HORROR AND GOTHIC MEDIA CULTURES

Karen Horsley

The American Southern Gothic on Screen

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Horror and Gothic Media Cultures

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For my dad

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Introduction

From Belles to Bayous: The Fall of the South on Screen

Abstract
The introduction outlines the South's shifting status in the cultural imaginary and its subsequent representation on screen in the mid-twentieth century. Where films like *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming 1939),[1] *Song of the South* (Harve Foster; Wilfred Jackson 1946), and *Jezebel* (William Wyler 1938) depicted the Old South as an exalted society built upon a thriving plantation economy, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Elia Kazan 1951), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Robert Mulligan 1962) and a number of other southern films reconfigured the South as a Gothic and othered space. This sets up the framework for the discussion of the Southern Gothic on screen by positioning it within a sociocultural context that has seen southern otherness disseminated through the tropes, conventions, and iconography of the Southern Gothic genre.

Keywords: Gothic, Southern Otherness, Old South, Slavery, Religion, Fundamentalism

Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there. How do they live. Why do they live at all.
– William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*

In an upstairs bedroom at the Twelve Oaks plantation house, Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh) navigates her way around the sleeping bodies of her fellow southern belles who lie strewn, in disorderly fashion, across beds and sofas

1 Fleming replaced the original director George Cukor when Cukor was fired from the project after aseries of disagreements with the film's producer David O. Selznick. Sam Wood replaced Fleming for a brief time during filming. Fleming, however, is generally recognized as the film's director.

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in the expansive and extravagantly furnished room. Having spent the day socializing, the belles of Clayton County have loosened their stays and surrendered to exhaustion in the heat of the Georgia afternoon. Slave girls, their own discomfort subjugated to the needs of the southern aristocratic class, stand at bedsides fanning the women to create a breeze. A young slave, no more than nine or ten years old, ceases her work momentarily when the heat threatens to overcome her, but she quickly regains her composure and continues fanning in steady rhythmic waves. Scarlett finds a mirror and checks her reflection. She is planning to confess her love to Ashley Wilkes on the eve of his departure for the Civil War – a war that will provide a powerful backdrop for Scarlett's personal transformation from cloistered southern belle to stalwart survivor of war and Reconstruction. Scarlett looks in the mirror and pinches her cheeks to create a blush, then rushes off to find Ashley.

There are probably few films that extol the grandness and spectacle of the Old South more effectively than the 1939 production of *Gone with the Wind*. Like a number of classical Hollywood films set in the antebellum South such as *The Littlest Rebel* (David Butler 1935), *So Red the Rose* (King Vidor 1935), *The Toy Wife* (Richard Thorpe 1938), *Jezebel* (William Wyler 1938), and *Way Down South* (Leslie Goodwins; Bernard Vorhaus 1939), *Gone with the Wind* conveyed a heroic picture of the southern planter class, capitalizing, at the time of its release, on popularly held and deeply sentimental yearnings for an idealized bygone era. In positioning the Old South as a nostalgic site of pomp and grandeur, *Gone with the Wind* participated in, and perpetuated a cultural mythology that refracted all concerns and issues connected with the Civil War through the lenses of romance, personal triumph, and glorified defeat. This version of the Old South was unambiguously exultant, presenting a "glossy apologia for slavery and white supremacy" which, through stereotyping and historical distortion, defined the image of the South for at least a generation (Mark 2014, 157). Operating in the space carved out by an extensive early twentieth-century antebellum industry that used the allure of the Old South to offer consumers a counterbalance to the changes brought by modernity (Cox 2001, 36), *Gone with the Wind* contributed to the establishment of a number of southern film tropes and character types that became defining images of the South and southerners on screen. These include the feisty southern belle, the loyal self-sacrificing Mammy, the kindly gentleman planter, the white-columned antebellum mansion, the sun-filled cotton fields, and the happy slaves singing while they worked which, rendered iconic by the film, cemented the mythology of the Old South in twentieth-century discourse and culture.

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Gone with the Wind. Director: George Cukor; Victor Fleming. Year: 1939. Stars: Vivien Leigh.
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While the cinematic Old South, with some thematic adjustments, proved popular with filmmakers and audiences alike right up to the 1960s, in the late-1940s a divergent image of the South had started to gain traction in Hollywood. It was an image that had been brewing for decades in the literary world, and by the 1950s had started to re-define the way the South was represented on screen. In Elia Kazan's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), just over a decade after *Gone with the Wind* had become embedded in the popular imagination through the sheer force of its imagery and Old South nostalgia, Vivien Leigh as Blanche DuBois sits at a mirror in a dimly lit New Orleans apartment and peers at a reflection that is both a symbolic and material manifestation of this redefinition. As the noise and clamour of the French Quarter tenement district filters through the open windows of the dingy apartment, Blanche looks upon a reflection that resonates unmistakeably with the traces of Scarlett O'Hara, yet is worlds away from the lavish parties, gallant beaus, and dutiful slaves of the antebellum South. In the claustrophobic spaces of Kazan's Gothic South, where the environment is thick with humidity and the air bristles with a multitude of barely concealed resentments and desires, Blanche contemplates an image tainted by guilt, pessimism, and defeat. It is an image that speaks not only of Blanche's personal fall from grace but indicates more broadly the fall of the South

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as a romanticized and idealized cultural construct. In an adjoining room, Blanche's brutish brother-in-law Stanley rifles through Blanche's papers. These are the last remnants of the lost plantation Belle Reve and the only link to a past that has been irreversibly reconfigured in Gothic terms of ruin and loss. The southern plantation, once a powerful symbol of the ascendency of the South, is rendered, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, an emblem of failure, its grounds useless except as the site of a long-abandoned family graveyard. In Kazan's cinematic adaptation of Tennessee Williams' play, the South is neither romantic nor grand, neither heroic nor triumphant. Rather, it is heavy with the burden of a history that has resulted in the positioning of the South as a benighted, melancholy, and troubled space.

