

**sympathy for the devil:  
the cannibalistic  
hillbilly in 1970s rural  
slasher films**

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In a key scene just prior to the climactic inter-clan showdown in *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), hillbilly clan leader Papa Jupe (who bears more than a passing resemblance to real-life homicidal hippie Charles Manson) eats the burned flesh of the opposing family's deceased patriarch, Pop Carter, and delivers the following soliloquy:

You come out here, and stick your life in my face! Stick your fingers in my pie! That was a bad mistake. I thought you were smart and tough. You're stupid! You're nothin'. I'm gonna watch your goddamned car rust out, yes I will! I'll see the wind blow your dried-up seed away. I'll eat the heart of your stinkin' memory. I'll eat the brains of your kids' kids! I'm in, you're out!

A scene of this exact kind, juxtaposing graphic cannibalism with a speech about explicit class warfare, was unthinkable in the horror cinema of just a decade earlier, when, in 1968, cult horror film *Night of the Living Dead* depicted scenes of gory cannibalism, but not with such direct, class-based political fury.

While seminal low-budgeter *Night of the Living Dead* is politically charged in its own right (primarily around the issue of black civil rights, and for first demonstrating that low-budget

horror made outside the studio system could be profitable)<sup>1</sup> despite its grainy, *faux*-documentary look, it was in many ways a product of a 1950s mentality, “rooted in the past,” especially with respect to its “1950s low-budget monster movie” style of acting. Nothing in it can match the directness with which Wes Craven's 1977 rural slasher equates homicidal violence and cannibalism with the American class struggle and urban fears of the countryside and its denizens.<sup>2</sup> In drawing attention to town and country fears and class disjunctions, Craven's film also lends itself well to an ecocritical analysis.

In his ecocritical study of contemporary cinema, *Hollywood Utopia*, Pat Brereton offers a compelling model for ecocritical close readings of film texts that analyze “the utopian ecological themes which pervade mainstream Hollywood cinema.”<sup>3</sup> He insightfully notes that “Hollywood films are good at showing effects but not causes of ecological problems,” a tendency that applies to a studio film like *Deliverance* (1972), which, despite its taboo-breaking depiction of a graphic onscreen rape, makes minimal effort to provide any specific cause for the rape's occurrence, besides the stereo-typically assumed degeneracy of its rural perpetrators.<sup>4</sup>

Addressing the ideological climate of the “environmental decade,” Brereton characterizes ecological thinking of the 1970s as concerned with “conflicts embedded within humanity” as well as threats posed by “technological developments and increased pollution,” concluding that this kind of ecologically focused “paranoiac thinking” is reflected in the sciencefiction and conspiracy thriller movies of the time.<sup>5</sup> Brereton analyzes dystopic 1970s science-fiction films such as *Soylent Green* (1973) and *Logan's Run* (1976), arguing that such films “helped create a more reflexive and overt exposé of major ecological issues” like diminishing natural resources, pollution, and human overpopulation, but he does not discuss horror films of the same period.<sup>6</sup> Yet horror films, especially low-budget ones like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and *The Hills Have Eyes*, particularly excel at expressing just that feeling of crushing eco-paranoia that Brereton documents.



**Figure 11.1** Cannibalistic hillbilly Papa Jupe lectures urbanite Pop Carter-while eating him—in *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977).

Photofest/Vanguard

I follow Brereton in linking my readings of these two films to the ecological concerns of their historical and cultural time-period, arguing throughout that these low-budget, low-cultural films frequently demonstrate the potential to address structural problems in a more direct and visceral way than their bigger-budget Hollywood counterparts. A few other scholars, such as Anthony Harkins and Carol J. Clover, have commented on the environmental themes of horror films.<sup>7</sup> However, their focus has been on high-budget films like *Deliverance* (Harkins), or upon the specifically gendered dimensions of the low-budget slasher film (Clover). Here, building on their themes and adding an ecocritical dimension, I argue that the figure of the cannibalistic hillbilly as he appears in low-budget horror films of the 1970s serves as a site whereupon (sub-)urban viewers may project their fears of environmental collapse, dwindling natural resources, and reprisals for their structural mistreatment of the working poor.

### **the 1970s: new environmentalism and new horror**

The 1970s were framed in political and pop-cultural discourses as “The Environmental Decade.” It was a time in which environmental activists, politicians, the Nixon Administration, and the general public collectively created “a mainstream environmental movement” that would endure throughout the next four decades to the present day.<sup>8</sup> As historian Robert Gottlieb notes, this increased mainstream visibility post-Earth Day 1970 came at a certain cost, for the April 22 Earth Day event was “perceived as shifting the focus” in environmental activist circles “from industrial to lifestyle issues,” in effect taking pressure off major industrial and corporate polluters and instead focusing upon how individual consumers can help manage resources and be environmentally conscious in their daily lives.<sup>9</sup>

Although this dramatic rise in public awareness of ecological issues was accompanied by “four crucial years” of legislative activity in 1970-4, with many key anti-pollution and pro-labor initiatives (including OSHA) then incepted, private-sector and grassroots environmental advocates argued that by shifting the responsibility for handling ecological crises into the realm of federal government, Nixon effectively attempted to re-appropriate and contain grassroots environmentalism, de-radicalizing it and separating environmental issues from broader race and class struggles in America.<sup>10</sup>

The low-budget horror films analyzed herein attempt to re-integrate those issues that the Nixon Administration treated as separate, shifting the critical focus back upon industrial, economic, and structural problems in 1970s America that impact the destruction of the natural environment and the unjust treatment of disenfranchised people.

