 1920s, in which the then-young Charlotte's beau is brutally hacked to death with a meat cleaver, before settling into a more conventionally gothic haunted house story. The presence of graphic violence and gore was certainly on the rise by this point, as evidenced by another film released that same year: *Two Thousand Maniacs*. In contrast with the black-and-white restraint of *Suddenly, Last Summer* and *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte*, *Two Thousand Maniacs* was filmed "in lurid color with blood spurting and viscera flopping" (Worland 90). It is also an early example of an often-repeated horror formula imposed on the southern setting: A "normal" group of outsiders face the terrifying emergence of the repressed in their southern brethren; in this case, the South makes good on promises to "rise again" in search of retribution. Described as "a bloody *Brigadoon*," the film features crazed inhabitants of a small southern town who exact a ghastly revenge on a group of northern travelers who unluckily stray into a centennial celebration of the town's destruction during the Civil War. Released just months before the murder of three Civil Rights activists in Mississippi during "Freedom Summer," the

film seems remarkably prescient in its depiction of “America’s repellent yet all too compelling Other” (Graham 335).

By this point, southern horror clearly existed as a subgenre of American horror film. However, most filmic portrayals of the South during this period do not belong to the horror genre. Many possess strong elements of horror, such as the cannibalism episode in *Suddenly, Last Summer*, or Max Cady’s threat to rape and murder a little girl in *Cape Fear*, but belong more clearly to other genres. The former is more appropriately categorized as a drama, with its focus on developing the characters’ relationships and internal struggles through dialogue, with overtones of mystery as psychologist Dr. Cukrowicz investigates the real cause of Catherine Holly’s seeming insanity. The latter is better classified as a thriller, featuring a story that builds tension and suspense slowly towards the inevitable, cathartic climax. Nevertheless, common themes of southern films often include what Wood would classify as the emergence of the repressed, particularly under the heading of two of the categories of “otherness” he defines: other cultures and deviations from ideological sexual norms (28). While, say, the films of Tennessee Williams are not horror films, many of them could be discussed in terms borrowed from horror genre studies. They frequently deal with a basically human breakdown of surplus repression within a context of southern decadence and degeneracy. If not horror, this use of the gothic is at least frequently horrifying in its physical embodiment of repression.

Meanwhile, though, a significant transformation was transpiring in representations of the gothic mode of southern horror, shifting the focus away from baroque invocations of a dark racial past and a fallen aristocracy that had begun with Poe and his predecessors. In 1972, the film version of *Deliverance*, destined to become an

archetype of the genre, marked a major point of change in the new emphasis of southern horror. As Allison Graham explains, “The phantoms who rise from the Georgia woods [...] in *Deliverance* are just as evocative of the past [...], only here it is the rural past” (23). In the 1991 remake of *Cape Fear*, Max Cady tells one of his victims:

You’re scared. But that’s O.K. I want you to savor that fear. The South was born in fear. Fear of the Indian, fear of the slave, fear of the damn Union. The South has a fine tradition of savoring fear. (qtd. in Langman 176)

By implication, Cady adds yet another fear to that list. The cracker/redneck/hillbilly persona has primarily been represented as a humorous figure of fun for centuries. However, a growing cultural tradition, paralleling the identification of the South as a problematic region, had established a darker side of the comically-innocent country bumpkin. After all, “poor white trash,” not fallen aristocrats, was the target of Mencken’s scathing criticism of southern backwardness at the beginning of the 1920s. At the end of the decade, the Agrarians, while mounting a resounding defense of the region in *I’ll Take My Stand*, “set the tone for the acceptance of [...] the ‘redneck’ stereotype” (Carr 80). The stereotype continued to take root in the southern literature of the 1930s, from Erskine Caldwell’s grotesque, vicious Lester clan to Faulkner’s lawless, opportunistic Snopeses. By the 1960s, southern films were presenting “the redneck reconstructed as irredeemable villain” (Graham 146), with one notable example being the character of the murderous, degenerate Bob Ewell in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Two earlier film adaptations highlight the shift in southern horror from haunted house to redneck monster: *The Night of the Hunter* (1955) and the original *Cape Fear* (1962).

The Night of the Hunter, adapted by James Agee from a 1953 novel by Davis Grubb, is about two children pursued by Harry Powell, a murderous revival preacher, across a stark, Depression-era landscape. *Cape Fear*, adapted from James D.

MacDonald's 1957 novel *The Executioners*, features a North Carolina lawyer and his family tormented by ex-convict Max Cady, a "cracker from hell," for sending him to prison years earlier (Graham 345). Both Powell and Cady were played by Robert Mitchum, and the two villains are similar in significant ways. Figures of incredible menace, neither character's origin is clear. Powell is a smooth-talking serial killer who preys on rich widows, and may or may not believe that he is acting upon orders from the Almighty. Cady is brutish but diabolically clever, and has recently sold the family farm in order to devote himself to revenge. What little we know of both men hints at a humble (and, in the case of Cady, country) background. The threat they represent is of a force from outside of civilized society; and society portrayed distinctively in *Cape Fear* as *urban* society. Both men are men of violence, particularly violence directed at women and children. However, Powell's violence is at least superficially religious, and stems from extreme sexual repression; he projects his own lust onto the women who inspire it, and lashes out at them for their sinfulness. Cady's violence seems to stem from a hot-blooded temperament unrestrained by either civil or moral law; he embraces his animal-like sexuality, and derives satisfaction from violently as well as sexually assaulting the women he desires. Together, the characters represent two distinct but complementary faces of the volatile (and versatile) southern redneck: the deranged, pious misogynist and the wild, lawless sexual predator.

By the time *Deliverance* was published in 1970, the horror genre stood ready to harvest this "hillbilly from hell," fully-developed and ripe for a new role as a distinctly southern monster. Both *The Night of the Hunter* and *Cape Fear* illustrate a movement toward depicting the disconnect between the South and the nation, not as strictly cultural

or geographic, but as a conflict between the city and the country, between urban civilization and rural savagery. Ironically, this dichotomy was further reinforced by formerly positive stereotypes about the region as well. As Edward Campbell explains, in the 1970s “the South was finally paying the price of the film mythology, and in popular culture found itself at last hobbled by the very character it had once been anxious to label as representative;” namely, its agrarianism (31). Whereas a few decades earlier, Scarlett O’Hara’s attachment to the red earth of Tara had seemed like the patriotic ideal, now it appeared backward at best. The “change, upheaval, and uncertainty” represented by the regional shift from agrarian to industrial created a cultural space for the intrusion of the gothic. Thus, the tension between the agricultural (or natural) past and the industrial future is of primary importance to *Deliverance*, both the 1970 novel and, with even greater emphasis, the 1972 film. *Deliverance* is a story of four men from the city who, for various reasons, undertake a canoe trip down the fictional Cahulawassee River, which is scheduled to be destroyed by a new dam. Along the way, the adventurers meet with disaster at the hands of a pair of monstrous hillbillies and must resort to drastic measures in order to leave the river alive. Just as some early colonial gothic novels had turned to Native Americans, the land’s original inhabitants, as the embodiment of a dark past for their characters to confront, so Dickey has his modern protagonists, representatives of the encroaching industrial world, encounter the degenerate rural occupants of the land their people have come to despoil.

Most critical readings of the adaptation have noted the simplified rendering of the novel’s many themes, but have frequently missed this point, and so are unable to interpret it correctly. *Deliverance* is basically a horror film in which the monster is the untamed

country and the people who inhabit it. Two analyses, by Robert Willson and James Beaton, both proceed on the assumption that the meaning of the film is intended to be identical to the meaning of the novel, and what's more, identical to their particular interpretation of the novel's meaning. As Beaton says, "*Deliverance* fails [...] because Boorman's cinematic rhetoric, aggressive where Dickey is probing, so alters the novel's aesthetic emphases that we experience the fiction from an awkwardly chosen vantage," that is, from a vantage other than Beaton's vantage as reader (296). Finding that the film does not communicate the entirety of their reading of the novel's meaning, they conclude that a failure has occurred. As a result, though their readings of the novel are well-detailed, they fail to illuminate the meaning of the film.

One of the chief difficulties in this case, as both Willson and Beaton acknowledge, is Dickey's use of narrative voice in the novel. The entire story is narrated in the first person by the hero, Ed Gentry. Attempting to translate this device into cinematic terms is tricky at best, and is rarely implemented successfully, whether through pervasive voice-over or consistent use of point-of-view shots. However, there is a further problem that both readings ignore. Willson makes a particular point of criticizing the translation of Gentry's climactic nighttime ascent of the cliff as having been "reduced" to "a few seconds of film time" during which "there is never any doubt that Ed will make it" (57, 52). Perhaps it is quibbling to note that the film devotes a full three minutes to this scene (hardly insignificant for a runtime of under two hours), and that this represents an even larger proportion of the overall story than the episode is granted in the book. Leaving that aside, the accusation of a loss of tension between novel and film is particularly baffling. Since the novel is presented to us from the beginning as Ed's

recollection of an event that happened to him many years before, it would likely never occur to the reader to suspect that he could die. By dislodging this privileged point of view, the film's audience cannot know for certain what the outcome will be for Ed, as well as for the other characters. These sorts of observations illustrate the subtleties of audience perception that influence how a story is received across different media.

Because the novel's cliff scene takes longer than three minutes to read and is so intimately connected with the anguish of the climber and metaphorical significance of his efforts, the impact of the same scene in the film seems to pale in comparison. However, the use of dissolves in this scene effectively heightens the audience's awareness of the passage of time, and the focus of the climb is simply shifted from the incredible effort involved to the more relevant importance of the end-goal once Ed has reached the top. The tension shifts with it; instead of worrying that Ed will fall to his death, the audience wonders what he will discover when he reaches the top of the cliff and whether he will be able to deal with whatever challenge it presents, even if it means killing a man.

Most assessments of *Deliverance* seem to have little knowledge of, or interest in, the process of adaptation beyond a point-by-point comparison of the literal differences between novel and film. Beaton notes at one point that he has "proceeded on the assumption that while Dickey obviously collaborated in the bastardization of his novel, Boorman's direction was responsible for most of what I have found to be objectionable about the film" (297). Though crudely put, this is likely a more-or-less fair assessment. In the afterword to the published screenplay, Dickey explains that, without a model to follow when he was hired to adapt his own work, he simply opened the novel and "with a camera in the hands of God rather than those of any mortal cinematographer, I wrote the

scenes one after the other as I would like to have them be” (154). The screenplay follows the novel almost exactly, and consequently is significantly longer than the finished film. Ultimately, nearly everything that is in the film is in the screenplay/novel, which implies a deceptive sort of fidelity. Perhaps the most significant change, as Robert Armour explains, is to “equalize the roles of the four [heroes], who are disproportionately presented in the novel” (282). In contrast to Willson’s accusation that Dickey has ignored characterization in the film, Armour finds that some of the characters, particularly Bobby, are given added dimension that was previously lacking. Although Ed is still the primary protagonist, some redistribution of dialogue and skillful performances by the lead actors enriches the experiences undergone by all four men. Like the other critics, Armour notices that the film has omitted “most of the material that is extraneous” to a few particular themes, but far from diminishing the film, Armour believes that this results in “a better understanding” of the central theme than is offered by the novel. For Armour, the key to *Deliverance* is its characters’ loss of innocence. However, he is also aware that “the appearance of the mountain people is made more grotesque in the film in order to heighten the gap between city people and mountain folk” and to help “set the cultural contrast between the two worlds” (284). I would suggest that, although the loss of innocence plays a thematic role in the film, it is *this contrast* between the country (the South) and the city (everywhere else) that serves as the guiding idea behind the film, and is of equal importance in the novel.