Blanche checks her reflection. She is a reiteration of Scarlett, but one irrevocably altered by the distortions of a depraved past. In the sweltering New Orleans apartment, where there is no respite from the heat, no romantic gesture untroubled by desperation, and no resolve not underwritten with hopelessness, Blanche finally succumbs to the violence and madness of a South, that in its downfall, has been Gothically encoded as disintegrating, degenerate, and brutal.

Banjos, Courtrooms, and Old-time Religion

This book examines the Southern Gothic as a screen genre, exploring the ways in which particular *Gothic* southern screen texts engage with a regional specificity that emanates from broader discourses of southern difference and southern otherness. It re-conceptualizes existing approaches to the Southern Gothic by offering an interdisciplinary analysis, which focuses on the intersection of Gothic studies, southern studies, screen studies, and genre studies to facilitate a renewed understanding of the Southern Gothic and the generic conditions that designate it as such. A recontextualization of the literary Southern Gothic, arguably nascent in the works of Edgar Allan Poe (1809 – 1849) and erupting as a fully-fledged literary style in the early part of the twentieth century, the Southern Gothic screen genre aestheticizes and formalizes certain narrative and thematic impulses arising from the aberrations of the South's unique historical reality. Oriented towards representing the American South as a dark and dangerous place in a perpetual state of collapse, Southern Gothic screen narratives are organized around what Nick Pinkerton describes as a "creeping darkness" solely attributable to the defining event of the South's history – Civil War and the institution of slavery that necessitated that war (2015, 46). Along with Civil War and slavery, this

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"darkness" derives from a multitude of other complex social and political anxieties arranged, or rearranged, through certain established conventions of Gothic representation such as ruin, decay, the supernatural, violence, distortion, and horror, to emerge in Southern Gothic film and television texts as tropes explicitly linked to the ideological positioning of the South as an othered space. These include (but are not limited to) Voodoo,[2] inbreeding, the spectre of slavery, the ruined plantation, the southern swamp, religious fundamentalism, the irrational southerner, and what is frequently referred to as the "southern grotesque," a tendency towards the depiction of certain physical and/or mental abnormalities in key characters.[3]

As a framing paradigm, the Gothic South has been a tenacious and persistent mechanism for organizing southern screen narratives. So much so, that many popular understandings of the South can be traced back to specific moments, images, characters, sounds, themes, and settings from film and television that have registered the South through a Gothic lens. Whether a fragment of dialogue, a particular southern stereotype, or a visual cue that functions to locate an audience unequivocally in the South, the South as a Gothic screen space has left an indelible impression on the popular imagination and had an enduring influence on filmmakers and creators of television content.

The distorted vision of the South that structures John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972), for example, helped to ensconce the image of the demented southern hillbilly in popular culture, going some way towards establishing banjo music as a metonymic device signalling a supposed southern predisposition for incest, violence, and backwardness. There is ample screen evidence of the film's influence with its legacy as a template for southern deviance present in such cinematic texts as *Zombieland* (Ruben Fleischer 2009), *Ruthless People* (David Zucker et al. 1986), *The Internship* (Shawn Levy 2013), *The Blind Side* (John Lee Hancock 2009), *Road Trip* (Todd Phillips 2000) *The Bell Witch Haunting* (Ric White 2004) and *Shrek, Forever After* (Mike Mitchell 2010). In these films, situations involving either dimwitted southerners or potentially dangerous southern environments reference *Deliverance* through devices such as the intonations of banjo music or the now iconic phrases, "squeal like a pig" and "he got a real pretty mouth ain't he." While in the television series *The Simpsons* (1989–current), *Futurama* (1999–2013), and

2 The terms "Voodoo," "Voudun," "Vodou," and "Vodun" refer to variations of pan-African spiritualism imported with slavery into the gulf states of the American South (Rigaud, 1985: 8).

3 See for example Flannery O'Connor's essay, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction."

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South Park (1997–current), and the video games, *Redneck Rampage* (1997) and *Duke Nukem Forever* (2011), deliberate nods to *Deliverance* are present in particular characters or situations where southern-ness functions as shorthand for backwardness, sexual distortion, and all manner of degenerate behaviour.[4] *The Simpsons*, for example, includes the recurring peripheral characters Cletus and Brandine, toothless hillbillies who live somewhere "south" of Springfield and whose low intelligence is the result of inbreeding.[5] Similarly, in a South Park episode entitled "The China Probrem" (Trey Parker 2008), Indiana Jones is raped in the wilderness by hillbilly versions of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg while repeatedly being told to "squeal." In its standardizing of the toothless sadistic hillbilly as a southern trope, and in its positioning of incest and inbreeding as common southern practices, *Deliverance* thus contributed to the establishment of several enduring southern stereotypes and generic codes, which through intertextuality, homage, parody, and imitation, fortified and perpetuated the concept of the distorted and benighted South in popular culture.