In light of these developments, perhaps it is to be expected that the new “environmental decade” witnessed the concurrent emergence of the “New Horror,” a rejuvenation and transformation of the horror genre both in Hollywood and in the independent film sector. New Horror directors such as George A. Romero, Wes Craven, Tobe Hooper, John Carpenter, William Friedkin, Brian De Palma, and Roman Polanski rebelled against the monster movie tradition that had dominated cinematic horror since the success of Universal Studios’ *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, and *Wolfman* series of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>11</sup>

In an attempt to avoid the “man in a rubber suit” problem that often rendered the revelation of the monster in a horror movie unintentionally comedic, these younger horror directors relocated the “monster” into unseen supernatural forces, Satanism, and violent human nature. They embraced a realistic (at times documentary-like) visual aesthetic yet strove to leave the exact *motivation* for the monstrous terror hazy and unknowable: “What the New Horror movies share is a sense that the most frightening thing in the world is the unknown, the inability to understand the monster right in front of your face.”<sup>12</sup>

In an attempt to capitalize on the new trend toward terrifying, disorienting ambiguity, Hollywood produced mainly supernatural and/or Satanic-themed thriller films like *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *The Exorcist* (1973), and *The Omen* (1976), while the low-budget sector responded with themes of human cannibalism and psychotic serial homicide in the form of zombie films and slashers. Indeed, George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) launched the low-budget strand of the New Horror and, along with the narrative template and (trans-)gender dynamics and viewer identification strategies provided by Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), led to the development of the low-budget slasher subgenre that reached its creative apex in 1978 with John Carpenter's *Halloween*.<sup>13</sup> Resisting the psychologization of the killer that 6 many New Horror directors felt ruined the ending of *Psycho*, these 1970s rural slasher films avoided psychoanalytic explanation of serial killing in favor of a socioeconomic justification for the cannibalistic killers’ deeds: their families’ very survival hinged upon the turn to cannibalism and a reversion to a more brutally capitalistic way of life.

Also, rather than absolving the viewer's guilt through traditional narrative closure, as big budget films like *Deliverance* do, low-budget rural slashers leave their audiences suspended in *horrific jouissance*, an apocalyptic suffering which forces their identification with the very murderous values that closure works to abject. Part of the pleasure of these films is that they

do permit the viewer to work through feelings of urban guilt over resource appropriation (“the rape of the natural world”), but these films do so by encouraging the viewer to empathize and identify with the murderous rural cannibals over the invasive city dwellers. Unlike films like *Deliverance*, these films present their cannibalistic hillbilly “villains” in extremely sympathetic terms and, due to the emerging conventions of the slasher horror film genre to which they belong, may even present the rural killers as the ultimate “heroes” of their scenarios in a way that a critically acclaimed Hollywood studio film like *Deliverance* does not attempt.

While the bulk of my analysis focuses specifically on rural slasher horror films, the broader cultural phenomenon those films embody and reflect, and the concept that links them to *Deliverance*, is “urbanoia,” or urban peoples’ fear of rural and wilderness areas and their inhabitants. American fear of the wilderness predates the nineteenth century and is grounded in the “Puritan conception of wilderness” which sees wild country as spiritually and physically dangerous, “a powerful symbol of [humanity’s] dark and untamed heart.”<sup>14</sup> Even when discussed in secular terms, modern American culture shows great “antipathy toward wilderness,” construing wild areas as “barrier[s] to progress, prosperity, and power.”<sup>15</sup> Urbanoia, an outgrowth of this fear of wilderness, refers to the pervasive terror city people have of country people, a motif that is prevalent in the modern slasher horror film. As Carol J. Clover documents in *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, in which she coins the term “urbanoia,” countless horror films (particularly of the slasher and rape-revenge varieties) have staged the urbanoiac scenario: naive city dwellers, usually teenagers, venture into the woods (*Evil Dead*, *The Blair Witch Project*), to a summer camp (*Friday the 13th*, *Sleepaway Camp*), or to a rural area (*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, *The Hills Have Eyes*), only to be mercilessly hunted down and killed by insane homicidal locals.<sup>16</sup> The recurrence of this plot structure in contemporary horror speaks to the power of urban peoples’ fears of the country, as these films both reflect and exacerbate that fear. However, what these films make especially clear is that it is not just the woods or the country we should be afraid of, but particularly the country people who make these areas their home. If these films are to be believed, we fear not just the hills but the hillbillies.

By “hillbillies” I mean a culturally constructed stereotype of uneducated, poor, rural white people, most typically associated with Appalachia. This figure has a long history in American popular culture, originating with the “Snuffy Smith” and *Lil Abner* comic strips in the Depression years of the 1930s, a period Anthony Harkins calls the “cultural epicenter” of hillbilly representation.<sup>17</sup> Harkins documents the hillbilly figure in mid-century cinema and television, noting that by the 1950s hillbillies were most often presented in strictly comedic terms in popular media, most notably in the figures of Ma and Pa Kettle.<sup>18</sup> Harkins argues that this comic stereotyping of the rural poor as ignorant pre-moderns is part of a larger strategy of discrimination and containment which eventually led to the extremely accessible “sanitized hillbilly” portrayals found in popular and long-running 1960s television programs such as *The Real McCoys* (1957–63), *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960–8), and *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962–71).<sup>19</sup> *Deliverance*, and the low-budget rural slashers that follow it, share an investment in countering these user-friendly representations, de-sanitizing the hillbilly, turning

him from a figure of familiarity and comedy into something terrifying and abject.