The distinction drawn between the city and the country as the characters journey to the river is impossible to miss in the novel, and is done in a manner that is highly suggestive of the tradition of othering that we have seen thus far:

The highway shrank to two lanes, and we were in the country. The change was not gradual; you could have stopped the car and got out at the exact point where suburbia ended and the red-neck South began. [...] There was a motel, then a weed field, and then on both sides Clabber Girl came out of hiding, leaping onto the sides of barns, 666 and Black Draught began to swirl, and Jesus began to save. We hummed along, borne [...] on a long tide of patent medicines and religious billboards [...] you would think that the South did nothing but dose itself and sing gospel songs; you would think that the bowels of the southerner were forever clamped shut; that he could not open and let natural process flow through him, but needed one purgative after another in order to make it to church. (Dickey 38)

This description is indicative of several things. First, and most importantly, is its identification of the South as something that is unconnected with geographical location. Although Ed's home is in Georgia, he does not think of himself as living in the South; he lives in suburbia. The urban regions of the South are presumed to have embraced progress, civilization, and everything that accompanies them, and so are no longer associated with the gothic South, America's repressed other, which is retains all of the trappings of the rural past. This repression is the strongest identifiable characteristic of "the red-neck South" that Ed observes through the dual symbolism of religion (spiritual repression) and excretion (physical repression).

The oppositional relationship between the city and the country is made more explicit in a conversation between Ed and Lewis a few pages later. Lewis observes that "up yonder" things are different, "the whole way of taking life and the terms you take it on." Ed is disinterested, wondering why he should care about the hillbilly way of life, but Lewis is insistent: "there may be something important in the hills." Ed remains skeptical: "I don't know anything. I don't mind going down a few rapids with you, and drinking a little whiskey by a campfire. But I don't give a fiddler's fuck about those hills," or, by extension, their inhabitants (40). For Lewis, the hills represent a return to a primal way of life that he finds appealing at this point in the story. Of course, although he has a

certain respect for the country, Lewis can still antagonize the people who live there. As the men negotiate with someone who can drive their cars downriver to meet them, Ed is horrified by Lewis's insistence on haggling about price: "I could see the man was insulted; Lewis himself had told me that the worst thing you can do is to throw something back at these mountain people" (64). His competitive spirit backfires when he races ahead of their guides, determined to reach the river on his own. He takes a wrong turn, much to the amusement of the man he had just attempted to humiliate, who drawls out "Where you goin', city boy?" and then mock-encourages him: "You'll find it. Ain't nothin' but the biggest river in the state" (67). What might sound like good-natured teasing has a mean edge, on both sides.

The opening scenes of the film, though taken directly from the book, are much more condensed than in the novel, and the sense of antagonism is consequently more pronounced. The novel begins with a lengthy segment that follows Ed through a normal day as vice-president of a small graphics consulting firm, details the debate between the four over whether to embark on the trip or not, and describes Ed's preparations for departure. The film begins with the men discussing their trip in voice-over, the dialogue taking place alongside images of the land being torn apart by heavy machinery, and transitions quickly to their arrival in the small town of Oree from which they hope to embark. Here, with magnificent economy, the film draws the battle lines between the men from the city and the men in the country, which are essentially lines of wealth, power, and social class, but also (to the city men) lines of basic humanity. As far as they can tell, the people of the country are barely people at all. But, if the hillbilly residents of Oree look grotesque, the protagonists' treatment of them (with the exception of Drew) is

equally grotesque. Bobby, the least fit of the men, also shows the least respect to the locals. He largely declines to speak to them directly. When a gas station attendant finally emerges at their first stop, Bobby spots him first, but turns away, saying, “Lewis, we got a live one here,” as he gestures dismissively over his shoulder. A few minutes later, as Drew engages in the famous “Dueling Banjos” number with a local boy, Bobby walks up to Ed and quietly observes, “Talk about genetic deficiency. Ain’t that pitiful?” Seconds later, another strange-looking local walks up and asks, “Who’s pickin’ the banjo here?” Bobby stares at him for a few seconds, and then pointedly looks away, suppressing a smile (Ed ignores the question, as well). His sole exchange with anyone other than his companions comes when he approaches the gas station attendant and mockingly says, “I love the way you wear that hat.” The man takes the hat off and looks at it before replacing it on his head and contemptuously replying, “You don’t know nothin’.”

So palpable is the suspicion between city people and country people that it is unsurprising to find that it extended behind the scenes into the actual film production, as demonstrated by Edward Ramey, the local who played the attendant. According to Frank Rickman, the local location scout and production adviser, after one scene had to be stopped due to loud noise made by a tree frog, Burt Reynolds and Jon Voight (Lewis and Ed, respectively) and director John Boorman all said they had never heard of a tree frog before. Ramey, insulted by their ignorance, marched indignantly up to the men and asked “Don’t you know nothing?” Ramey himself, whose character breaks into an impromptu dance during the “Dueling Banjos” scene, later said that he saw production assistants oiling the ground before he began. Although this was undoubtedly to keep

Ramey's feet from kicking up too much dust, he declared, "I believe they thought I'd slide down that hillside. [...] They was just having their fun, I reckon" (qtd. in Williamson 165). Meanwhile, Boorman (perhaps due to his British nationality) got away with constantly referring to the locals as "hillbillies," despite the term's connotations. For J.W. Williamson, though, the "crowning irony" of the entire production was Rickman's creative contribution, including being the one to suggest the infamous "squeal like a pig" portion of the film's shocking rape scene. Williamson observes that while Rickman dreamed up "better ideas about how to make Bobby the insurance salesman suffer, the fictional hillbilly characters were coached into a depiction of awfulness that would be used against Rickman and his kin forever" (167).

In terms of both theme and genre, the hillbilly rape is the central scene of the movie. The impact of the horror relies on depicting something that is both unimaginably awful and completely unexpected. In this case, two filthy rednecks emerge from the woods and take Bobby and Ed captive as they put ashore to rest. One of the men humiliates and then sodomizes Bobby, and then Ed is nearly forced to perform fellatio on the other. In the nick of time (for Ed, if not for Bobby), Lewis comes to the rescue, killing one of the hillbillies with an arrow. The other one escapes. For both the audience and the characters, the trip down the river has now taken on a completely different meaning, though it should be immediately clear that this was the meaning envisioned by the author all along. The opening scene, in which the men are heard discussing the trip over footage of the construction that will drown the river, explicitly states the movie's central theme. Lewis' voice emerges above the rest, explaining the reason for the dam and what it means: "You push a little more power into Atlanta, little more air-

conditioning for your smug little suburb, and you know what's gonna happen? We're gonna rape this whole goddamn landscape. We're gonna rape it!" And yet, by seeking to penetrate the watery canal of the river with their phallic canoes, Lewis and his companions are enacting their own rape of the natural on a small, symbolic scale. Now, though, the tables have turned. Even more than the citizens of Oree, the hillbilly rapists seem like a literal embodiment of the natural/rural past, particularly in that they enact nature's vengeance on the trespassers. In the novel, as in the film, they arrive without introduction: "Two men stepped out of the woods" (107). They come from nowhere and have no identity, seemingly appearing out of the wilderness much as their ancestors had disappeared into it, terrifying embodiments of the gothic past. There is no apparent motive for their actions. They simply are, and they simply do. Furthermore, they draw the four companions towards a "natural" state of pure survival, of kill-or-be-killed. This, at least, is what the men all assume. Just as the hillbillies' presence and motives are a cipher, there is a terrible ambiguity surrounding what happens after the initial encounter. Drew is killed, and Ed scales a cliff to shoot a mountain man with an arrow. That is all anyone knows for certain. It is reasonable to believe that Drew is shot by the vengeful survivor of Lewis' attack, and that this survivor is the man Ed kills atop the cliff, but the lack of certainty is troubling. However, once Ed has demonstrated his worthiness by defeating nature's champion, the river becomes suddenly cooperative. The men are forced to painstakingly dispose of the first hillbilly by dragging the corpse far inland and laboriously digging out a grave with their bare hands. However, the second hillbilly's body is concealed by the river itself, along with Drew's body. Finally, the last major set of rapids, where the men agree to claim that Drew's death and Lewis's accident took

place, actually lets them pass miraculously unscathed. The river in *Deliverance* is a powerful ally if one can survive by its ruthless code.

Ed's lone return home mirrors the arrival to the countryside, with one important difference: "After four hours I passed slowly from the Country of Nine-Fingered People and Prepare to Meet Thy God into the Drive-ins and Motels and Homes of the Whopper, but all I could see was the river" (267). Having narrowly escaped ravishing at the hands of the terrifying country other, he steps back out of the past and into the present, emerging from the experience a more complete man, now with the river by his side. However, where the novel ends in serenity, the film ends with a much-imitated waking nightmare. Ed dreams a vision of the dead white hand of the man he murdered rising from the dark waters of the lake that has drowned the Cahulawassee, and awakes in a cold sweat. As the credits roll to the upbeat sounds of banjo music, he lies in bed, unable to sleep, and the final image is of those same dark waters as the banjo music quickly fades into a deeply ominous thrum. For contemporary audiences, the image is even more fraught with horror. We are certain of what Ed only fears, that the awful specter of the hillbilly from hell will rise from the lake again and again to terrorize our screens and stalk our imaginations for as long as his violent and perverse appetites remain within the American subconscious.

Certainly many of the extras in the film, and their country neighbors both far and near, felt they had good reason to resent the way Boorman portrayed them in *Deliverance*. According to Armour, the "residents of north Georgia angrily believe that Boorman scoured the hills looking for the worst sort of people." However, he goes on to declare that "they miss the point. People like these mountain folk do exist and they could

easily respond to outsiders just as their counterparts in the movie do” (284). Perhaps Armour does not include the two rapists in his last statement, but he is certainly correct that Boorman located most of his extras among genuine mountain-dwelling people. More to the point, perhaps, is the fact that Boorman’s search for “the worst sort of people” comes directly from the novel by way of the screenplay. In Dickey’s novel, when the gas station attendant played by Ramey first appears, he is described by Ed as looking “like a hillbilly in some badly cast movie, a character actor too much in character to be believed” (55). In the screenplay, Dickey describes the character as “almost ridiculously country, almost like a caricature” (24). The local boy who plays a banjo with Drew appears in the screenplay as “an albino boy, most probably a half-wit, as back-country as they come, likely from a family or community inbred to the point of imbecility and albinism” (27). Appearances being of paramount importance to the film, the boy who was found to fit Dickey’s cruel description could not actually play the banjo at all. Another boy was hidden behind him with an arm through his sleeve to finger the right strings and give the appearance of playing. Finally, the man hired to drive the cars downriver is pictured as “a kind of red-neck Thor [...] an enormous, country-brutal-looking man, with no humor in him. He suggests nothing but brutality and stupidity” (31-32).