The South, as it is represented in *Deliverance*, is a space of otherness in which the debauched tendencies of those who reside on the fringes of southern society manifest in sadistic violence, partly due to their alleged cultural and intellectual backwardness. *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Robert Mulligan 1962), on the other hand, interprets southern otherness as a collision between the benighted South and encroaching southern modernity through its portrayal of a sophisticated southern lawyer attempting to challenge endemic prejudice and ignorance in small-town Alabama. Charging the spaces of the Alabama courtroom with a fervour that reflects the burgeoning American Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, the film established the southern courtroom as both a legal and ideological site in which specific southern social and cultural concerns are highlighted and interrogated. *A Time to Kill* (Joel Schumacher 1996), *The Client* (Joel Schumacher 1994), *The Gingerbread Man* (Robert Altman 1998), *The Gift* (Sam Raimi 2000), *Ghosts of Mississippi* (Rob Reiner 1996), *Mississippi Burning* (Alan Parker 1988), *Bernie* (Richard Linklater 2011) and *Futurama* (1999–2103)[6] while not all necessarily engaging with the South as a *Gothic* space, nevertheless utilize

4 It's interesting to note that the video games *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Walking Dead*, while adapted from Southern Gothic texts, do not adopt specifically Southern Gothic themes or aesthetics.

5 Cletus and Brandine are variously referred to in the series as siblings, cousins, niece/uncle, and parent/child.

6 The Hyper-Chicken in the series is modelled on an assemblage of small-town layers from film and television, his southern accent suggesting unavoidable parallels with Atticus Finch.

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specific tropes such as the overheated onlookers, the uneducated hillbilly witness, the corrupt redneck lawyer, and the confluence of religion and racism in such a way that they bear an obvious relationship with *To Kill a Mockingbird* and its characteristic courtroom setting.

In *Deliverance* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* the South is established as an othered space through complex and overlapping themes and subject matter, which can be somewhat crudely reduced to, the horrors of southern deviance and the horrors of southern racism respectively. In Charles Laughton's directorial anomaly, *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), the horrors of the othered South are imagined through an absurd and contorted version of fundamentalist Christianity, positioned as a driving factor in the depraved actions of Preacher Harry Powell. A classic of the Southern Gothic genre, *The Night of the Hunter* combines an elaborate lyrical realist aesthetic with a plot centring around the psychopathic Preacher Powell, who travels the South marrying, and then murdering recently widowed women. Depicting the South as a region suffocated by old time religion and blind piety, *The Night of the Hunter* situates such values as the bedrock of southern morality, community, and small-town ideals. Punctuating this central thematic conviction with the now iconic image of Harry Powell's tattooed knuckles bearing the words "love" and "hate," *The Night of the Hunter* presents a compelling vision of the American bible belt on screen, its influence still evident in multiple films and television series in the twenty-first century. In scenes of tent revivals featuring fire and brimstone sermons where congregations are whipped into religious frenzies, the film not only offered a glimpse of southern fundamentalist religion unfamiliar to non-southern and non-American audiences at the time of its release, but also employed a powerful Gothic aesthetic that evoked the cathedral and the underworld as indivisible conceptual spaces.

This tension around the inseparability of good and evil, the divine and the infernal, has structured such films as *The Fool Killer* (Servando Gonzalez 1965), *Angel Baby* (Paul Wendkos 1961), *The Apostle* (Robert Duvall 1998), *Frailty* (Bill Paxton 2001), *The Reaping* (Stephen Hopkins 2007), *The Last Exorcism* (Daniel Stamm 2010), *The Devil all the Time* (Antonio Campos 2020), and a number of television series including Season One of *True Detective* (Nic Pizzolatto 2014), *Rectify* (Ray McKinnon 2013–2016) and *The X Files* – in particular, an episode entitled "Signs and Wonders" (Kim Manners 2000) in which Mulder and Scully head down South to investigate a crooked preacher at a Tennessee snake-handling church. As Roger Ebert wrote in 1996, "Everybody knows … the sinister 'Reverend' Harry Powell. Even those who have never seen [*The Night of the Hunter*] have heard about the knuckles

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The Night of the Hunter. Director: Charles Laughton. Year: 1955. Stars: Shelley Winters and Robert Mitchum. © United Artists. ScreenProd / Photononstop / Alamy Stock Photo

of his two hands" (rogerebert.com November 24, 1996), a testament no doubt, to the film's impact on generations of film and television audiences and media makers alike.