In both cases, but especially in his desanitized variant, he is a modular cultural signifier: a vaguely white cultural “other” that includes white trash, rednecks, hicks, okies, mountain men, etc. That is, despite the term's invocation of the rural South and specifically Appalachia, in the wider cultural imagination the hillbilly inhabits *any* rural area at the fringes of civilization, regardless of its specific region. So while, for example, *Deliverance* is explicitly set in northern Georgia, “Hillbillyland,” the imagined home of hillbilly folk is a mythical, geographically ambiguous place, about which Harkins notes that “most cultural consumers, to the extent they [consider] the matter at all, [conceive] of ‘hillbillyland’ as, at best, an amorphous area of the upper South and, more often, as anywhere on the rough edges of the landscape and the economy.”<sup>20</sup>

This explicit linkage between “landscape” and “economy” is central to the urbanoia films under discussion, for all of them, *Deliverance* included, depict rural landscapes that have come into direct and violent contact with economic “progress,” exemplified in their recurring images of junkyards, failing business, abandoned or relocated towns, gas shortages, displaced workers, and soon-to-be-built hydroelectric dams. But in terms of the representation of the hillbilly figure itself, the amorphousness and lack of cultural specificity in determining who and where hillbillies are only helps urbanoia spread: nowadays, at least in the urban mind, *any* rural, wooded areas are potential sites for getting raped or killed by insane country folk.

The most influential urbanoia film of the past 40 years is undoubtedly John Boorman's *Deliverance*, a mainstream Hollywood film that Harkins notes “became instantly recognizable shorthand for demeaning references to rural poor whites” throughout American popular culture.<sup>21</sup> *Deliverance* emphatically sympathizes with a group of civilized city men (played by Hollywood stars Jon Voight, Burt Reynolds, Ronny Cox, and Ned Beatty) who visit rural Georgia for a canoe trip and get inexplicably raped and hunted by nameless, degenerate hillbillies.

The film, while calling into question the city men's right to be there by linking their interest in the river to a dam project that will soon destroy it, ultimately redeems their project through the heroic deeds of Ed (Voight), who discovers his inner “ferociousness” and uses it to climb a sheer cliff face, kill the last hillbilly who menaces them, and get his surviving companions safely off the river and back to Atlanta.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the film ends with shots of Ed safely returned to his suburban home, enjoying the company of his wife and child. And while his domestic harmony is punctuated by a nightmare in which he imagines the arm of a dead hillbilly rising from the waters of the newly formed reservoir, it is of course “only a dream,” and the last shot of the film shows the unbroken surface of the reservoir, confirming that the surfacing dead arm is only a figment of Ed's imagination. In sum, while Ed (and surely Bobby, the rape victim) is haunted by his experiences on the river, the film nevertheless closes in the “safe” space of Ed's suburban family home, and his justification for killing the two hillbilly rapists is never directly called into question.

Conversely, low-budget slashers of the same period such as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) emphatically promote viewer identification with their hillbilly characters (*Texas Chain Saw's* rural Leatherface family) through various formal and narrative techniques

including suturing the audience directly into the hillbillies' point of view and dedicating lengthy scenes to the interactions *between* the rural family members in the absence of the city folk. In the low-budget rural urbanoia films, the point of view (POV) shots of the urban victims being watched from tall grasses or woods have the effect of aligning the stalker with the natural environment, further emphasizing the city/country dichotomy while physically positioning the viewer *with the rural killer*. Furthermore, films like *Texas Chain Saw* go out of their way to depict their rural killers as fully (if insanely) human, characters with families, economic backgrounds, and a real need—i.e., survival—to do what they're doing. Thus, if the most culturally widespread version of the urbanoia tale, that of *Deliverance*, positions its country folk as opaquely motivated, strongly vilified agents of nature's vengeance against sympathetic urban exploiters, *Texas Chain Saw* and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) complicate this model by inviting the audience to identify with both the (urban) exploiters *and* the (rural) exploited: perhaps the latter more so than the former.

1970s rural slashers like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *The Hills Have Eyes* stage the country-city dichotomy Nash analyzes in violently extreme yet socioeconomically realistic terms, exposing the inequities that link the decline of the slaughtering industry, modern meat production and consumption, and the general infirmity of American patriarchal authority to issues of resource use, (sub-)urban class privilege, and, ultimately, the rural “hillbilly” stereotyping that results from the urban, middle-class projection of cultural guilt over these issues.

The figure of the hillbilly, functioning as a frightening yet sympathetic rural killer in urbanoia-themed horror films since the 1960s, is a key site for the working through of middle-class anxieties about the collapse of patriarchal authority and the class- and gender-based privilege upon which modern civilized (i.e. Western) culture depends.<sup>23</sup> Along the way, the figure of the cannibalistic hillbilly also metaphorically addresses the concerns of the burgeoning environmental movement very much at the forefront of the national consciousness throughout the decade of the 1970s.