Furthermore, in a 1970 interview, Dickey declared that his hillbilly rapists were based on real people, friends of his father when he was growing up. He explains:

You know, there’s some kind of absolutism about country people. [...] there’s almost no hill family, or “crackers” as we call them at home, that doesn’t have at least one relative in prison. [...] most of them are in for murder. Life and death up in those Georgia hill counties, life and death are very basic gut-type things, and if somebody does something that violates your code, you kill him, and you don’t think twice about it. [...] you’d just better think twice before you commit yourself

to being tried, up in those mountain communities that are inbred to the point of imbecility and albinism, where everybody is everybody's kin. (Heyen 153-154)

One struggles to imagine how Dickey would elaborate on the senseless, unprovoked assault described in his novel as an action dictated by a hillbilly "code." More importantly, Dickey's comments reveal a somewhat appalling prejudice, and a willingness to paint large groups of people with broad, generalizing strokes. Duane Carr points out that these remarks, "though rendered as an observation, [are] really only one more repetition of a much over-worked stereotype of hill people" and that such observations are frequently "based on past experience, not with life in the hills, but with literature, the movies, and television" (4). Dickey's interviewers, a pair of faculty at a university in New York, describe the hillbillies as "wonderfully realized;" evidence, perhaps, that Dickey has succeeded in tapping into (and reinforcing) common cultural perceptions regarding his subject, not in illuminating any concrete realities about them.

Within the fictional space of the novel (where the descriptions come from the characters) and of the film (where any conscious judgment is up to the prejudice of the viewer), one might suggest that the author/director is merely highlighting the extreme othering of country folk by city folk, and the tension that exists between the two worlds. However, when one peels back the thin veil surrounding the creative process and finds an author who is actively prescribing that his story be populated by real-life "ridiculously country caricatures," and a director who is more than ready to oblige, it becomes clear that some storytellers are in the business of creating what audiences perceive as reality as much as they are commenting on it. Perhaps even more troublingly, as the conscious arbiters of the subconscious repository of cultural ideas and prejudices, they become active participants in the continued regional othering of the South.

CHAPTER FOUR

Large and Startling Figures: Adapting *Wise Blood* and the Christ-Haunted South

Flannery O'Connor could almost have been talking about the popular reception of *Deliverance* when she lamented in 1960 (perhaps a bit disingenuously) that “anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic” (815). When an interviewer questioned her about the grotesque in her own work a few years later, she replied, “We’re all grotesque and I don’t think the Southerner is any more grotesque than anyone else” (233). Despite these remarks, which seem to indicate an awareness of the othering of the South, and a rejection of it, O'Connor frequently made conscious use of the grotesque in her own depictions of the South. Her aim in doing so, however, was markedly different from that of authors like James Dickey:

My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse and the unacceptable. [...] The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, [...] and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock – to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures. (805-806)

Dickey’s *Deliverance* draws a clear border around the South, setting it apart as the dark, abject id of America. However, where Dickey depicts a land terrorized by degenerate hillbillies, O'Connor envisions a different sort of haunting.

In one of her most famous and widely-quoted descriptions of the region, O'Connor observed that "while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted" (861). This aphorism is a particularly apt description of a region where Christianity can always be found ghosting across the cultural landscape. O'Connor's South is simply a microcosm of the rest of the world as she perceives it "by the light of" her Christian faith. Her stories "however tangibly [they] begin in local facts, [...] continue into situations and revelations that are parabolic or anagogical" (Gossett 493). By her reckoning, "it is the peculiar burden of the fiction writer that he has to make one country do for all" (802). For O'Connor, as for Dickey, that country is the state of Georgia. Unlike Dickey, though, she depicts its inhabitants as strange and even grotesque in order to illuminate some larger truth about her Catholic faith and its relation to the modern world. However, this purpose is so unique to O'Connor that her audience can easily miss it amidst the larger context of what the South represents in American culture. Perhaps this explains her frequent cause for complaint about the mislabeling and (in the case of a radically-altered made-for-TV adaptation of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own") misappropriation of her work. Nevertheless, she must have been aware that her fiction "takes the risk [...] of being misread and dismissed, because though [it] originates in the social [...] and historical reality of her region, no interpretation of it on these grounds alone is complete" (Gossett 493). An examination of the 1979 film adaptation of her first novel, *Wise Blood* (1952), reveals the difficulties and complications of understanding O'Connor's work on her own terms amidst the cultural connotations which surround her southern setting.

O'Connor expressed a conviction that "no one but a Catholic could have written" *Wise Blood*. In saying this, she is specifically excluding Protestants from the pool of potential authors, however she goes on to add that "of course no unbeliever or agnostic could have written it because it is entirely Redemption-centered in thought" (923). Nevertheless, fifteen years after her death, the novel was brought to the screen under the direction of John Huston, a firm agnostic. After her disastrous experience with television during her lifetime, O'Connor could probably scarcely have imagined the result: that Huston appears to have been extraordinarily faithful to her vision. One contemporary critic referred to the film as "an uncompromising act of fidelity," adapted "with chilling tenacity," and, upon re-reading the novel, found that it was "close enough to have been a working, if not a shooting, script" (Young 254). This, no doubt, had something to do with the screenwriters, Benedict and Michael Fitzgerald, who are not only staunch Catholics (Benedict has since collaborated with Mel Gibson on the screenplay for *The Passion of the Christ*), but are also the sons of Robert and Sally Fitzgerald, the literary executor of O'Connor's estate and editor of her letters, respectively. That Huston's vision aligns so closely with O'Connor's is a testament to the artistic integrity they both share. However, in their appreciation for the close relationship between novel and film, these early critics somewhat failed to recognize the film's artistic autonomy from its source. As Michael Tarantino explains in his review of the film:

it may be instructive to note the frequent intersections of intentions between Huston and O'Connor, especially in matters of tone, with each work developing the reverberative qualities of word or image. There is a literal quality to the film in each shot, each sequence; yet there is always some mystery, some obscure crazedness, behind Huston's crystalline images. (16)

From the opening titles, which definitively declare this to be “John Huston’s *Wise Blood*,” what we see can best be described as Huston’s own cinematic, religious, and cultural commentary on the South in the late 1970s, layered over a direct transposition of O’Connor’s narrative of Southern religion in the late 1940s. There is an additional dimension that was not there before (although O’Connor’s work is by no means incomplete), much like an animated character cel combines with the painted background to create a composite image. At the same time, just as physicists cannot measure the position of a particle without changing its velocity, Huston cannot illuminate O’Connor’s vision without altering it.

In some ways, these alterations stand out so vividly precisely because O’Connor’s novel is so strikingly visual. Film, constructed from a series of images, will inevitably be intimately concerned with issues of vision and sight. Conrad, of course, described his task as a novelist as a primarily visual one (at least in some sense): “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the powers of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*” (qtd. in McFarlane 3). Some fifty years later, in “Writing Short Stories,” Flannery O’Connor explained the task of the writer of fiction in strikingly similar terms:

Your beliefs will be the light by which you see, but they will not be what you see and they will not be a substitute for seeing. For the writer of fiction, everything has its testing point in the eye [...] The first and most obvious characteristic of fiction is that it deals with reality through what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, and touched [...] learning to see is the basis for learning all the arts except music. [...] Fiction writing is [...] a matter of showing things. (91, 93)

The apparent influence of Conrad’s artistic philosophy here is no coincidence. O’Connor frequently cited Conrad as a favorite author and major influence, and referred to him often in letters and essays, even quoting his desire “to make you *see*.” Many of the

metaphors she uses to explain and describe art, even literary art, are visual. Not surprisingly, then, her fiction reflects the same concern with putting the reader in visual contact with a scene.

Michael Klein describes how, in 1951, Caroline Gordon (the wife of celebrated Southern poet Allen Tate) read an early manuscript of *Wise Blood* and wrote to O'Connor about it. In the letter, Gordon praises O'Connor's abilities as a writer and a storyteller, but suggests several passages that "could have been more successful had they been more effectively visualized" (Klein 231). Some of these passages were revised prior to publication, and Klein is quick to note that the passages Gordon drew attention to are the basis for many of the most visually effective scenes in Huston's film. One of O'Connor's chief concerns is with creating a world that can be visualized. Even on a thematic level, *Wise Blood* returns again and again to the motif of blindness and true sight. One possible reason for the startling ease with which O'Connor's bizarre characters and situations transition from page to screen in *Wise Blood* is that, just like her novel, film is primarily concerned with the visual; that is, what it can place before our eyes, or what it can make us see. Clearly her *style* is extraordinarily well-suited to the medium of film. However, the *substance* of O'Connor's fiction presents obvious difficulties to adaptation as a conventional American production, both because such an undertaking must defy expectations with respect to the South, and because such a film must flout the storytelling principles that mainstream movies follow. With characters who are difficult to like, events laden with symbolic meaning, and an ending that seems to offer neither happiness nor closure, *Wise Blood* seems a particularly unlikely candidate for the Hollywood treatment.

As an author more known for her short stories, O'Connor's novels can be difficult to unpack. Typically, her short fiction follows the more-or-less predictable (for one familiar with her stories) range of motion of a single, eccentric character and those immediately around them (often family members). *Wise Blood*, by contrast, does not seem to follow the usual neat arc, and involves a variety of disparate characters with widely diverse spheres of action. The place of this novel within O'Connor's larger body of work becomes much clearer, however, when the novel is regarded as a skillful conglomeration of connected elements which, alone, might make up several discrete, individual short stories. There is the story of Enoch Emory, the stupid teenage boy, alone in the big city and desperate for human contact, who eventually becomes obsessed with a man in a gorilla suit. There is the story of Mrs. Flood, the middle-aged landlady who slowly becomes fixated on her odd, self-flagellating tenant, desperate to discover his secret. And, most importantly, there is the story of Hazel Motes ("Haze"), the faux-dissolute war veteran who is so anxious to escape from Jesus, the "wild ragged figure" who "move[s] from tree to tree in the back of his mind" (11), that he starts his own Church without Christ and shouts its message from street corners. In the end, all of these stories are linked situationally, but also in a deeper sense, as stories about people who are somehow alienated by the superficiality and faithlessness of modern society, and who desire something deeper that they cannot quite identify.