Categorizing the Southern Gothic

As recognisable as such images, themes, and genre conventions are in popular culture, and as familiar as they might be to film and television audiences, the Southern Gothic as a screen genre has been somewhat overlooked as a genre worthy of close analysis, leading to a certain ambiguity around, or lack of clear acknowledgement of its place in the screen lexicon. This is not to undermine or ignore the important work that has already been undertaken by a handful of scholars who have addressed the Southern Gothic as a recognizable and legitimate screen genre. David Greven, for example, in his chapter, "The Southern Gothic in Film: An Overview" in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic* (2016) provides an outline of a selection of film and television texts that function as Southern Gothic, arguing that the Gothic South is partly rooted in certain features and customs of southern

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identity and is partly a national fantasy (2016, 473). Christopher Lloyd's essay "Southern Gothic" in *American Gothic Culture* (2016), offers a broad analysis of Southern Gothic film and television, with a focus on three key examples to highlight the striking "visual imaginary" of the Southern Gothic," (2016, 81). While Nick Pinkerton's article in *Sight and Sound*, also entitled "Southern Gothic," tracks the "rich seam of content" that originated in the literature of such southern authors as William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor, and found its way into multiple cinematic texts structured around "the ghosts of slavery, lost loves and dark family secrets." (2015, 44). A diverse array of scholars such as Teresa Goddu, Christopher Smith, James Crank, Ken Gelder, Brigid Cherry, Phillip Lamarr Cunningham, Andrew Leiter, Bruce Brasell, Tara McPherson, Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee, Lisa Hinrichsen, Gina Caison, and Stephanie Rountree, and Anthony Wilson engage with the Southern Gothic on screen (although not necessarily in terms of genre) to explore the historical anxieties that link the South to the Gothic in twentieth and twenty-first century film and television. Andrew Leiter's edited collection *Southerners on Film* (2011), for example, focuses on challenging many of the preconceptions associated with the image of the filmic South as a hillbilly and redneck dominated space, instead emphasizing the multitude of diverse ethnic, thematic, and subregional perspectives brought to bear on the South's transition to modernity. Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee's edited collection of critical essays provide contemporary insights into the "evolving and expanding field of southern film" (2011, 1) with the aim of challenging totalizing discourses around southern representation. Stephanie Rountree, Lisa Hinrichsen, and Gina Caison's edited collection *Small Screen Souths* addresses television's rediscovered fascination with the South "as a site of desire and fantasy, wonder and danger" (2017, 2). Other analysis slightly peripheral to the specific subject of the Southern Gothic on screen can be found in the work of Tara McPherson (2003) who tracks and interrogates changing representations of the South to examine the way in which the contemporary South conceptualizes identity, race and gender in historical and contemporary texts such as advertisements, music, film, and television. While Anthony Wilson (2006) looks at the way in which Hollywood has portrayed the southern swamps as sites of visceral menace, in which various monsters emerge in a symbolic association of the South with notions of primitive and uncultivated beliefs and practices.

While these scholars offer valuable perspectives that intersect, in many ways, with the concerns of this book, what this body of scholarship as a whole highlights is the fact that there is room for a more dedicated and focused analysis of the Southern Gothic as a screen genre. However, rather than

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expanding upon existing scholarly works such as those mentioned above (and many others not mentioned), and rather than reiterating the extensive analysis already undertaken in Gothic studies around core Gothic tropes, this book adopts a poststructuralist approach that draws on Derridean conceptualizations of categorization, which includes an interrogation of the related but divergent concepts "genre" and "mode." It does this to reflect upon the framework that underpins generic attribution and to highlight the slipperiness of genre categorization.

Anticipating, however, some challenges to this approach, it seems necessary to explain the absence of a more concrete or definitive method of analysis. The key idea discussed in this book, that the Southern Gothic as a screen genre remains somewhat under-investigated, seems straightforward enough. Yet the approach this book takes to that idea is not quite as straightforward, since is asks the question, "what constitutes a genre category?" In order to answer this question, it focuses on the slipperiness of genre and the instability of generic tropes to propose a mimetic succession of signification that disallows entirely knowable or stable conclusions about the Southern Gothic as a mediated screen space. It takes as its starting point the breadth of scholarship around genre that has examined genre from a diversity of critical perspectives. It then discusses and analyses those perspectives using the principles of Derridean deconstruction to demonstrate the complexities inherent in any attempt to definitively categorize texts in terms of "belonging" or "not belonging." Intended as neither axiomatic nor prescriptive, this book approaches genre through the theoretical prism of Derridean genre critique to offer one method among many other possible methods for investigating the Southern Gothic on screen.

From the Old South to the New South: Redefining Southern Screen Narratives

To properly examine the Southern Gothic as a screen genre, the South's shift in the cultural imaginary needs to be addressed due to its role as a driving factor in the emergence of the Gothic South as a representational construct. As the opening paragraphs of this introduction aimed to demonstrate, the films *Gone with the Wind* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* represent divergent, yet inseparable images of the South on screen. While *Gone with the Wind* presents, in an unproblematic way, the Old South as an exalted society built upon the success of a plantation economy, *A Streetcar Named Desire* dismantles the symbols associated with the Old South and presents

