No Trespassing: The post-millennial road-horror movie

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Since the turn of the century, there has been released throughout America and Europe a spate of films unified by the same basic plotline: a group of teenagers go road-tripping into the wilderness, and are summarily slaughtered by locals. These films may collectively be termed ‘road-horror’, due to their blurring of the aesthetic of the road movie with the tension and gore of horror cinema. The thematic of this subgenre has long been established in fiction; from the earliest oral lore, there has been evident a preoccupation with the potential terror of inadvertently trespassing into a hostile environment. This was a particular concern of the folkloric *Warnmärchen* or ‘warning tale’ of medieval Europe, which educated both children and adults of the dangers of straying into the wilderness. Pioneers carried such tales to the fledging United States, but in a nation conceptualised by progress, by the shining of light upon darkness and the pushing back of frontiers, the fear of the wilderness was diminished in impact. In more recent history, the development of the automobile consolidated the joint American traditions of mobility and discovery, as the leisure activity of the road trip became popular. The wilderness therefore became a source of fascination rather than fear, and the road trip became a transcendental voyage of discovery and of escape from the urban, made fashionable by writers such as Jack Kerouac and by those filmmakers such as Dennis Hopper (*Easy Rider*, 1969) who influenced the evolution of the American road movie. The road-horror subgenre effectively reverses this triumph over the wilderness, giving the lie to the American myth of conquest, and revitalising folklore’s terror of unknown space. Within the wilderness territory of the subgenre live groups of hostile antagonists, often in family clans, who have been left behind by progress. Living in the former mines, ghost towns, and other spaces abandoned by modern Americans, these malefactors take vengeance upon those who trespass into their homeland. Although exclusively white, the road-horror’s antagonists seem to represent a culmination of all of those oppressed in the name of the United States’ progress; the Native American, the African-American, and the white poor. The road-horror dramatises the fantasy of retribution by that which America has tried hardest to repress; the primal wilderness, and its impoverished and isolated citizens. The subgenre therefore fulfils something of the role previously held by folklore; both are strongly moralistic media, which warn of the consequences of trespassing, and both delineate the rural environment and its inhabitants as bloodthirsty, dangerous, and to be avoided at all costs.

Conflation and scavenging: the generic history of the road-horror

The road-horror was originally made manifest during the 1970s, and since the turn of the twenty-first century has been experiencing a resurgence. The nascence of the subgenre can be dated to the 1974 release of Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and subsequently Wes Craven’s *The Hills Have Eyes*, released in 1977. Although a similar storyline of trespassing and violence had previously been depicted by thrillers such as *Deliverance* (1972), it was not until the release of Hooper’s film that this narrative was propelled into the realms of the horror cinema, becoming awash with the extreme violence by which the road-horror has subsequently been characterised. Hooper and Craven’s work consolidated the elements which would become characteristic of the road-horror: the centralisation of a group of generally young protagonists; the journey of this group into an unknown and hostile location, and its resulting encounter with a murderous, perverse and often interrelated clan of killers, preceding violent and gory consequence. In Hooper’s film, the protagonists are young road-trippers expounding upon astrological signifiers as they travel deep into the heart of Texas; in Craven’s film, the lead family are cosseted suburbanites, crossing sun-bleached New Mexico on their journey West to California. The antagonists of both films are implicitly coded as ‘rednecks’ or as ‘hillbillies’ respectively, as perverse dwellers of the rural, isolated wildernesses of the Southern American states, which are unnavigable to their victims. Similar tropes were articulated by a number of even lower-budget imitators which soon succeeded Hooper and Craven's films, such as *Just Before Dawn*, *Don't Go in the Woods* (both 1981), and *The Forest* (1982). After the two directors provided sequels for their respective films, both *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *The Hills Have Eyes* developed into franchises, being adopted by other filmmakers.(1) Established at an early stage, therefore, was the trend which has proven characteristic of the subgenre; that of revision and emulation, often undertaken by directors other than the original creators.