In short, the anxieties urban viewers feel about the decreasing centrality of white, middle-class, heterosexual masculinity and the emptiness of its guarantees of unified subjectivity and cultural progress—bound up, at the time, in an explosion of public awareness about pollution, resource management, and human labor issues—are placed on dramatic display in the figure of the animalistic, rural, white male killer and his extended hillbilly family.

As Clover observes of the narrative progression of *Deliverance*, “The chain does not begin with the mountain men's rape of Bobby in the forest; it begins with the city men's ‘rape’ of the landscape, the visible destruction of the physical habitat of the mountain people. The city approaches the country guilty.”<sup>24</sup> Clover concludes that the “real motor” of the urbanoia film is “economic guilt” and, as I argue, this motor drives not just *Deliverance* but the low-budget rural slashers that follow it, such as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, in which an insane family of displaced slaughterhouse workers turn to cannibalism and sell human flesh in their barbecue business, and Wes Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), in which a savage hillbilly family terrorizes a suburban one, killing their dog and kidnapping their baby for food.<sup>25</sup>

## cannibalism and the economies and ecologies of meat

Cannibalism is a persistent motif in the low-budget rural slasher films, and is explicitly linked to the exploitive nature of capitalism and the class-based privilege that middle-class city folk enjoy over their working-class country counterparts. To return to the essay's introductory example, while eating the burned corpse of suburbanite Big Bob Carter in *The Hills Have Eyes*, Papa Jupe delivers a speech to the dead patriarch in which he berates the city man, saying “you come out here and stick your life in my face, stick your fingers in my pie!” Cannibalism thus becomes, for Papa Jupe as well as *Texas Chain Saw's* Leatherface family, a “natural” way of reversing the exploitive dynamic, using the bodies of urban dwellers for profit and sustenance. These films make clear that if the family under capitalism exploits others to survive, then cannibalism is the (eco-)logical, if extreme, extension of consumer capitalist practices: capitalism gone “wild.”

A raced dimension to this cannibalism motif is also prevalent in the urbanoia films. Rural cannibals are often depicted as failed industrial workers of some kind, and—like their urban victims—are nearly always white-skinned. I say “white skinned” because while hillbillies in horror films are technically white, they have symbolically failed at achieving “proper” whiteness, which, according to Richard Dyer, is historically characterized by a sense of energy, enterprise, industriousness, and discipline, all of which the stereotypical hillbilly lacks, has lost, or outright rejects.<sup>26</sup> Hillbillies occupy an ambiguous position with respect to whiteness and its associated privileges: they are biologically white but socio-economically and behaviorally non-white (to use Dyer's term), and in stereotypical terms, are more associated with animals than proper, civilized humans. This is extremely clear in *Hills* and *Texas Chain Saw*, where the rural killers wear animal skins, frequently imitate animal noises (Leatherface “speaks” only in pig-like squeals, surely a knowing reference to *Deliverance*), and even—in the case of the Leatherface family—decorate their home as if it were a barn or slaughterhouse. Blurring the line between human and animal is not only of central concern to ecocritical scholars, but in this case the issue is central to New Horror's disorienting, terrifying agenda by reminding civilized moviegoers of that which we repress: that is, the way our meat is processed, the similarity between slaughterhouse practices and human butchery, and the horrifying possibility that we may be literally eating our own.

In *Texas Chain Saw* the Leatherface house replicates, in a degraded, messy way, an industrial slaughterhouse: as Wood writes, “The borderline between home and slaughterhouse [. . .] has disappeared—the slaughterhouse has invaded the home.”<sup>27</sup> A metal partition separating the house's kitchen—where Leatherface bleeds his human victims—from its front hall recalls the separation between the “trap” where cattle are stunned and the aisle down which they are led toward the killing floor. Further, the Leatherface house sits next to a (now dried-up) creek bed, a common feature of industrial abattoirs, which are almost always “sited near rivers or streams, into which they emptied all their waste.”<sup>28</sup> The dryness of the Leatherface family's creek bed emphasizes the sterile, barren quality of this region of Texas and is representative of the impotence of the Leatherface family via the destruction of its former livelihood as skilled slaughterhouse workers.

In *Animal to Edible*, Noëlie Vialles's incisive 1987 ethnographic study of meat consumption and the French slaughtering industry, the author writes that “slaughtering tends to be a somewhat ‘unpopular’ subject” and that “the separation of slaughtering and butchery and the associated banishment of abattoir premises [to sites outside cities] have contributed greatly towards keeping that knowledge [of slaughtering] between narrow bounds.”<sup>29</sup> The industry's attempt to render invisible the mechanisms by which edible meat appears on our tables is predicated upon our unwillingness to acknowledge a common definition for what is or is not meat: “It goes *without saying* that not all animals’ flesh can be eaten, that the flesh of certain animals is not meat, and that meat is obtained only by slaughter.”<sup>30</sup> 2

This unspeakable quality marks the beginning of a chain of dissociations that is constitutive of the civilized urban subject's phobic response to death, the unclean, and by extension the meat industry: we civilized folk do not like to see nor be reminded of anything to do with death or slaughtering, even when, as with the modern meat-packing industry, “we set great store by the end achieved thereby.”<sup>31</sup> Vialles argues that such disjunctions of thought and speech are necessary to protect the Western meat-eater from that which is too threatening or gruesome to acknowledge, and that this thrusting away invariably targets (among other things) the figure of the slaughterhouse worker: “We are paradoxical carnivores, deeming suspect a job that has to be done. How, we wonder, could anyone be a slaughterer?”<sup>32</sup>