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a challenge to the idealized nostalgia that structures, not only *Gone with the Wind*, but idealized representations of the Old South more generally. Blanche's references to the plantation home Belle Reve, for instance, reveal it to be a site of dereliction and lost equity, a site whose once fertile grounds are now barren and deserted. While earlier Hollywood plantations, such as Twelve Oaks and Tara (*Gone with the Wind*), Halcyon (*Jezebel*), and Bayou Lovelle (*Way Down South*) were conceived of as symbols of white power and superiority, the deserted Belle Reve repositions the southern plantation in such a way that it becomes a symbol of corruption and defeat. Further, *A Streetcar Named Desire* portrays the southern belle, traditionally a figure of chaste and virtuous comportment, as the embodiment of perversion and moral corruption. It does this through references to Blanche's inappropriate sexual conduct with a 17-year-old boy and other unspecified "affairs," which function to paint her as a sinful woman of questionable morals. Additionally, the character of Blanche, played by Vivien Leigh, operates intertextually with Leigh's portrayal of Scarlett O'Hara due to the way in which Leigh essentially reprises of the role of Scarlett within the Gothicized spaces of Kazan's film. This represents not so much a reversal of meaning in relation to the southern belle, but an overlaying of meaning that enfolds the earlier construct of the southern belle within a relationship that allows each version to reflect upon, and inform, the other. Functioning here as an example of a broader movement in the mid-twentieth century towards the re-positioning of the South as a Gothically encoded space, *A Streetcar Named Desire* perfectly illustrates this shift through its reorganizing of existing southern tropes and imagery into new Gothic arrangements. This shift, in large part, can be understood as a response to wider cultural and political factors affecting the South: the emergence of the Civil Rights movement, revisionist critiques of the Old South as a nostalgic construct, and a mounting cultural unease around some of the more unsavoury aspects of southern history, particularly in relation to slavery. As the historical fictions that had shaped the Old South took a backseat to depictions of a modern-day South organized around themes of poverty, racism, depravity, and violence, the Southern Gothic offered a striking, if implicit, critique of the exalted Old South to become one of the most recognizable methods for representing the contemporary South on screen.

Significantly, in the twenty-first century, as the definitions of cinema and screen have changed to include the multi-platform distribution of media content, streaming and television services have provided new avenues for telling southern stories though the lens of the Southern Gothic. Leaving aside classical Hollywood films and streaming for a moment, and tracking back to

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A Streetcar Named Desire. Year: 1951. Stars: Vivien Leigh and Marlon Brando. © Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

the 1980s, the 1990s, and the early 2000s, it is easy to see American cinema's embrace of the Southern Gothic genre increasingly strengthened through the integration of Southern Gothic elements into prominent Hollywood films. *Crimes of the Heart* (Bruce Beresford 1986), *Angel Heart* (Alan Parker 1987), *Cape Fear* (Martin Scorsese 1991), *Ghosts of Mississippi*, *Dead Man Walking* (Tim Robbins 1996), *Sling Blade* (Billy Bob Thornton 1996), *The Green Mile* (Frank Darabont 1999), *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Joel Coen 2000), *The Gift* (Sam Raimi 2000), *Frailty* (Bill Paxton 2001), and *Monster's Ball* (Marc Forster, 2001), films primarily produced as star vehicles intended to attract maximum box office revenue, access, to greater and lesser degrees, the tropes and conventions of the Southern Gothic. To single out one example, Martin Scorsese's 1991 remake of *Cape Fear* (originally made in 1962 with J. Lee Thompson as director) became a box office success partly due to audiences' familiarity with the original film and partly due to the film's casting of prominent stars such as Juliette Lewis, Jessica Lange, and Robert De Niro, not to mention the interest around Scorsese's expansion of his already impressive oeuvre. While the film operates primarily as a psychological thriller, it also utilizes Southern Gothic genre conventions: establishing

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shots emphasize the ominous gloom of the swamps and bayous of North Carolina; the narrative foregrounds a revenge plot driven by the violent, predatory, and psychopathic Max Cady; and a mock trial on a sinking boat deliberately references and simultaneously distorts the jargon and customs of the traditional southern courtroom. Into the twenty-first century, films such as *The Skeleton Key* (Iain Softley 2005), *Black Snake Moan* (Craig Brewer 2007), *The Last Exorcism* (Daniel Stamm 2010), *The Paperboy* (Lee Daniels 2012), *Mud* (Jeff Nichols 2012), *Beautiful Creatures* (Richard LaGravenese 2013), and *Django Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino 2013), weave their narratives around specific Southern Gothic tropes while operating simultaneously within the parameters of popular genres such as the horror (*The Skelton Key*, *The Last Exorcism*), fantasy (*Beautiful Creatures*), the crime drama (*The Paperboy*), and the western (*Django Unchained*).

In the current shifting landscape of media production and distribution, streaming and/or subscription television services have, in some ways, taken up the mantle as leaders in Southern Gothic storytelling. In a number of popular television series: *True Blood* (Alan Ball 2008–2014) *True Detective*,[7] *Rectify*, *Murder in the Bayou* (Matthew Galkin 2019), *Tiger King* (Eric Goode and Rebecca Chaiklin 2020), *Southern Gothic* (Lauren J. Przybyszewski, Joanne Hock 2020), *Sharp Objects* (Jean-Marc Vallée 2018) and the Netflix films *The Devil all the Time*, and *Hillbilly Elegy* (Ron Howard 2020), characters and actions are mediated through specific tropes of ruin and decay – both physical and symbolic, haunted landscapes, southern backwardness, and feature such familiar characters as the small town simpleton, the demented hillbilly, and the uneducated redneck. *True Detective* in particular had a significant widespread cultural impact upon its release due to its complex themes and intertextual references structured around the classical Gothic texts *An Inhabitant of Carcosa* (Ambrose Bierce 1886) and *The King in Yellow* (Robert W. Chambers 1895). Set in Louisiana, the series presents an ominous view of the South that emphasizes the region's cultural backwardness through a narrative that includes Voodoo, fundamentalist Christianity, inbreeding, violence, and a formal aesthetic that overstates the desolation of Louisiana's industrialized landscapes. *True Detective*'s combination of police procedural and Southern Gothic proved to be an extremely successful formula, which, simply in terms of ratings, saw the Season One finale averaging 3.5 million viewers in the U.S. alone, while the first season overall was one of the most watched series on the HBO network in 2014 (Kissell,