One of the most prominent elements of the novel is its darkly comic tone. Throughout the work, O'Connor carefully balances her grotesque images with a humorous irony that manifests itself in many ways, but is ultimately part of "the divine comedy of redemption" (Gossett 490). Enoch Emory serves as one of the more comical

characters in the story, and the passages involving him, particularly when he is apart from Hazel, can be quite funny. The most notable instance is his stalking of Gongga the Gorilla as the “movie star” visits the premier of his new film at theaters all across town. The situation is so bizarre as to evoke a visceral sense of amusement from the reader. The dialog is a frequent source of humor, as well. The sheer absurdity of what a given character is saying, though delivered with utter seriousness and conviction, causes an exchange to become funny; for example, Enoch’s inability to decipher the mysterious sign which reads “MVSEVM,” and his description of the mummy that he will eventually steal for Hazel as a man who was “once as tall as you or me. Some A-rabs did it to him in six months” (56). The humor of the novel, and of the Enoch Emory character, is an element that is particularly prominent in the film to a degree that can be distracting for the viewer. Some of Enoch’s more comical appearances feel episodic and irrelevant, like digressions from the main story whose function is to “lighten the mood.” In reality, they are significant, but in playing up the slapstick elements of these scenes with clowning and over-the-top music, Huston obscures their symbolic meaning. Although this never quite overwhelms the story, there is a sense that the audience is meant to laugh and to feel superior in response to the characters’ foibles, rather than to learn from or understand them.

Fortunately, the novel’s tightly-packed web of interconnected themes remains resonant with the cinematic approach. In particular, O’Connor attaches a great deal of importance to *perception* throughout *Wise Blood*. Hazel Motes, having exchanged his army uniform for a dark suit and wide-brimmed hat, is mistaken for a preacher by everyone he meets, and in some ways he becomes one. Haze himself believes that Asa

Hawks is really a blind preacher, and that his daughter Sabbath Lily is an innocent girl, although neither assumption is correct. Enoch perceives, in the novel's greatest flash of insight, that the "new Jesus" Haze is looking for, the Christ without Christ, must be the dried and shriveled corpse from the museum. As previously mentioned, there is also a recurring motif of blindness and sight: Asa Hawks pretends to be blind, but can actually see. Hazel Motes can see, but is spiritually blind, before ultimately blinding himself with lime and gaining spiritual sight. This is just one of several shocking acts of violence (another hallmark of O'Connor's fiction) that occur at significant points throughout the narrative, such as when Hazel murders the "false preacher," Solace Layfield, and when the policeman destroys Hazel's car. O'Connor's explanation for this is that she finds "violence is strangely capable of returning [her] characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moments of grace" (qtd. in Bernstein 145).

While critics approach the crucial role of O'Connor's theological agenda in a variety of ways, criticism of the novel ultimately centers on the idea that Hazel is (as O'Connor frequently explained) a "Christian *malgre lui*" (in spite of himself) who cannot ultimately escape his own redemption by Jesus Christ. In a note written for the novel's second edition in 1962, O'Connor said that, for many of her readers, "Hazel Motes' integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind. For the author Hazel's integrity lies in his not being able to" (qtd. in Cooper 40). As a Southerner and a Catholic writing in the late-1940s, a time of renewed American prosperity, but consequently of diminishing spirituality, O'Connor was very much concerned with modern man and his struggles to adjust to a society that has relegated its deities to strange and shallow roles. *Wise Blood* displays a

keen eye for the absurdities, but also the realities, of everyday Southern life in a region that was, in some ways, just catching up to the rest of country. O'Connor's sense of concrete detail, though sharing a complex relationship with her dense application of theologically-charged symbolism, is ultimately what makes *Wise Blood* an engaging experience for the reader, despite a self-professed use of the grotesque that might seem to distance the audience from her characters and their struggles. In their attempt to draw O'Connor's vision out of the novel and onto the screen intact, the screenwriters attempted to lean heavily on a sense of real people and real places. In an interview with Carter Martin, Benedict Fitzgerald explained, "I was trying [...] to make a clear and straightforward adaptation of the *story*—because the story itself has all the elements we need to suggest rather than openly point out the allegory" (qtd. in Bernstein 147).

The film begins with an opening credit sequence that, while not drawn from the novel at all, effectively establishes everything the audience needs to know about this adaptation. The credits, which were written in crayon by a child, appear over a series of black-and-white still photographs. When the title appears, it is displayed as *Jhon Huston's Wise Blood*. There are two things which are immediately apparent. First, the director's first name, which appears a total of three times during the credits, has been misspelled. In his discussion of the film, Stephen Cooper interprets this as deliberate attempt on the part of the director to signal a "commitment to the spirit, if not the letter, of O'Connor's novel" (43). However, in an interview about the film, the writer-producer reveals that the mistake was unintentional, but that it struck them as "a perfect metaphor for what [they] were trying to do in the film [...] that this was not exactly supposed to be hyperrealism [...] that there was going to be something deliberately, slightly

manufactured and twisted about this” (Fitzgerald). This clearly indicates an understanding on the part of the writers that the southern setting of the film is not a literal depiction of the South, and a desire to communicate that distinction to the audience.

The second notable aspect of this title is the possessive apostrophe attached to the director’s name. This movie is not *Wise Blood*, it is *Jhon (John) Huston’s Wise Blood*. The source may be O’Connor’s novel, but Huston is the creator of the film. However, this statement is not as strong as it first appears. The film names Barbara McKenzie as the photographer responsible for the images used in the credits. Shortly after the film’s theatrical release, most of the photographs (along with many others) were published by McKenzie in a book entitled *Flannery O’Connor’s Georgia*. These photographs, taken over a period of many years, are all of the area where O’Connor spent much of her own life, and where she experienced the culture she describes so vividly in her fiction. The intention of the director could not be more clear: This film may be “his” version of *Wise Blood*, but it is still Flannery O’Connor’s Georgia. However, it remains to be seen whether Huston recognizes the distinction between Georgia and “Flannery O’Connor’s Georgia.”

His intentional evocation of place has as much to do with casting as it does with location. Huston maintained (and most critics who have discussed the film agree) that the actors selected to portray the major characters are all extraordinarily well-suited to their roles. Much of the praise is heaped upon Brad Dourif for his intense and compelling portrayal of Hazel Motes (a role that was originally slated to go to a young Tommy Lee Jones). Nevertheless, there is also a great deal of attention paid to Ned Beatty (who made his screen debut in *Deliverance*, and appears here as Hoover Shoats)

and the rest of the cast. Many roles were inhabited by performers who were (and still remain) virtual unknowns. In addition, the smaller roles in the film were largely filled by nonprofessionals from the area. The man who sells Haze his car was a local who had never acted before. The policeman who destroys Hazel's car was portrayed by the sheriff of Macon. The woman who played Leora Watts was an actual prostitute. Small wonder that the filmmakers were on the lookout for ways to indicate that the film would *not* be hyperrealistic. As O'Connor explains:

to say that fiction proceeds by the use of detail does not mean the simple, mechanical piling-up of detail. Detail has to be controlled by some overall purpose, and every detail has to be put to work for you. Art is selective. What is there is essential and creates movement. (93)

An understanding of the selectivity of art is essential to understanding how Huston's film operates. Even during the verisimilitudinous opening titles, where we see "the ramshackle stores, the kudzu-bordered roads, the religious and commercial billboards" of *Flannery O'Connor's Georgia* (a description evoking Disney theme park attractions in the vein of "Tom Sawyer Island" or "Pocahontas Indian Village"), a "more intricate merging of actual and fictional milieu is suggested by Barbara McKenzie's photographs" (Gossett 489). These are locations that actually exist, but they have been carefully selected by Huston from among McKenzie's photographs, themselves carefully and artistically composed, in order to support the symbolic framework of the narrative.

It is precisely this element of the film's introductory images that Pamela Demory objects to in "Faithfulness vs. Faith: John Huston's Version of Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*." Registering an odd complaint about the effect of these photographs on the film's audience, she claims that they "create a documentary-like effect" that presents "a 'real' location for the fictional story." However, "in their representation of a world that is rural,

poor, and imbued with signs of fundamentalist Christianity, these images also conform to the familiar ideas about the South that have been generated by popular culture and media representations.” This is certainly not a surprising observation in light of the previous discussion about O’Connor’s cultural context. The question is how this affects the perceptions of the audience. Counterintuitively, Demory argues that, by beginning with a recognizable place rather than with the somewhat off-putting character of Hazel Motes (as the novel does), the film erases the novel’s ironic distance from its subject, replacing it with increased sympathy for the film’s characters. The implications of this, that the filmmakers are exploiting audience perceptions and indulging in broad southern stereotypes, and that the result forges a connection between audience and characters, will require further discussion. However, Michael Klein, while agreeing that the images are “documentary-like in quality,” interprets their message somewhat differently: “as no narrative context has yet been established, we respond to them as visual tropes, significant in themselves and an indication that we should keep our eyes on the cultural background throughout the film” (231).

Klein engages in a detailed discussion of the photographs, and a close examination of them reveals that they largely fall into one of two categories (many belong in both). The first type of image is connected with travel (i.e., roads, automobiles, etc.). Of the eight images shown during the credits, the first, second, sixth and seventh prominently feature country roads (all are shots of roadside signs). The third image is of a roadside business selling tires (as well as peaches and plums), and the fourth image is of a stone sign marking the “C.T. Lord Highway” running between Toombsboro and Milledgeville (O’Connor’s hometown). Klein describes these images putting the viewer

in mind of “Hazel as pilgrim beginning his journey” (232). This idea resonates with Laura Jehn Menides’ account of the film in “John Huston’s *Wise Blood* and the Myth of the Sacred Quest.” Menides draws attention to the film’s opening scene (after the credits) which, unlike the novel, depicts Hazel’s return to the family home, which he finds abandoned. He wanders through the ruined structure, taking it in, and then departs for Taulkinham. The scene appears in a flashback in the novel, but Menides accounts for the decision to change the order of events in order to “show the hero leaving home and then beginning his journey.” Hazel’s journey is to be understood in terms of “a mythic journey or quest [...] toward an important goal.” To achieve this goal, Haze must “travel and suffer, experience frustration and failure, discover important things about [himself] and the world, and eventually reach [...] a symbolic or literal home” (208).

The second type of images shown during the credits contains references to religion in the South, many of them linked explicitly with symbols of commercialism. For example, the first and seventh photographs depict road signs which exhort passing motorists to “repent” and to “seek Jesus.” The second photograph is of a group of signs pointing the way to two nearby Baptist churches. The signpost is topped with an advertisement for Coca-Cola. The fifth image is of the front of a roadside stand, displaying a weird hodgepodge of kitschy knickknacks (including, significantly, a plush gorilla doll seated in a rocking chair). To the left is a large wall hanging of da Vinci’s “The Last Supper.” Small Confederate flags flank the chair, and a larger flag hangs behind it. “Here the central symbols of a regional culture [...] are dominated by structures of commodity fetishism” (Klein 231). The sixth image is of a Dairy Queen sign whose bulletin reads “REPENT/BE BAPTIZED IN JESUS NAME.” The final

image is of a grave marked with a cross and a small plastic telephone, the receiver off the hook, and the words “Jesus Called.” It would be impossible to take these images together and not conclude that the stage has somehow been set. “Huston's preface to the film [...] defines a context for Hazel's quest: America as commercial and spiritual wasteland” (Klein 232).