As former members of the slaughtering profession, displaced by more “humane” methods for killing animals in the contemporary slaughterhouse, the Leatherface family embodies the necessary but repressed aspect of the meat production industry that does the “dirty work” for millions of American meat-eaters. More than just separating the meat-eating subject from the knowledge of where his meat comes from, this chain of deliberate obfuscations also enables the exploitation of the slaughterhouse worker and the degradation of slaughtering sites. As Eric Schlosser has reported in his 2001 book *Fast Food Nation*, industrial slaughtering has “turned one of the nation's best-paying manufacturing jobs into one of the lowest-paying [ones], created a migrant industrial workforce of poor immigrants, tolerated high injury rates, and spawned rural ghettos in the American heartland.”<sup>33</sup> Schlosser compares the negative effects of this modern meatpacking regime to “the [inescapable] odors that drift from its feedlots, rendering plants, and pools of slaughterhouse waste.”<sup>34</sup>

The impact of these “inescapable effects” on the slaughterhouse worker himself is evinced by the liminal existence of the Leatherface family. Already aligned with an abjected profession, they have been further displaced by technologically advanced slaughtering techniques epitomized by the air gun stunner, which, through the series of disjunctions previously described, are productive of a fragmented and disorienting subjectivity. As Vialles notes, industrial slaughter “has the effect of eliminating landmarks, imposing an anonymity on the animals (as well as on the men who face them) and giving rise to a general lack of differentiation that is experienced as disorienting: anything, including the worst, seems possible.”<sup>35</sup> In the case of *Texas Chain Saw* and similar urbania films, “the worst”—mistaking humans for animals and animals for humans—is not only possible but seemingly inevitable.

The connection between the Leatherface family's former profession and its current cannibalism is made clear throughout *Texas Chain Saw*. All the film's murders relate in one way or another to meat slaughtering. The most obvious of these are the killings of Kirk and Jerry, both of whom Leatherface stuns with his sledge before dragging them off to the kitchen to be bled out and dressed.

One of the most significant sequences in *The Texas Chain Saw* immediately follows the stunning of Jerry, when Leatherface, in a panic, hurries out of the kitchen into the living room, and peers out of the house's front window, fretting. Leatherface is worried, upset that there have been three unexpected intruders entering his home uninvited, and wondering if there are more yet to come. After looking out the front window and pacing worriedly for a moment, Leatherface sits on a chair and places his head in his hand—a very humanizing gesture of defeat. The film then cuts to close-up of his face, with his blankly staring eyes and crooked teeth visible through the holes in his human-skin mask. We linger in close-up with him for about ten seconds as a caged chicken clucks offscreen, the noise further emphasizing Leatherface's fear-ridden state. We may be horrified at what this character has just done, but this lingering moment asks us to sympathize with him, to see him as vulnerable, fallible human. No comparable scene exists in *Deliverance*. This key scene, as well as *Texas Chain Saw's* final few shots, are what most dramatically differentiate it from *Deliverance* and drive home the sense that *Texas Chain Saw's* filmmakers want us to identify with the rural killers.

In taking great pains to foreground the entire Leatherface family's integral relationship to the meat slaughtering industry, the film provides an ostensible “explanation” for Leatherface's killings. As we have seen, this foregrounding is prevalent in the film's *mise-en-scène*, as in Leatherface's cattle-stunning sledge and bloody apron, the animal bones and skins hanging from the family house's walls, and the metal gate and ramp that suggest the house interior as abattoir. The slaughtering business is the key theme driving the narrative forward, and is prevalently highlighted in the dialogue, as in the early scene in the van in which Hitchhiker and Franklin discuss the advent of the air gun stunner and Hitchhiker insists that “That gun's no good. The old way, with a sledge. See, that was better, they died better that way.” When Franklin asks why the sledge method was better, Hitchhiker explains in no uncertain terms: “With the new way, people put out of jobs.” This line sums up what is at stake for the Leatherface family—their very livelihood—and elicits viewer sympathy for the family's plight, if not the particulars of their creepy and brutal deeds.

Hitchhiker's family, once-skilled slaughterers (“Grandpa was the best!”) who are now disenfranchised, have turned to slaughtering and barbecuing humans to support themselves. Their current economic desperation can be read in Hitchhiker's attempt to sell a photograph to Franklin for two dollars and, in a later scene, the old man's complaints about the high price of electricity at his gas station being “enough to drive a man out of business.” Theirs is the plight of many slaughterhouse workers laid off by an industry that, according to Eric Schlosser, has simultaneously “cut costs by cutting wages” and, due to increased line speed—“Twenty years ago, new plants . . . slaughtered about 175 cattle an hour. Today some plants slaughter up to 400 cattle an hour”—has earned the industrial slaughterer the distinction of holding “the most dangerous job in the United States.”<sup>36</sup>

During his time in the youths' van, Hitchhiker shares with Franklin evidence of his skill at slaughtering, showing him photographs of a flayed carcass ("I was the killer!") and brandishing a knife (actually a collapsible straight-razor), insisting, "It's a good knife." The importance of flaying carcasses properly and of having a "good knife" relates to Hitchhiker's vocation: "[The] knife is the tool *par excellence*, always carried, always kept razor-sharp. The knife is in fact the yardstick and the badge of skill ... It is competence with the knife that makes a skilled slaughterer."<sup>37</sup> Hitchhiker also takes Franklin's pocketknife, and his self-mutilation therewith (cutting open his hand while laughing gleefully) can be read in part as an attempt to gauge the quality of the tool. Despite these indications that Hitchhiker takes pride in being a skilled slaughterer, the viewer only sees him put his knife to inappropriate use, dismembering corpses in the graveyard and attacking living humans rather than flaying cattle.