7 Season One of the anthology series is the only season that operates specifically as Southern Gothic.

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2014). While the success of *True Detective* certainly cemented its status as a pop culture phenomenon, in terms of ratings it never quite reached the levels of viewership of HBO's Southern Gothic vampire series *True Blood*, or AMC's *The Walking Dead* (Frank Darabont 2010–present). *True Blood*, which ran for seven seasons from 2008 to 2014, became HBO's most popular show since *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) and *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) when its first season averaged 6.8 million viewers per episode in the U.S. (Garofalo, 2014). *The Walking Dead*, which depicts a southern sheriff's attempt to lead a group of survivors in the post-apocalyptic South straddles the Western, the dystopian science fiction, and several other genres in equal measure. Yet, the series' primary engagement is with the Southern Gothic through its depiction of the South as a space of deterioration, decay, ruined landscapes, and characters such as the psychotic redneck Merle Dixon who functions as one of a multitude of contemporary versions of the uneducated southern racist. Indeed, as Matthew Dischinger points out, the significance of *The Walking Dead*'s southern milieu is such that in the apocalyptic landscape, where "southern" should cease to mean anything at all, viewers are required to imagine a South in which regional stereotypes are maintained even after the literal collapse of both nation and region (2017, 259–260). According to Paul Tassi from Forbes online, 17.29 million viewers in the U.S. watched the Season Five premiere of *The Walking Dead*, setting an audience record as the most watched episode in the series to date (Tassi 2020).

Organizing the Unsaid

The emphasis on ratings in relation to Southern Gothic television texts is not intended here simply as a rationale, in and of itself, for an analysis of the Southern Gothic screen genre. Rather, it is intended as an indication of the genre's adaptability and its continuing popularity as subscription and streaming television services embrace the Gothic South as a framework for storytelling. This demonstrates the significance of the Southern Gothic genre in popular culture overall because its generic codes, both on the big and small screen, have contributed to, and perpetuated an accepted image of the South in which the South's representation as a space of strangeness and otherness has been established as a familiar convention. While it is quite possible that audiences, filmmakers, and showrunners are not fully cognizant of the extent to which genre serves as an organizing principle that arranges particular southern texts in terms of Gothicity and otherness, an engagement and participation with the Southern Gothic genre occurs,

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nevertheless. As John Frow has noted, the generic framework constitutes "the unsaid of texts." It organizes information "which lies latent in the shadowy region" in a way that allows us to draw on it as we need it, even though it is information that we may not know we know because it is not directly available for scrutiny. (2006, 90)

If Frow is right, and the framework that organizes genre is essentially latent yet accessed nevertheless, then what can be achieved by articulating the "unsaid" when genre is so adept at structuring texts (in this case, Southern Gothic texts) in such a way that the relevant information is successfully conveyed whether or not we know what the genre is or how it works? This is a problem Bruce Brasell considers in his discussion of a proposal by Larry Langman and David Ebner (2001) to establish the "Southern" as a legitimate screen genre comparable with the "Western." As Brasell says, the desire to identify a southern genre raises a number of questions: Where does this desire spring from? Why is it a desirable goal? Why do we need it? (2011, 297). As a way of ostensibly side-stepping the inclination to understand southern screen texts along genre lines, Brasell suggests a framework for conceptualizing dominant trends in southern film and television that he refers to as the "southern-scape" – a configuration that informs a film or television text's narrative development and character construction (2011, 299). For Brasell, this configuration is a discursive formation applicable to the southern screen, allowing the mediated South to be imagined as a conceptual space in which certain features or characteristics exist in complex interrelationships that determine their organization into meaningful arrangements (2011, 303).

While Brasell's description of a "southern-scape" as a discursive southern space is in many ways simply a semantic alternative to the conceptualization of a "Southern" genre, his ideas are useful insofar as they re-frame generic discourse in such a way that the inescapability of genre is highlighted. We can call something a genre, a discursive space within which certain conventions are organized, or some kind of visual or conceptual "scape," but what is unavoidable is the tendency towards categorization. Taking Brasell's questions about southern film and television and posing them in relation to the Southern Gothic, we can similarly ask: why is it desirable to understand the Southern Gothic as a genre? It is tempting here to invoke a 1989 article by film scholar Adrian Martin, whose provocation, "why bother?" in relation to the teen genre, concludes with the answer, "because it exists" (1989, 10–15). Considering this, the mere existence of the Southern Gothic on screen might therefore be sufficient justification for undertaking an analysis of the genre. However, the Southern Gothic's existence as a

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functioning genre notwithstanding, it seems clear, as Brasell's concept of the "southern-scape" shows, that any attempt to transcend genre while still wishing to discuss groups or networks of texts that display thematic, narrative, or visual consistencies is a difficult pursuit. This is explained quite succinctly by Frow when he says that there can be no speaking or writing or any other symbolically organized action that takes place other than through the "shapings" of generic codes, since genre is central to meaning making (2006, 10). In other words, we cannot avoid the way that genre guides interpretation by specifying what is relevant or appropriate in a particular context (Frow 2006, 110). To paraphrase Adrian Martin, then, the rationale for discussing the Southern Gothic as a screen genre might be stated simply thus: because the genre exists. Taking its cue from Frow, this book proposes that it is the latent information, generic shapings, and embedded assumptions of the Southern Gothic on screen, along with the discursive formations that inform narrative development and character construction, that organize the mediated South into a site of Gothicity. Why this happened and how it happened is the crux of this book's argument.