This theme, although present in O'Connor's novel, lacks the concrete, literalized quality that film easily allows. Immediately, within the first few seconds of the film, Huston brings the tension between faith and its commercialization strikingly into view with the instantly-recognizable Coca-Cola and Dairy Queen logos. This “cultural background” of commercialism intensifies as *Wise Blood* moves into the city of “Taulkinham” (although the city does not actually exist, *Wise Blood* was shot on location in Macon, Georgia). Klein draws attention to a number of scenes in which signs advertising or denoting various places of business serve to subtly underscore important elements of various scenes. The most significant of these appears during the scene in which Hazel finds himself competing with Solace Layfield and Hoover Shoats for his audience. Situated prominently in the background over Hazel's shoulder is a giant sign which simply reads “JESUS CARES.” As the camera shifts over to Layfield and Shoats, both just out to make a quick buck, we see that the building behind them is labeled “Pepsi Cola Bottling Company.” Again, in a subtle, unobtrusive way (impossible in a novel), Huston manages to emphasize this essential alienation that defines Hazel's conflict with the society around him.

Several critics have drawn attention to other key scenes in the film which represent modifications to the letter of O'Connor's novel while staunchly preserving its

spirit. Two of the most frequently cited scenes are Haze's introduction to the "new jesus" and the loss of his car. In the former, Enoch hands the mummy to Sabbath Lily while Hazel is asleep and she sneaks it into the bathroom to get a good look at it. Taking a liking to it, she sweeps it into her arms as though it were a baby and goes to present it to Haze. He comes to the door of his room, bleary-eyed with sleep, and discovers her there, holding the "baby" with her sweater pulled up to cover her hair in a visual reference to the Madonna and Child. The image only strengthens the Messianic mockery represented by the mummy, making Haze's reaction that much more understandable. In the novel, the policeman Hazel encounters pushes his car over a small cliff, and it lands upside down in a dry field, one wheel flying off. The film stages this scene quite differently, panning to follow the car down a gentle slope as it picks up speed, racing further and further out of Hazel's reach before finally sinking into a pond. Bernstein and Menides both stress that "the car's autonomous, lengthy run across the field into a pond, emphasize more forcefully than the novel the finality of Motes's loss of the car" (Bernstein 157). Boyum and Pulleine "can't help but call up in this context 'associations of both burial and baptism'" (Boyum 181). These scenes, and many others, lay open the filmmakers' adaptation process of continually drawing the events of the story out onto the screen, and allowing the deeply embedded metaphorical elements to either follow along naturally or, if not natural to the new medium, to be preserved via replacement with something more cinematic.

The musical score of the film also plays a significant thematic role. A "dignified melodic rendition of 'The Tennessee Waltz'" runs behind the opening credits, further affirming the wistful, familiar sense of Southern hospitality welcoming the viewer into

the world of the film (Cooper 42). Bernstein argues that “the music functions most prominently of all among the film’s stylistic elements,” likely an accurate assessment given that most of the film’s critics also single out its score as particularly, even jarringly, intrusive. There are four notable musical arrangements that can be heard throughout the film. The “slow” version of “The Tennessee Waltz” reappears at various dramatic points, such as during the scene in which Hazel is walking through his ruined home, or as Hazel follows Solace Layfield out to a deserted road to murder him. There is a serene, nostalgic, distinctively regional quality to the melody which implies a connection to Haze’s past life which he cannot escape. A different reoccurring piece carries an implied connection with Hazel’s religious past as well as his ultimate destination: “Simple Gifts” (often simply called “Shaker Hymn”) from Aaron Copland’s 1944 arrangement for *Appalachian Spring*. Bernstein identifies three points during which the melody appears: First, when Hazel stands at his grandfather’s grave and remembers one of the old man’s revival sermons via flashback; second, when Haze leaves Mrs. Flood’s house in the rain after she has proposed that they marry near the end of the film; third, for a few seconds as the final scene fades into the credits and before the melody fades into yet another rendition of “The Tennessee Waltz.” The lyrics of “Simple Gifts” (which are not heard anywhere in the film) resonate powerfully with the arc of Hazel’s spiritual progress: “’Tis the gift to be simple, ’tis the gift to be free, / ’Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be, / And when we find ourselves in the place just right, / [...] To bow and to bend we shan't be asham'd, / To turn, turn will be our delight, / Till by turning, turning we come round right” (Brackett).

The other two melodies are much lighter in tone, and produce a vastly different effect. One is a “more jaunty, bouncy version” of “The Tennessee Waltz” which plays (most notably) as Haze drives his new car fitfully out of the lot and when the policeman shoves Haze’s car off of the road (Bernstein 156). An even more broadly comic tune (built around zany banjo-picking) accompanies some of Enoch’s more colorful exploits, particularly his theft of the mummy and of the gorilla suit. Both of these pieces have a slapstick quality that deeply colors every scene in which they are heard. These musical motifs in particular offer the strongest indication that some creative force behind the adaptation of *Wise Blood* saw the material as broadly comic, maintaining an ironic distance from the characters that threatens to reduce them to figures of fun rather than human beings on the path to redemption. This speaks to the central tension in all of O’Connor’s work: whether to laugh at her characters or learn from them. It is a line that she walks so delicately as to present great difficulty for anyone attempting to retrace her steps, particularly if that is not the primary goal. This was clearly the goal of the film’s screenwriters, but perhaps not of the director and crew.

In charging that the film’s use of real locations destroys its ironic distance, Demory not only misses the effect of the score entirely, she fails to satisfactorily explain why ironic distance is desirable except as (by her interpretation) a matter of fidelity to the novel. Of equal interest is Demory’s implication that the images, which represent common tropes about the South, serve to shrink rather than widen the gap between the “normal” viewer and the eccentric character that inhabits this landscape. Emphasizing southern stereotypes generally highlights the comical or disturbing differences between viewer and subject, as it does so effectively (and even maliciously) in *Deliverance*.

However, in this case Demory appears to be saying that the stereotypes act as a sort of cultural shorthand which transform the bizarre and off-putting characters and situations of O'Connor's novel into the familiar (though still not, perhaps, the comfortable). This seems, by some happy accident, to have captured perfectly O'Connor's penchant for drawing "large and startling" southern figures as a means to communicate something which was, to her, universal. However, it leaves the film open to the same possibility for misinterpretation as its source, though perhaps somewhat less so. Joy Gould Boyum goes so far as to hint that the problem lies, not with the film, but with the novel, and that the distance maintained in *Wise Blood* is "the flaw in O'Connor's work [...] its lack of human acceptability." Had the filmmakers not somehow accounted for this element of O'Connor's novel, her characters "might seem to us too mad, too repellent, too unbelievable to invite us to go beyond their immediate impression and search for their larger significance" (Boyum 177-178).

Given the critically-acclaimed result of this narrative collaboration between Flannery O'Connor and John Huston, it may be somewhat surprising to realize that, just as the film Huston made is not the novel O'Connor wrote, neither is it the film that Huston set out to make. An account of what transpired behind the scenes reveals the source of the seemingly-contradictory nature of some of the film's elements, which sometimes invite us to laugh at the characters and sometimes invite us to join them in their struggles. In "*Wise Blood: A Matter of Life and Death*," Francine Prose reveals that Huston approached the filming of the movie convinced of "the unmediated comedy of Hazel's obsession" and with the idea "that he was shooting a picture about the semi-ridiculous religious manias prevalent throughout the South." The screenwriters, by

contrast, had envisioned Hazel's story as one of "redemption and salvation," prompting "a hasty script conference about Hazel's fate" in which Huston finally conceded their point. Prose conjectures that:

Perhaps [O'Connor] would have thought that the progress of the production had, in some mysterious way, paralleled the plot of her novel. In spite of himself, the director had made a film about a Christian in spite of himself, groping his way toward redemption.

In an odd twist, studying the production of *Wise Blood* reveals that the novel modified the film just as surely as the film modified the novel; their interaction through adaptation displays the very essence of intertextual dialog. If the two texts are indeed in an open, ongoing conversation with each other rather than "closed" and therefore silent, it is possible that each contains some "key" to "unlocking" meaning within the other. In this case, *John Huston's Wise Blood* makes O'Connor's characters and their story more real to us, and they become figures we can identify with and learn from through their dissatisfaction with the superficiality of their (and our) culture. Meanwhile, Huston narrowly escaped the superficiality which O'Connor's audience so frequently falls prey to: of treating her story as a comedy about southern religious eccentricity. Through their mutual commitment to making audiences "see," O'Connor kept Huston unwittingly grounded in its deep awareness of the spiritual reality of modern life. The film version of *Wise Blood*, while consciously drawing on cultural images of the South, takes its audience beyond regional stereotypes and into the world of O'Connor's eternal perspective. Meanwhile, Hazel Motes' spiritual identity crisis foreshadows an imminent cultural identity crisis that began to emerge in southern narratives a decade after Huston's film.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Maybe Dixie’s Not the Right Song:” Adaptation and the Southern Identity Crisis

In a 1941 essay, Carson McCullers suggests that “The South has always been a section apart from the rest of the United States, having interests and a personality distinctly its own. Economically and in other ways it has been used as a sort of colony to the rest of the nation” (McCullers 260). Although her choice of words is interesting, this idea is basically consistent with other observations about the region, including C. Vann Woodward’s statement that the South’s military defeat in the Civil War had cut it off from the myth of American success and victory, and Teresa Goddu’s exploration of the literary and cultural classification of the South as America’s dark “other.” What each of these descriptions implies is a conception of southern identity that is at odds with the national identity (and, specifically, white male identity in both cases). Cinematic depictions of the South have consistently reinforced this conflict of identity while dealing with it in different ways. Positive Hollywood depictions of the South, embraced by southern audiences, frequently sought to promote reconciliation between the southerner and the American (or northerner) by glorifying the southern way of life and its values as equal or superior to northern values. As a result, in *The Birth of a Nation*, white northerners unite with white southerners on markedly southern terms in order to answer the threat represented by freed black slaves. Negative depictions, on the other hand, have emphasized the contrast between southern and American identity, rendering southerners grotesque; they ultimately either cause their own downfall or are defeated by a non-

southern protagonist. Thus, in *Deliverance* the hero and his friends journey into the South from outside, and must achieve victory over the various threats of southern degeneracy.