Hitchhiker's fascination with head cheese and how it is made runs counter to the principle underlying the industrial process of "dressing" a carcass to make it "clean" and edible, instead calling attention to ambiguous aspects of meat production and consumption that the typical American meat eater considers repugnant. According to director Tobe Hooper, the film's original title was going to be *Head Cheese* (audio commentary, 1998), and Franklin's interest in this topic and admission that he likes eating head cheese highlight a point of connection between himself and Hitchhiker, a bond reinforced by the fact that Franklin has an uncle who is a slaughterer and a grandfather who used to sell his cattle to the same slaughterhouse where the youths first pick up their insane passenger. Further, Franklin, "presumably the eldest male of Sally's clan," is paralyzed from the waist down, that is, rendered symbolically castrated by his disability and is thereby mimetically doubled by Grandpa, the also chair-bound patriarch of the Leatherface family.<sup>38</sup> Hence, insofar as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is a visual working out of the values integral to the patriarchal American family, both Franklin and Grandpa might be seen to represent the "hollow father" or corrupt and humiliated masculine ordering principle of Western culture. That is, both families, despite evoking sympathy, are also in their own ways guilty and corrupt.

That the slaughterhouse imagery serves as backdrop to these characters' violent meeting suggests that their separation from one another—and Leatherface's murderous tendencies—can be attributed to the anonymity prevalent in the industrial slaughterhouse to which both clans have ties. The film depicts the five youths as little more than animals ripe for slaughter: "In the original production notes, [director Tobe] Hooper said he wanted to make a film 'about meat,' and the structure of the scare scenes is a profile of our food industry, with people cast as the animals."<sup>39</sup>

In this context it is noteworthy that the members of the Leatherface clan, with the exception of Leatherface himself, lack proper identifying names. They are referred to in the film's credits as "Hitchhiker," "Old Man," "Leatherface," and "Grandfather," and even their exact relationship to one another, excepting grandfather's, is left ambiguous. This atomization of individual identity can be understood as an effect of the cannibal family's "disorienting" work in the industrialization of slaughter and their subsequent devolution to an alienated state where the "worst" (i.e. the massacre of human beings) is not only possible but is part of their daily lives.

## **technology and the economies and ecologies of “progress”**

This liminality of the hillbilly figure is not only legible in terms of his ambiguous gendered, socio-economic, racial, and species status, but in his relationship with technology. The hillbilly's ambivalent relation to technology is visually indicated, for example, by the ubiquitous presence of junkyards in urbania films, which suggest how hillbillies and their demesnes signify a repudiation of typical white, industrial progress. In particular, car and junk graveyards feature prominently in *Deliverance* and *Texas Chain Saw*, showing how the hillbilly casts aside automobiles, the central emblem of Fordism, thereby rejecting urban American mobility and “progress.” These car graveyards signify the hillbilly's tendency to reuse technological implements for spare parts, thereby avoiding the purchase or exchange of new commodities. Yet they also hint at the dismal fate that awaits urban dwellers who trespass into rural territory. This connection is rendered explicit in 2003's *Wrong Turn*, wherein the urban teens recognize right away that the collection of junked vehicles, smeared with blood and littered with clothes and personal effects, signify the number of urbanites— “All these people!” one character exclaims—that have fallen victim to the hillbilly killers.

The motif of abandoning and repurposing technological artifacts is a hallmark of *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977). *Hills* depicts a suburban family, the aptly-named Carters (Jimmy Carter, formerly a Georgia peanut farmer, was President when the film was made), who get stuck in rural Nevada and relentlessly attacked by a family of hill-dwelling white savages. The film bears many similarities to other hillbilly horror films heretofore discussed: as D. N. Rodowick writes, *The Hills Have Eyes* “gradually reveals ... that there is no comfortable distance between the Carter family and the ‘monster’ family which threatens them.”<sup>40</sup> Significantly, in *Hills* the patriarch of the urban family, “Big Bob” Carter, is a cop, a stand-in for our ineffectual rural sheriff, and indeed, Big Bob dies horribly midway through the film and the survival of the Carter family falls ultimately to Carter's twin son and daughter, Brenda and Bobby, and son-in-law Doug.

In the film's startling final sequence, Doug (assisted by Ruby, a young hillbilly woman who wishes to defect to civilization), chases down and brutally stabs to death the last remaining male member of the hillbilly clan. The film ends on a freeze-frame close-up of Doug, panting heavily with rage and exertion, looking down (straight into the camera) at his dead victim, whose position the viewing audience occupies. Like *Leatherface's* dance at the ending of *Texas Chain Saw*, this concluding freeze-frame shot encourages us to see Doug as barbaric and violent and, by suturing us into the dead hillbilly's physical position, asks us to identify with the Papa Jupe clan.