As a complex screen space where Gothicity, southern-ness, history, and the Other assemble, the Southern Gothic genre sees relations between screen texts enacted through the re-citing and re-framing of characters, themes, narratives, and visual styles that operate as part of a wider generic dialogue. We can see, for example, in Buck Grotowski from *Monster's Ball* or in "Wild Bill" Wharton from *The Green Mile*, the racist redneck from earlier Southern Gothic films such as *The Defiant Ones* (Stanley Kramer 1958) and *In the Heat of the Night* (Norman Jewison 1967). In Buddy Cole from *The Gift,* John Coffey from *The Green Mile*, Daniel Holden from *Rectify*, and Karl Childers from *Sling Blade* we can recognize Boo Radley from *To Kill a Mockingbird* or Lonnie, the banjo boy from *Deliverance*. Moreover, Buddy Cole and John Coffey are supernaturally encoded as characters haunted and/or haunting in the manner of the folkloric character the Fool Killer in *The Fool Killer* and Charlotte Hollis in *Hush…hush, Sweet Charlotte* (Robert Aldrich 1964). The antebellum mansions in *The Skeleton Key* (Iain Softley, 2005) *American Horror Story: Coven* (Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk 2013–2014), and *Hush… hush, Sweet Charlotte* reconfigure the ruined mansions of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Sound and the Fury* (Martin Ritt, 1959; James Franco, 2014) and *Baby Doll* (Elia Kazan, 1956) as sites of horror and/or destruction within which the past has a corroding and haunting influence on the present. Both *The Skeleton Key* and *The Gift* configure swamps as haunted spaces, and thus bear traces of Jean Renoir's *Swamp Water* (1941) in which the southern swamp is aestheticized in terms of mystery, the unknown, or the supernatural. In

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Frailty, *The Last Exorcism*, *True Detective* and *The Devil all the Time*, the theme of southern religious fundamentalism that underpins *The Night of the Hunter* and *Angel Baby* (Paul Wendkos 1961), re-emerges in the more contemporary context of the twenty-first century only to reinforce, like the earlier films, the image of a backwards South mired in superstition and driven by regressive attitudes and behaviours.

While the endurance and adaptability of the Southern Gothic genre is evident in the retrieval of such tropes, it is not only the Southern Gothic's penetration into Hollywood filmmaking and contemporary streaming content that attests to its power as a genre. There are a number of independent films, non-Hollywood films, and made-for-television films[8] that engage with elements of the Southern Gothic genre in various ways. Some examples are: *The Beyond* (Lucia Fulci 1981), an Italian film set in Louisiana that blends Italian horror conventions with Southern Gothic conventions resulting in a mutual hybridization of both generic forms; *Southern Gothic* (Mark Young 2007), an independent vampire film; *Little Chenier: A Cajun Story* (Bethany Ashton Wolf 2006), also an independent film which premiered at a number of film festivals before gaining direct-to-DVD release; *A Christmas Memory* (Glenn Jordan 1997) and *Orpheus Descending* (Peter Hall, 1990), which are both made-for-television films based on the work of Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams respectively; and *My Louisiana Sky* (Adam Arkin 2001), a Showtime production adapted from a novel by southern children's author Kimberly Willis Holt. In addition to these narrative films, several feature documentaries display obvious Southern Gothic tropes and aesthetics. Some examples are: *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* (Andrew Douglas 2003), a BBC-funded documentary exploring the connection between music and religion in the South, which gained limited theatrical release in the U.S; *Deepsouth* (Lisa Biagiotti 2012) a film that focuses on the prevalence of HIV in the South, and has been used as an educational tool at various AIDS related conferences; *Trouble the Water* (Tia Lessin and Carl Deal 2008), a film about Hurricane Katrina which premiered on HBO and features ground zero footage, archival footage, and cinema verité footage; and Werner Herzog's death row documentary *Into the Abyss* (2011) which premiered at the Toronto film festival and was followed in 2012 by two seasons of *On Death Row* (Werner Herzog 2012–2013), a series that aired on the UK's Channel Four.

8 Made-for-television films, or telefilms, are those films produced and aired on commercial television networks. They can be distinguished from films made specifically for streaming services such as *Roma* (Alfonso Caurón 2018), or *The Irishman* (Martin Scorsese 2019), by their comparatively low production values and use of second-tier actors.