This dichotomy has, with few exceptions, traditionally comprised the basic formula for representations of the South on film. This is not to suggest a complete absence of ambiguity, but whether devil, saint, or something in between, the protagonist in these films remained unregenerately southern; an identity that continues to be inextricably associated with distasteful connotations. However, several films of the late 1980s and early 1990s depict a profound southern identity crisis. In these films, southern white male identity is associated with violence and racism (the villains are rednecks and Klansmen), while American white male identity assumes the oppositional virtues of racial tolerance and democratic justice through law enforcement and the courts (the heroes are lawmen and lawyers). Confronted with this basic incompatibility between negative southern values and positive American values and forced to choose between them, the protagonists repeatedly reject their southern culture and heritage and face severe personal consequences as a result. Ironically, but not surprisingly, the portrayal of this struggle is often guilty of the same white racial privileging that it condemns as a fundamentally southern characteristic. The resulting films are what Allison Graham calls “Hollywood’s white redemption tales,” in which the “man of law, the redeemed southern white man” defeats the “irrationally violent redneck [...] as proof of the inherent goodness of all other whites” (17, 148). This basic formula of a protagonist who “becomes less Southern and more American” (Jansson 275) is repeated in *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *A Time to Kill*, *The Chamber*, and *Ghosts of Mississippi* (all 1996).

Mississippi Burning and *Ghosts of Mississippi* are both based on actual events, while *A Time to Kill* and *The Chamber* are adaptations of John Grisham novels. An analysis of these adaptations as well as the other two films reveals how Grisham's novels, and even historical events, are co-opted to support this dominant cinematic metanarrative.

Graham traces the cultural origins of the redeemed southern man of law to two fictional characters, both created in 1960 amidst building racial turmoil. The first is Andy Taylor, wise sheriff of the all-white town of Mayberry (based on Mt. Airy, North Carolina), played by Andy Griffith on the enormously popular *Andy Griffith Show*, which ran on television from 1960 to 1968. The second is Atticus Finch, who practices law in Maycomb (based on Monroeville, Alabama) and prevents a lynching before unsuccessfully defending its intended victim from a bogus rape charge in *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (adapted into a successful film in 1962). Graham notes that where *Andy Griffith*'s 1930s atmosphere reconstructed "the Depression as a kinder, gentler time for white America," the same "temporal displacement" in *Mockingbird* gave Lee the ability to "address mainstream television's taboo subject," the "mounting fear and violence surrounding desegregation," although in her opinion the historical distance still made audiences conscious of "its remoteness from present-day urgency" (159-160). In "The Female Voice in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: Narrative Strategies in Novel and Film," Dean Shackleford argues that, despite critical admiration for the fidelity of the adaptation, the film relocates the novel's main concern. Namely, where the novel is centered on the narration by Atticus' daughter, Scout, and her "female child's perspectives on an adult male world," the film "shifts perspectives [...] to the male father figure and the adult male world," changing the story's focus from Scout's struggles with her own gender

identity to an overriding interest in Atticus and the rape trial (102-103). Citing its production during “the turbulent period of the 1960s when racial issues were of interest” (103) as an explanation for this shift, Shackleford’s observations highlight the subtle transformations that realign a narrative’s concerns with the prevailing cultural interests. Nevertheless, Andy Taylor and (especially) Atticus Finch became early prototypes for a new, enlightened breed of southern authority figure that would return in force with the highly controversial, highly acclaimed release of *Mississippi Burning* in 1988.

Mississippi Burning, written by Chris Gerolmo, is loosely based on an FBI investigation into the murder of three civil rights workers in Mississippi in 1964. Relying on elements of the “buddy cop” genre, the main characters of the film are Ward and Anderson, two white FBI agents with conflicting personalities and approaches who must learn to work together in order to succeed. Ward, the younger agent, is officially in charge and has come to the FBI after working in the Kennedy Justice Department. During his time there, he was wounded while protecting James Meredith, the first African American student to enroll in the University of Mississippi. Ward believes in rigorously following FBI rules and procedures, but he is also ideologically committed to bringing about racial equality in the South. Meanwhile, Anderson was once the sheriff of a small Mississippi town, not unlike the one which the agents are now investigating. He is rough and blunt, and his sense of humor is crude. He knows the region, and he speaks the heavily accented, “good-old-boy” language of the white locals. He functions as a guide to both Ward and the audience as the film enters the foreign country of Mississippi.

Anderson uncomfortably occupies the space between the culture of righteous, enlightened American justice embodied by Ward and the FBI, and the culture of a

virulently racist and white-supremacist South. As a result, his role in the film leaves him in a somewhat ambiguous position during much of the story, and he is clearly conflicted in his attitudes about the South. He simultaneously cautions Ward against any action which might stir up trouble in the area (“Don’t do it, Mr. Ward. You’ll just start a war.”), and engages in dialogue with the locals that is calculated to provoke a reaction. His sympathy with, or at least understanding of, the town’s residents is clear in various conversations with Ward, but he rarely shows the same level of respect in his encounters with suspicious rednecks. In the agents’ first encounter with the sneering deputy Clinton Pell (Brad Dourif), Anderson immediately senses disrespect after they ask for the sheriff. While Ward politely takes a seat to wait, Anderson sits down on the deputy’s desk and says, “Listen to me, you backwoods shit-ass, you. You’ve got about two seconds to get the sheriff out here, or I’m gonna kick the goddamn door in.” He smiles broadly as he finishes speaking, but before the deputy has a chance to respond, the sheriff emerges from his office. It is unclear whether this ostentatious display has had any effect on the deputy, but it has served its intended purpose: to signal to Ward and to the audience that Anderson “knows how to talk to these people.” Moments later, though, as the agents sit in their car, Anderson contradicts Ward’s assumption that the account given by the civil rights office is more reliable than the sheriff’s story: “Lying just don’t come into it [...] If a sheriff in a little town like this says that’s what happened, then that’s what happened.”

Later, Anderson tells Ward not to “even think about” provoking the local white population by taking a seat in the “colored” section of a crowded diner (Ward ignores the warning). However, Anderson repeatedly goads whites by joking that he likes baseball “because it’s the only time that a black man gets to wave a stick at a white man without

starting a riot.” As a result, Anderson’s attempts to ingratiate himself with the townspeople are often repulsed. He always enters their gatherings with a friendly smile, but everyone in the room quickly stops talking and he is left to deal with an awkward silence. When he happens on an informal meeting of a men’s “social club” at one point, his arrival forestalls the punch line of a racist joke, but he convinces the reluctant deputy to supply him with a beer. Forced to make conversation himself amidst the sudden lull, he launches into a humorous story about his experiences dealing with bootleggers as a southern sheriff. No one in the room is amused, and Deputy Pell quickly pipes up, “We ain’t too interested in your good ol’ Mississippi boy stories, Anderson. You ain’t from here no more.” By this point in the film, Anderson couldn’t agree more. When asked why he left, he replies “The grits started to leave a bad taste in my mouth.” This offhand remark cuts straight to the heart of Anderson’s character. This staple of the stereotypical southern diet serves as a metaphor for his growing discomfort with southern mores and traditions, but rejecting these values has cut him off from his people, his heritage, and his identity. Although he has replaced unacceptable southern values with acceptable American ones, he still speaks with the accent and idioms of a southerner. To his fellow agents, he is a man from the South, but the people of the South recognize the lack of connection between the style and the substance of his speech, and see him as an outsider.

Anderson’s ambiguity with regards to the South is in sharp contrast with the other characters. As Ward tells Anderson, “We’re not killers. That’s the difference between them and us.” Anderson’s reply reflects his atypical nature: “That’s the difference between them and *you*.” This is a world of “us” and “them,” sharply defined camps which cannot overlap. The attitude is shared by the Mississippi natives. The mayor

attempts to set Anderson straight about the region: “People got the wrong idea about the South [...] Simple fact is we’ve got two cultures down here: white culture and the colored culture. That’s the way it always has been and that’s the way it always will be.” When Anderson responds that “The rest of America don’t see it that way,” Sheriff Stuckey is quick to interject, “Rest of America don’t mean jack-shit. You in Mississippi now.” The film presents a monolithic Mississippi (and, by extension, a monolithic South) which stands in opposition to the nation and must be converted or subjugated.

This element of outside white intervention is the source of much of what undermines the film’s social message in opposition of racism. The local black population is portrayed as passive in the face of discrimination. Their response is not only ineffectual, it is basically nonexistent, and the filmmakers fail utterly to integrate them into the story in any meaningful way. All of the scenes which feature black characters, most of which show them either collectively suffering from or reacting to random acts of violence, feel like digressions from the plot. The only action taken by the black population in the film occurs after a judge has suspended the sentence of some of the suspected murderers. In response, the black population riots and destroys their own section of town (while the local police watch). The agents largely fail to show any sort of significant concern about (or even knowledge of) the escalating racial violence transpiring in the margins of this film, although several buildings are burned to the ground, blacks are terrorized and beaten, and one man is lynched as his family hides nearby. Anderson and Ward are finally galvanized into taking decisive action and working together to defeat the KKK network, but the event that enrages and inspires them to act is, not the lynching which has just transpired, but the brutal beating of a white

woman with whom Anderson has become romantically involved. By making the endangerment of a southern white woman the impetus which drives the film's resolution, the filmmakers resurrected a conventional trope typical of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). While this raises the dramatic stakes, it does little to promote the enlightened racial attitudes the film is trying to foster. The film's director, Alan Parker, seemed to at least partially understand this by the time he did the DVD commentary for *Mississippi Burning*. As the final credits roll, he says:

Is it the definitive Civil Rights story? No. Is it a story told from a black point of view? No. Did this film get made because the two heroes in it are still white? Possibly, but that's a reflection of American society as much as it is to do with the film industry [...] if it opened up a debate to discuss racism in America, and if they used the inadequacy of my film in order to point that out, I'm still proud.

Parker's desire to shape historical events on film in order to inspire audiences to examine their own attitudes about race reveals *Mississippi Burning* to be "a fable for, by, and about white characters" (Graham 151). However, its graphic depiction of southern racism was also widely perceived as groundbreaking, and inspired a period of heightened interest in stories about the Civil Rights Movement.

Not long before *Mississippi Burning* was released, in 1987, John Grisham finished writing *A Time to Kill*, his first novel. However, it received very little attention until the enormous success of his second novel, *The Firm* (1991). *The Firm* and Grisham's two subsequent novels, all legal thrillers with colorful but largely incidental southern settings, were adapted into films in 1993 and 1994. Their success finally led to the adaptation of *A Time to Kill*, released in the summer of 1996, and followed a few months later by the adaptation of Grisham's fifth novel, *The Chamber*. Grisham's direct inspiration for writing *A Time to Kill* came from hearing the testimony of a young rape victim in 1984, but *To Kill a Mockingbird* is also a clear influence. The novel's hero is

Jake Brigance, a young, white lawyer in a small southern town who defends Carl Lee Hailey, a black man who gunned down the two rednecks that raped his daughter. Despite some shifts in perspective to black and non-southern characters, the main character is clearly Jake, who must face a series of trials, both personal and legal, in his quest for justice. Jake is essentially a surrogate for Grisham, as he makes clear in the Author's Note, drawing a series of parallels between himself and his protagonist: "There's a lot of autobiography in this book" (xi). The chief concern of the story is the violence that erupts around the trial, prompting the question of whether it is possible for Carl Lee to receive a fair hearing in the white-dominated part of Mississippi he inhabits. Much is made throughout the novel of the white majority in the fictional Ford County, although the sheriff, Ozzie Walls, is black. He is, we are informed, "the only black sheriff in Mississippi. [...] He took great pride in that fact, since Ford County was seventy-four percent white [...] Not since Reconstruction had a black sheriff been elected in a white county in Mississippi" (9). Small asides like this appear frequently as background detail for Grisham's familiar vision of the South, which emphasizes the region's exotic foreignness. As Ellen Roark, a law student from Massachusetts and Jake's volunteer assistant for the trial, observes: "I'm not a Southerner and I find this place bewildering most of the time, but I have developed a perverse love for it. It'll never make sense to me, but it is fascinating" (297).