*The Hills Have Eyes* wants us to see the two families as “two sides of the same coin; or better yet, the violent ‘monster’ family could be characterized as the latent image underlying the depiction of [what director Craven himself called] the ‘whitebreads.’”<sup>41</sup> As Rodowick claims, this leads us to read the ultimate defeat of the monstrous hillbilly family “ironically: instead of celebrating the triumph of the bourgeois family [as in *Deliverance*], the final moments of the film only serve to inscribe [the hillbillies] in the place of their victimizers.”<sup>42</sup> *The Hills Have Eyes* emphasizes that we are the same as the hillbillies, that they are versions

or reflections of us.

Director Craven's desire to elicit audience identification with the wild Jupiter family in *The Hills Have Eyes* is clear from the film's earliest moments, when the viewer's gaze is incessantly linked to that of the wild family. The first 30 minutes of the film consists of the audience watching the urban Carter family *from the point of view of the wild family*—we are even party to hillbilly voices confabulating on the radio as the hillbillies watch the Carters through binoculars and coordinate their attack plan. With the exception of Ruby, a would-be deserter from the wild family, the audience does not see any of the hillbillies onscreen until Papa Jupe leaps through the window of Fred's Oasis about 30 minutes into the film. To that point the hillbillies are a structuring absence, a force we are asked to share perspective with even though we know very little about them individually. The film's title is suggestive in this regard: *The Hills Have Eyes*. The rural family are the hills' eyes, part of the landscape, one with their environment, wild “animals” defending their territorial hunting grounds. The Carters are urban intruders, unworthy of our sympathy in the film's opening act. As viewers, we are voyeuristically aligned with the “eyes.”

While POV shots do not guarantee audience identification, and while, as Clover points out, identification in horror films is always shifting and troubled, such shots are nevertheless strong indicators of narrative *control*, and the first third of Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes* makes clear that the wild family are in control.<sup>43</sup> Craven's use of POV shots places the audience literally in the wild family's position, keeping them technically offscreen yet always *present*. To an unprecedented extent, the wild family in *Hills* controls the cinematic gaze: even when we see two quick long shots of a lurking hillbilly in the opening Fred's Oasis sequence, it is precisely to illustrate what the Carters *do not see*. The audience knows the Jupiters are out there, knows they are starving, and knows that the oblivious Carters have not noticed them yet. Viewer pleasure arises from anticipating exactly how the foolish 6 Carters will meet their certain doom.

As in most slasher films, and as Clover discusses at length, identification switches about midway through the film: after the rape of Brenda and the kidnapping of Doug and Lynne's baby, the Carter youths go on the offensive, commanding the gaze, hunting down the wild family on their own turf to exact their brutal revenge.<sup>44</sup> And while the urbanites successfully take their revenge, Craven returns the audience, in the film's final shot, to the POV of the hillbillies: the audience views Mars' fatal stabbing from Mars' own viewpoint—Doug stabs *us*. This is a shocking reversal, coming as it does so late in the film, when the audience expects to side fully with the Final Urbanites. John Carpenter uses a similar technique to startling effect just one year later, in the famous opening sequence of *Halloween* (1978), in which the audience spends the first four minutes of the film inhabiting the POV of youthful murderer Michael Myers.

Close-ups are also a way of encouraging viewer empathy with specific characters, and while the opening sequence of *Hills* depicts both Fred and Ruby in multiple close-up shots, Craven generally withholds such treatment from the urbanites. Instead, the Carter family is depicted in various two-shots and *tableaux*, as if the audience should consider them more of an amorphous group rather than sympathetic individuals. The only two exceptions are brief

close-ups of Bobby and Doug when, while walking the family dog behind the main building of Fred's Oasis, Bobby thinks he hears a suspicious noise and Doug finds a blood streak on a window. We empathize with Bobby's and Doug's trepidatious reactions, and these two young men will indeed be among the three urbanites who survive the night, yet even these close-ups depict the men wearing sunglasses, preventing us from seeing their eyes and hence their deeper feelings, whatever they may be. In sum, Fred is still the center of this scene, and his (at this point ambiguous) connection to the wild family keeps the Jupiters, not the Carters, foremost in our minds as the action at Fred's Oasis unfolds. We *know*, more or less, what will happen to the Carters: the narrative suspense, and hence the audience's strongest investment, hinges on what the wild family might do next.

### **conclusion: moving away from the wilderness**

In a broader cultural context, the disjunctions and separations highlighted in 1970s low-budget slashers like *The Hills Have Eyes* and *Texas Chain Saw* can be read as a reflection of the degree to which American identity had become fragmented and divided against itself in the wake of industrialization and the political and cultural upheavals (Vietnam, Watergate, the decline of the student protest movements) of the late 1960s and early 1970s. American slasher horror films of the 1980s and 1990s for the most part replayed the themes of the 1970s films already discussed, frequently in the form of literal sequels to and remakes of those films (see Selected Urbanoia Film List in the Appendix).

Also significant in the 1980s and beyond was the influence of John Carpenter's wildly successful low-budget film *Halloween* (1978), which relocated the source of horror from the remote summer camp or Texas countryside to a suburban neighborhood in Illinois. Other major slasher hits of this period, including Wes Craven's *Nightmare On Elm Street* and its sequels, followed Carpenter's lead and momentarily left the rural wilderness and the urbanoia motif behind. This no doubt has much to do with the teen culture explosion of the early 1980s, for as teenagers (rather than whole families) became the sole focus of the late 1970s and 1980s slashers, the sites of their encounters with killers migrated to suburban neighborhoods, summer camps, sorority houses, and the like.