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The Shape of Genre

As Frow points out, no text is ever unframed no matter how unstable its relationship to the genre with which it participates (2006: 30). He goes on to say,

> Genre … is a set of conventional and highly organized constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning. In using the word "constraint" I don't mean to say that genre is simply a restriction. Rather, its structuring effects are productive of meaning; they shape and guide, in the way that a builder's form gives shape to a pour of concrete, or a sculptor's mould shapes and gives structure to its materials. (2006, 10)

The "shape" of the Southern Gothic, then, manifests in the genre's capacity to frame texts in such a way that even in cases where a text might disrupt expectations, genre still contributes to the contours that create those expectations. Additionally, this "shape" may be unstable and mutable, and engaged with consciously or unconsciously, but without the framing capacity of genre, meaning cannot take place since no text's meaning is transparently conveyed, rather, it is mediated through a framework of interrelations (Frow, 2006: 10). The Southern Gothic as a genre is thus a guide, determining, in some ways, the direction of meaning while not limiting meaning, but rather, allowing meaning to move and flow in a dynamic and regenerative process where texts interact and intersect in broadly conceived networks of affiliation. Further, the notion of southern otherness, now ensconced as a characteristic of southern-ness in myriad cultural, historical, and mediated contexts, underpins the Southern Gothic genre, with the genre becoming one of the primary mechanisms through which such othering discourses about the South emerge. In the realms of the "unsaid," genre thus structures the mediated South in such a way that it is read, consciously or unconsciously, as a space of ruin, collapse, deterioration, desolation, defeat, backwardness, violence, haunting, melancholy, regression, guilt, and pessimism. These specific tropes, and others that will be discussed throughout this book, shape the South into a Gothic space, which is as much a result of cultural discourse as it is an employment of Gothic signifiers for aesthetic and narrative effect.

This book is organized into four sections. Section One, "The South in the Cultural Imaginary," lays the foundation for an examination of the Southern Gothic on screen through an analysis of the impact of slavery and Civil War on the South's positioning as a region separate from

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dominant American culture and values. It does this by drawing on seminal works of southern scholarship to understand the links between southern distinctiveness and the construction of southern identity. Section Two, "Gothic Visions, Southern Stories," focuses on the traditional parameters of Gothic representation to show the way in which the destabilizing of these parameters allowed the Gothic to emerge and thrive in such seemingly unlikely locations as America, and the South. It also includes an analysis of the concept of the Other to highlight the extent to which the Southern Gothic is shaped and informed by this inherently divided and dividing construct. Section Three, "The Southern Gothic on Screen," establishes the idea of the South as an imaginary space with a complex relationship to the actual geographical region to which is connected. It also undertakes a survey of Southern Gothic film and television titles in order that Southern Gothic screen texts can be organized into a generic space for the purposes of categorization. Conceptualizing the Southern Gothic screen genre as an umbrella concept, the survey includes texts that share narrative, thematic, aesthetic, or formal affinities, along with an overall tendency to render the South in terms of otherness. Finally, Section Four comprises two case studies: the Hollywood adaptation of Lillian Hellman's play *Toys in the Attic* (George Roy Hill 1963) and the 2003 BBC-commissioned feature documentary *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* (Andrew Douglas). *Toys in the Attic* has been selected for its contribution to the "sweltering and sexy" depiction of the South that became popular in Hollywood cinema in the 1950s and 1960s. With a plot that draws attention to certain cultural and sexual boundaries, *Toys in the Attic* sees those boundaries transgressed in a Gothicized reimagining of the dominance (and ultimate failures) of the southern elite. In *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, a road trip across the South becomes an endeavour to find a quality that is allegedly unique to the region. While *Toys in the Attic* and *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* are very different films, what these differences highlight is the fact that despite such dissimilar modes of engagement with genre, an affinity nevertheless exists between the films due to the way in which they both clearly operate as Southern Gothic.

Throughout the book the terms "America" and "American" will be applied in keeping with twenty-first century usage. The terms "United States," "U.S.A," and "the United States of America" have become conventions of speech primarily associated with political rhetoric and will therefore be avoided unless they form parts of quotes where the referenced material uses the latter convention. The capitalization of "South" is based on its function as a proper noun and the non-capitalization of "southern" is based on its adjectival

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function. Further, in keeping with contemporary descriptors, the term "black" will be kept to a minimum with "African American" the preferred term.

This book examines the Southern Gothic primarily in terms of its attributes as a screen genre. It does this by addressing the ubiquitous nature of Southern Gothic tropes in popular screen representation (hillbillies, banjo music, the southern courtroom, the faded southern belle, tent revivals, fundamentalist religion) to establish the Southern Gothic's place within wider scholarly and popular discussions of the South's history, culture, identity, and media. Locating the Southern Gothic on screen within precise Gothic and southern discourses, the book not only revises and re-frames discussions of the Southern Gothic literary genre with which it historically and unavoidably intersects, it also examines the way in which the genre (like all genres) functions as a shifting and transitory site of meaning. In order to illustrate this, a large number of film and television texts that display certain narrative, stylistic, aesthetic, and thematic consistencies will be referenced to position the Southern Gothic screen genre within a broad economy of representation that resonates with the influences of eighteenth and nineteenth century Gothic literature as much as it functions as a specific manifestation of southern otherness in twentieth and twenty-first century screen contexts. Combining cultural analysis of the South with textual analysis of key film and television examples to ascertain the features of the Southern Gothic genre, the book illustrates the way in which particular film and television texts adopt, adapt, and reject these features according to principles of generic collapse and reinvention. Underpinning this approach is a tracking of the proliferations and meanings of the terms "Southern" and "Gothic" as historical, cultural, and discursive categories, the aim of which is to highlight, and partly resolve certain ambiguities that may undermine the cohesiveness of the film and television titles proposed as a generic map – albeit an ever-evolving one – of the Southern Gothic on screen.

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