Race-related violence is one of the novel's central features, mostly involving the Ku Klux Klan, who threaten Jake and the prospective members of Carl Lee's jury with burning crosses, attempt to bomb Jake's house before later burning it down, and kidnap and beat Roark. There is also a large street brawl outside the courthouse between

members of the KKK and black protesters that leads to the death of Stump Sisson, the Imperial Wizard of Mississippi, after someone throws a firebomb at him. The riot prompts the local government to summon the National Guard to keep order during the trial. Grisham's depiction of the near-anarchy provoked by the racially charged trial of Carl Lee Hailey is reminiscent of the outbreak of arson and murder seen in *Mississippi Burning*. Looking back on his novel in a 2004 interview, Grisham indicates the cultural pressure that prompted some of these images: "I'm really tired of the Ku Klux Klan stuff. When you write about the South it's got to be about race and I wish I hadn't devoted so much of the book to the Klan because they don't deserve it" (Jordan 1). Still, in *A Time to Kill*, the Klan is just one of several obstacles that Jake must overcome, and not all of his obstacles are white. Carl Lee attempts to fire him several times. In particular, before the trial begins, the NAACP comes to town and attempts to take over the defense, making sure that Carl Lee is aware of the stakes: "Your acquittal by a white jury for the killings of two white men will do more for the black folks of Mississippi than any event since we integrated the schools" (208). The organization and the local black minister in charge of raising money for Carl Lee are portrayed as solely interested in political and personal gain, and the novel makes it clear that the minister is "taking his cut" of all the money he raises (269).

Neither the vicious attacks by the KKK or the transparent machinations of the NAACP can be characterized as social commentary in the novel; they are merely regional details that add color and excitement to the hero's story without prompting any need for genuine introspection. Although he wants to see Carl Lee go free, the motives behind Jake's dogged attachment to the case remain somewhat murky. In the end, the victory

doesn't belong to him at all, but to a member of the jury, Wanda Womack.

Remembering her address after the trial, Jake happens to stop by her house, and is told that "She won it for you. [...] She made them all close their eyes and listen to her. She told them to pretend that the little girl had blond hair and blue eyes, that the two rapists were black [...] And then she told them to imagine that the little girl belonged to them" (513). In an even more explicit reminder of the threat which drives the racial ideology of *The Birth of a Nation*, this proves to have been the decisive factor: the jury's ability to imagine a black rapist and a white victim. However, this realization arrives almost as an afterthought on the novel's penultimate page, and fails to elicit any further discussion, from Jake or anyone else, about what a victory on these terms implies about the state of race relations.

All of this changes dramatically in the film version, which transfers the novel's plot to the screen intact, but provides Jake with a character arc reminiscent of Anderson's identity crisis in *Mississippi Burning*. The film makes Roark's character much more antagonistic, prompting a discussion with Jake about the death penalty to quickly get heated. Jake, becoming annoyed, says, "Roark, spare me your northern, liberal, cry-me-a-river, we-are -the-only-enlightened-ones-in-the-northern-hemisphere bullshit," prompting her to call him "just another repressed, hypocritical southern provincial" and storm out. The exchange reveals both of their inner prejudices, as well as Jake's resentment of non-southern attitudes of superiority and his own staunchly southern identity, which goes largely unquestioned until later in the film. However, a much clearer antagonist emerges in the film as Jake's southern opposite: Freddie Lee Cobb, the brother of one of the rapists. Cobb, enraged by the murder of his brother, makes contact

with the Klan and founds a new chapter of the organization in his county. He is the instigator behind every violent act, including wielding a sniper rifle in an attempt to murder Jake as he exits the courthouse (a national guardsman is hit instead). After Sisson is killed, the other Klan members seem inclined to depart, but Cobb rallies them to continue. He is the face of redneck racism in the film, representing everything that Jake must defeat.

Jake's journey remains largely beneath the surface for much of the movie as the plot follows the chain of events laid out in the novel, with two significant differences. First, Jake's wife (having left town with their daughter after the attempted bombing) returns in the film to offer moral support. Second, Carl Lee remains completely loyal to Jake as his attorney, and never seems to so much as contemplate firing him. The reason for these changes becomes clear in two scenes that occur just before the closing arguments of the trial. In the first scene, Jake's wife appears in the doorway of his office on the eve of the final day of the trial and finds him at his lowest point. She has returned to offer forgiveness for everything that has happened (the disruption of their lives, the loss of their home), and to explain Jake's interest in the case: "I thought you took this case because you wanted to prove to everybody what a big-time lawyer you were, but I was wrong. You took this case because if those boys had hurt Hanna the way that they hurt Tonya, you would have killed them yourself." Jake is committed to Carl Lee's defense because he identifies with his actions as a father, and the experience of fatherhood that they share has made it possible for him to, in some sense, cross the racial divide and see the world through Carl Lee's eyes. In the very next scene, Jake visits Carl

Lee in jail to tell him he thinks the case is lost and that it is time for Carl Lee to cop a plea. His client won't hear of it, and has something to explain to Jake, as well:

You think just like them. That's why I picked you. [...] When you look at me, you don't see a man. You see a black man. [...] We on different sides of the line. Our daughters, Jake, they ain't never gonna play together. [...] You my secret weapon cuz you one of the bad guys. You don't mean to be, but you are. It's how you was raised. [...] You see me like that jury sees me. You are one of them. [...] If you was on that jury, what would it take to convince you to set me free? That's how you save my ass. That's how you save us both.

Carl Lee sees Jake's southern identity as the key to success in the trial, although by this point it is clear that Jake is uncomfortable with that identity. He fidgets and protests throughout Carl Lee's speech, but finally has nothing left to say in response. He recognizes the truth, but he does not like it. This self-awareness is also the key to his ability to change, but first he must win Carl Lee's case.

This he proceeds to do with a dramatic closing argument borrowed directly from Wanda Womack's contribution in the novel. He begins his speech by telling the jury what he has learned ("I set out to prove that a black man can receive a fair trial in the South. [...] But that's not the truth."), then commands them to close their eyes while he describes the rape in graphic detail for some four excruciating minutes. Finally, he concludes: "I want you to picture that little girl. Now imagine she's white." By reassigning this speech to Jake, the film strengthens his victory, and underscores his recognition of the problematic nature of his southern identity that Carl Lee has illuminated. A few minutes later, in the film's final scene, Jake arrives at Carl Lee's victory party with his family. As his wife takes their daughter over and introduces her to Carl Lee's daughter, Jake tells Carl Lee, "I just thought our kids could play together." The two stand, facing each other, smiling, as the uplifting music of a gospel choir fades into the soundtrack and the image gives way to the closing credits. Carl Lee, in

exploiting Jake's southern identity to help win his defense, has made Jake aware of it and what it means. Now, he leaves it firmly behind him in order to embrace racial reconciliation. Still, although there are many other sympathetic white characters, Jake and his family are the only white faces present at the gathering, and it remains to be seen whether Jake will be able to reconcile his new identity with life in Mississippi, as Anderson has clearly failed to in *Mississippi Burning*.

Grisham returned to these issues much more explicitly in *The Chamber*, which seems to have been loosely inspired by the 1994 trial of Byron De La Beckwith for the murder of Medgar Evers in 1963, a trial which would also form the basis for the film *Ghosts of Mississippi*. Whereas Grisham had completed the writing of *A Time to Kill* prior to the release of *Mississippi Burning*, prompting changes to the film version that emphasized the sudden interest in southern identity conflicts, *The Chamber* seems to indicate Grisham's awareness of, and response to, this growing trend. In the novel, Adam Hall learns that his real name is Alan Cayhall, and he was born in Clanton, Mississippi (the same fictional town that serves as the setting for *A Time to Kill*). His family changed their names and moved away in 1967, after his Klansman grandfather, Sam, bombed the offices of a Jewish lawyer, killing two young children. As the novel begins, Sam sits on death row, nearing execution, and Adam, now a lawyer, has taken a job with the large Chicago firm that is handling Sam's appeals. He hopes to take over the case, meet his grandfather for the first time, and save his life. As Peter Robson explains, "Unlike Jake Brigance, who was comfortable with the notion of the death penalty, Adam Hall is against the barbarity of judicial murder" (160). Grisham had undergone a reversal in his opinion about the death penalty between writing the two novels, and *The Chamber*

is his extended attempt to make a case against the death penalty in the form of a novel. The result is long-winded and didactic, but Grisham could have chosen many ways to communicate this message, and the way he chose contains an obvious crisis of southern identity. Adam is opposed to the death penalty, but he is also looking for answers about himself, to understand who he is and where his family comes from. Early in the novel, we see that he has made a video of all of the news footage associated with his grandfather's crime and subsequent trial, which he watches obsessively. Although he has grown up entirely outside the South, not learning about his heritage until late adolescence, he is finally about to come face to face with that past in the form of his grandfather.

The man he meets is bitter and mean; an unregenerate racist from a family of unregenerate racists. Soon, the family secrets begin to surface. He eventually learns from his grandfather that the previous three generations of Cayhalls were members of the KKK. His Aunt Lee tells him how Sam murdered the father of one his son's playmates, a killing that Adam's father Eddie blamed himself for, and about a lynching Sam participated in as a teenager along with his father and brothers. She has an old book with a photograph of Sam at the lynching in it, which she offers to show Adam. He refuses, but several days later he decides that he is "ready to face the lynch mob" (554), and pulls the book out. He is shocked by what he sees, but also begins to conjure up a flood of excuses:

[Sam] was just a boy, born and reared in a household where hatred of blacks and others was simply a way of life. [...] Sam didn't have a chance. This was the only world he knew. [...] How could he fairly judge these people [...] when [...] he would've been right there in the middle of them had he been born forty years earlier? [...] Though Sam was obviously a willing participant, he was only one member of the mob, only partly guilty. [...] How in God's world could Sam

Cayhall have become anything other than himself? He never had a chance. (556-557)

Later, he learns that Sam is also the hooded Klansman who appears in another lynching picture in the book. By the time his sister comes to visit, Adam seems to have decided that, with or without attempts at justification, he would rather not reveal to her what he has learned: “Adam had been very careful. He’d hit the peaks and skipped the woeful valleys—no mention of Joe Lincoln or lynchings or sketchy hints of other crimes” (573).