There has been a resurgence of urbanoia horror cinema in the early 2000's, with films like *Wrong Turn* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* remakes (both 2003), a *Texas Chain Saw* prequel, and *The Hills Have Eyes* (both 2006) being released within a few years of each other. Regrettably, but not unexpectedly, these remakes do little to push the ideological boundaries so eagerly transgressed by their 1970s namesakes: these recent films do little to focus our attention upon the real-world socioeconomic and environmental exploitation that drives the murderous families of their cinematic predecessors to kill trespassing urbanites. We must look instead to the low-budget urbanoia films of the 1970s, before slasher conventions became commonplace and self-referential, to find the most productively ambivalent and ideologically challenging depictions of the murderous, anti-heroic hillbilly who, as these films contend, are really a horrifying reflection of our own "civilized" cultural anxieties about our own rape of the natural world.

## acknowledgments

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## notes

1. Jason Zinoman contends it was “proof for a generation of directors that you didn't need the support of a studio, big or small, to make an effective horror film that would attract large audiences.” Zinoman, Jason. *Shock Value: How a Few Eccentric Outsiders [. . .] Invented Modern Horror*. New York: Penguin Press: 2011:38.
2. Ibid: 38, 40.
3. Brereton, Pat. *Hollywood Utopia: Ecology in Contemporary American Cinema*. Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2005: 12.
4. Ibid: 140.
5. Ibid: 164.
6. Ibid: 139.
7. Harkins, Anthony. *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; and Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
8. Gottlieb, Robert. *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*. Washington, DC: Island Press: 2005: 158.
9. Ibid: 149.
10. Ibid: 176–177, 360–361, 157.
11. Zinoman, *Shock Value*: 7.
12. Ibid: 9.
13. Ibid: 38. See Carol J. Clover and K. E. Sullivan for extended comments on the gender dynamics of *Psycho*.
14. Nash, Roderick. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967: 39.
15. Ibid: 40.
16. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*: 124.
17. Harkins, *Hillbilly*: 9.
18. Ibid: 167.
19. Ibid: 173.
20. Ibid: 5.
21. Ibid: 206.
22. Williamson, J. W. *Hillbillyland: What the Movies Did to the Mountains and What the Mountains Did to the Movies*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995: 159.
23. As Clover notes in *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (p. 129), modern urbania films constitute an ideal object of study for environmental criticism, since urbania—the city person's fear of rural spaces and their inhabitants—constitutes a dominant theme and narrative catalyst in the post-1968 horror film: “The construction of the city as metaphoric rapist of the country is an increasingly common one in horror [. . .] Environmental sentiments in fact thrive not just in city-revenge films but in modern horror in general.”
24. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*: 128.
25. Ibid: 134.

- [26.](#) Dyer, Richard. *White*. London: Routledge, 1997: 21.
- [27.](#) Wood, Robin. "An Introduction to the American Horror Film." In Bill Nichols (ed.) *Movies and Methods: Vol. II*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985: 212.
- [28.](#) Vialles, Noëlie. *Animal to Edible*. Trans. J. A. Underwood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994: 80.
- [29.](#) Ibid: 125.
- [30.](#) Ibid: 4.
- [31.](#) Ibid: 6.
- [32.](#) Ibid.
- [33.](#) Schlosser, Eric. *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2001: 149.
- [34.](#) Ibid.
- [35.](#) Vialles, *Animal to Edible*: 31.
- [36.](#) Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*: 149, 173, 172.
- [37.](#) Vialles, *Animal to Edible*: 95, 96.
- [38.](#) Sharrett, Christopher. "The Idea of Apocalypse in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*." In Barry Keith Grant (ed.) *Planks of Reason*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984: 268.
- [39.](#) Zinoman, *Shock Value*: 140.
- [40.](#) Rodowick, D. N. "The Enemy Within: The Economy of Violence in *The Hills Have Eyes*." In Barry Keith Grant (ed.) *Planks of Reason*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984: 321–30.
- [41.](#) Ibid: 324.
- [42.](#) Ibid.
- [43.](#) Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*: 45, 179.
- [44.](#) Ibid: 45–6.

## **selected urbanoia films 1972–2009**

*Deliverance* (1972, dir. Boorman).

*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974, dir. Hooper).

*The Hills Have Eyes* (1977, dir. Craven).

*I Spit On Your Grave (aka Day of the Woman)* (1978, dir. Zarchi).

*Motel Hell* (1980, dir. Connor).

*The Evil Dead* (1981, dir. Raimi).

*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986, dir. Hooper).

*Evil Dead 2* (1987, dir. Raimi).

*Pumpkinhead* (1988, dir. Winston).

*Pulp Fiction* (1994, dir. Tarantino).

*Breakdown* (1997, dir. Mostow).

*The Blair Witch Project* (1999, dir. Myrick and Sánchez).

*Wrong Turn* (2003, dir. Schmidt).

*House of 1000 Corpses* (2003, dir. Zombie).

*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (remake, 2003, dir. Nispel).

*The Devil's Rejects* (2005, dir. Zombie).

*The Hills Have Eyes* (remake, 2006, dir. Aja).

*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre: The Beginning* (2006, dir. Liebesman).

*Rob Zombies Halloween* (2007, dir. Zombie).

*Rob Zombies Halloween II* (2009, dir. Zombie).