Meanwhile, all of Sam’s legal recourses fail to forestall the execution, and he is ultimately put to death. Adam spends the final pages of the novel with Lee at the gravesite where his grandfather will soon be buried. Adam informs her that he intends to move back to Mississippi in order to practice law and battle the death penalty. This is almost the identity crisis in reverse, with Adam recovering and restoring his own southern identity. However, Lee tells Adam that she has bought the old house where the family lived when she was a child, and burned it down the night before as Sam was being executed: “Evil things happened there. It was filled with demons and spirits. Now they’re gone. [...] They’ve gone off to haunt someone else” (674). The corner of the South that he is returning to has been purged of everything that tied it to the racial crimes of his forefathers. Adam’s father had taken the step of rejecting his southern identity years before, leaving the region completely and changing his name. Now, his son can return, but Sam will remain the last of the Cayhalls, and his grandson will be a new kind of southerner with a new name, a compassionate man seeking to overturn the death penalty, in a new kind of South that has no place for Sam, his house, or his name.

The plot remains virtually identical in the film version, though somewhat condensed from the nearly-700 pages of the novel. The film, seeking to generate

additional suspense, places a much greater emphasis on a subplot involving Rollie Wedge, the man who built the bomb and masterminded the bombing for which Sam is being executed. In both novel and film, investigators remain suspicious about whether Sam acted alone in the bombing, but in the novel, Wedge watches the appeals process from a distance and keeps his tracks well hidden, and finally disappears as the execution draws nearer. In the film, Adam and an assistant provided by the governor desperately investigate the old files, looking for evidence of the accomplice. As the assistant says, echoing a line from *Mississippi Burning*, “You’re in Mississippi now. Land of the secrets. Dead bodies buried everywhere.” Although Sam is put to death anyway, as the governor gives a speech shortly before the execution, Wedge is shown being taken into custody as a result of the evidence Adam has uncovered, laying the crime even more firmly to rest than in the novel. The film also places a greater emphasis on the photo of the lynching, and Adam uses it as part of Sam’s insanity defense at a final hearing, claiming that the environment in which he was raised made it impossible for him to conceive of acting any other way. However, at the end of the film, Lee doesn’t mention burning her father’s house, and Adam says nothing about moving back to the South. He has faced down his family’s southern demons, but Hollywood does not seem quite ready for a character to regain his southern identity, even a regenerated one. Instead, as Adam and his aunt embrace just before the final fade-out, he simply says, “Maybe the ghosts are gone, Lee.”

He had spoken too soon. Three months after *The Chamber* was released, *Ghosts of Mississippi* appeared in theaters with another story (this one true) of a Klan killer on trial in the present-day for crimes committed decades earlier. This time, though, (in direct contrast with both Grisham novels) the killer is the clear villain, and it is the

prosecutor who is the hero. The black community features much more prominently in this story, particularly Evers' loyal wife Myrlie, who continues to seek justice for the murder for over a quarter century before finally finding someone who is willing to prosecute Beckwith again, but the protagonist is still white. The film begins with an extended flashback, showing the murder and subsequent mistrials in the 1960s. During that first trial, as Myrlie sits in the witness stand, she watches in shock as the governor of Mississippi slips into the courtroom and makes his way over to shake the murderer's hand. A reporter covering the trial protests to a colleague, "There isn't a court in America that would stand for that!" "What's America got do with anything?" the other replies. "This is Mississippi." The exchange echoes quotes from both *Mississippi Burning* and *The Chamber*: "You in Mississippi now." Again there is a strong sense that this part of the country is not *actually* a part of the country at all.

Although it begins in 1963 and seems poised to place Myrlie center-stage in the story, the action soon moves to 1989 and we are introduced to the real central character of the movie: Bobby DeLaughter, a white southern lawyer serving as Deputy District Attorney in Jackson, Mississippi (again, a redeemed southern man of law). A principled but somewhat complacent father of three, DeLaughter comes to identify strongly with Medgar Evers, who was gunned down in front of his wife and three children. Like Jake Brigance, DeLaughter forges a strong connection across racial boundaries because he understands the other man as a father. And, like Agent Anderson, DeLaughter soon finds himself awkwardly dangling between two cultures as he reluctantly begins to look into reopening the Beckwith case. He is inspired by the courage and determination of Mrs. Evers, and convicted by his own conscience as a well-educated American man of the

1990s, both of which make him inclined to pursue the case. On the other hand, he faces the opposition of, not only a large and very vocal (and violent) segment of the Mississippi population, but of his own family in the form of his wife and mother.

In fact, as he insistently pursues the case into the evidence-gathering stage, his wife leaves him, ashamed and unable to face the disapproval of her own friends and family. On her way out the door, she asks her husband what happened to them. "People change," he tells her. "Are you saying I've changed?" she protests. "I'm saying you haven't." DeLaughter is well aware that the Evers case has changed him. He can hardly help but be aware of it. The further he proceeds, the more difficult circumstances become. His car is vandalized, his children get into fights, and he is forced to move them into a hotel when they receive a bomb threat at home late one night. Unlike in the fictional Clanton of *A Time to Kill*, no violence actually ensues. However, like Jake he also faces suspicion from the local black community, who don't quite believe that a white government official in Mississippi is really working in their interest. The excruciatingly slow process lasts for years, finally coming to trial in 1994.

In that time, a great deal has changed for DeLaughter, including his attitude towards his own culture. Early in the film, we see him play out a ritual with his young daughter when she comes into his room to complain that "the ghost is back." DeLaughter humors her, carrying her back to bed and pretending to be able to see the ghost as well. He tells her that his mother told him as a child that ghosts can be made to leave if they hear their favorite song, and that all ghosts are known to love "Dixie." Together they sing the song and banish the ghost. Later on, after his wife has left him, DeLaughter is sitting alone in bed when his phone rings. On the other end of the line is Beckwith, who has

called to deliver an ominous but vague threat against the life of the new star witness. DeLaughter has just finished the conversation when his daughter comes in to inform him that the ghost has returned to her room once more. He scoops her back into bed, and she asks him to sing “Dixie” for her again. Haunted by the specter of Beckwith and all that he represents, DeLaughter finds himself unable and unwilling to sing the song. Finally, he tells the little girl, “Maybe Dixie’s not the right song after all,” and together they settle on the more innocuous “Old MacDonald.” The unpleasant associations of the song have overwhelmed his desire to sing it, and you can see in his expression that he is thinking of the legacy he is passing on to his daughter, as well. He must reject the southern anthem and even the small tricks of parenting which his racist mother has passed on to him in order to steer away from the darker connotations of his culture. With these cultural demons defeated, the only thing that remains is to go through the dramatic motions of the trial scene. After the jury returns its guilty verdict, DeLaughter and his family join Myrlie Evers and her family on the courthouse steps to celebrate before a jubilant crowd.

Interestingly, *Ghosts of Mississippi* shares an unlikely historical link to its 1988 predecessor, at least according to Fred Zollo, who produced both films. As Zollo tells it, the real-life DeLaughter reopened the Beckwith case partially as a result of a series of investigative articles written by local reporter Jerry Mitchell, who in turn claimed to have been inspired by the heightened interest in Civil Rights brought about by *Mississippi Burning*. Additionally, shortly after the release of *Mississippi Burning*, former Neshoba County Sheriff Lawrence Rainey sued Zollo for the unfavorable portrayal of his fictional alter-ego in the film. While researching Zollo’s defense, lawyer John Ables discovered *Klandestine*, a book about a KKK member who became an informant to the FBI. Years

later, *Klandestine* provided a crucial break in the Beckwith case when it led DeLaughter to use the informant as a witness. So, by this somewhat tenuous and convoluted route, *Mississippi Burning*, inspired by a racially motivated murder in the South in 1964, inspired the long-overdue resolution of a racially motivated murder in the South in 1963, which in its turn inspired the film *Ghosts of Mississippi*. It is a perfect example of “the tangled contemporary relationship between history and historical reenactment” (Graham 150).

However, Zollo’s account neglects a final chapter to the story which Parker alludes to more than once in his commentary on *Mississippi Burning*: That the obsessive telling and retelling of a story can breathe new life into spirits long since laid to rest. It is somewhat disturbing to watch the scene of a church being consumed by flames during the opening credits of *Mississippi Burning* and hear Parker casually observe that this is “one of the many churches that we burned.” That is, in order to recreate the image, the film crew actually located and burned down three existing church structures. Even Parker, after a moment’s reflection, is forced to acknowledge that “it felt pretty weird doing it.” He recalls further discomfort during the scenes depicting Klan violence, particularly the lynching scene. The director also vividly recalls the displeasure of the townspeople of Lafayette, Alabama (where he filmed his small-town exteriors) when the crew set up burning crosses for various scenes involving Klan intimidation. The phenomenon is hardly limited to the earlier movie, though. Crosses are also burned and fully robed and hooded Klansmen march through the streets of the town in *A Time to Kill*, filmed on-location in Canton, Mississippi. Even *The Chamber* stages a brief brawl between Klansmen and others outside the state prison. However, perhaps the most disturbing of

these resurrections of the past is James Woods' incredible, repulsive immortalization of Byron De La Beckwith for *Ghosts of Mississippi*. The film was nominated for two Oscars, one for Woods performance (he disappears completely into his role) and another for the makeup that aged the younger actor a quarter century to play a geriatric bigot. Acclaimed Mississippi novelist Willie Morris worked as a consultant on the film, and later wrote a book about the production. In it, he describes his own occasional ambivalence at the often all-too-literal evocations of Mississippi ghosts: "this uncanny blending of the 'real' and the re-created 'unreal,' between the authentic fact and the filmed fact, between the shadow and the act, would make it exceedingly difficult for me to distinguish the two: layer upon layer of ironies, of painful and public personal memories, surreal to me in their unfolding" (31-32). As a native of Mississippi, Morris is uncomfortable with the implications of the film crew's attention to detail in bringing this story back to life.

More important than any other consideration, perhaps, is the question of what impression all of this might have made on a region still working to heal the scars of a not-so-distant past. After bringing integration to the South during the 1960s, outsiders returned to the region throughout the 1990s to erect the symbols of racial segregation and intolerance once more and re-enact scenes of racial strife. Culturally, then, the South is still being used as a colony to the rest of the nation as Carson McCullers suggested, possibly to the detriment of both. Nevertheless, both *Ghosts of Mississippi* and *A Time to Kill*, end with glowing portraits of restored community. But then, as a document of the immediate past, *Ghosts of Mississippi* can afford to pretend that the evils of racism (as

embodied by Beckwith) have been somehow defeated, or at least banished for a while. Now, it seems to say, the ghosts really are gone, and DeLaughter's experience indicates that the only way to be rid of them is not to sing them their favorite song: Dixie. In other words, white southern culture cannot be redeemed. Only white southerners themselves can hope for redemption, and only by abandoning their culture to its ghosts, and (of course) to the unblinking gaze of the movie cameras, which don't seem inclined to abandon the region anytime soon.

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