The post-millennial revival of the road-horror can be traced to the 2001 release of Victor Salva's *Jeepers Creepers*, the tale of a brother and sister who meet a killer on their journey through a rural backwater on the way home from college. Although reminiscent of the work of Hooper and Craven, Salva's film added a new element to the road-horror by attributing to its antagonist, an ancient demon in human disguise, a range of superhuman abilities, including near-immortality and an imperviousness to pain. Following the success of this production, there was released a spate of road-horrors in a more traditional mould, exclusively featuring antagonists who were human, though often so grotesquely deformed as to be barely recognisable as such. This group included *Wrong Turn*, *House of 1,000 Corpses* (2003) and its 2005 sequel *The Devil's Rejects*; the remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (both 2003), and that of *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), as well as an assortment of prequels and sequels. Reminiscent of the 1970s cycle was the subsequent release of numerous 'B'-class horrors with similar plotlines, but with lower budgets and production values; these included Monster Man, Cannibal Detour (both 2003), *Hoboken Hollow*, *2001 Maniacs* and *The Curse of El Charro* (all 2005). During this period, the road-horror also infiltrated various national cinemas external to North America; from Britain came *This is Not a Love Song* (2002) and *Straightheads* (2007); from France, *Deep in the Woods* (2000), *Dead End* and *Switchblade Romance* (both 2003); from Belgium, *Calvaire* (2004); from New Zealand, *The Locals* (2003); and from Australia, in 2005, came one of the subgenre's most notorious and harrowing releases, *Wolf Creek*.

By the close of 2006, the subgenre seemed to have somewhat deflated, being subsequently associated less with new material than with sequels and prequels, such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* (2006), *The Hills Have Eyes 2* and *Wrong Turn 2: Dead End* (both 2007). This brief period of relative success, followed by a quick decline, seems analogous with current trends in much contemporary horror cinema. A similar example could be found, for instance, in the trend for Hollywood remakes of Japanese horror films; the group which encompassed *The Ring* (2002), *Dark Water* (2005), *The Grudge* (2004) and its 2006 sequel was chronologically synonymous with the road-horror. By the law of diminishing returns, the impact of the road-horror's initial releases has not been matched by its more recent output; the subgenre has followed the trend of horror cinema to descend into remakes, pastiches and parodies. This could be considered indicative of the postmodernism of contemporary horror, which is heavily derivative and self-consciously referential; either in a bid to provide audiences with the pleasure of recognition, or due to laziness or a lack of imagination on the part of filmmakers. Modern horror cinema seems, therefore, to embody the consummation of anxiety articulated by Walter Benjamin(2), Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer(3), each of whom feared that mass production would cause cultural output to decline in quality and originality.

Being demonstratively influenced by its 1970s predecessors, and postdating not only the extreme reflexivity of releases such as *Scream* (1996) and *The Faculty* (1998) but the parody-of-pastiche *Scary Movie* series (2000-), the road-horror shows no shame about its status as a subgenre of bricolage. Rather, a few films of the subgenre are unabashedly referential, the dialogue of sceptical characters reinforcing the sentiment of cineliterate viewers, whilst providing the genre-savvy audience with something of a pleasurable jolt of recognition. Certain protagonists act as choruses, commentating on the unfolding action by relating their predicament to that of filmic predecessors; in *Wrong Turn*, for instance, one sceptic quips to his companions, 'Must I remind you of a little movie called Deliverance?' Immediately preceding a reckless action by her brother, Darry (Justin Long), which catalyses the film's chaotic and violent events, *Jeepers Creepers*' Trish (Gina Philips) sighs, 'You know the part in horror movies when somebody does something really stupid, and everybody hates him for it? This is it.' Such techniques may be successful if audiences continue to suspend their disbelief, reinforcing identification with a cynical lead, or such self-consciousness can instead cause the estrangement of viewers irritated by such reminders of fictionality.

Due to its referentiality, the road-horror could be regarded as a subgenre which holds particular attraction for movie buffs, particularly young horror fans, who are its primary, though rarely cine-literate, defenders on resources such as the message boards provided by the Internet Movie DataBase(4). By contrast, the subgenre has few defenders among mainstream critics, most of whom have reprimanded the road-horror for its derivativeness. Although largely derided on original release, it seems that the primary road-horror duo, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *The Hills Have Eyes*, have been subsequently immortalised as 'cult' classics. As a result the originals are fiercely defended by some contemporary critics, so that the modern road-horror cycle stands little of a chance to be perceived as more than a poor echo of its predecessor; which is especially ironic in consideration of the condemnation suffered by the original duo on first release. Reviewers of Marcus Nispel's 2003 remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* advised viewers '[j]ust go rent the original again'(5) ; Alexandre Aja's 2006 remake of *The Hills Have Eyes* was condemned as 'pointless'(6), *Jeepers Creepers* (Victor Salva, 2001) as 'derivative crap'(7), and *Wolf Creek* as 'pointless, nauseating cinema.'(8) Reviews of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* asked 'do we really need another film… in the saga of Leatherface?'(9) and assured 'you've seen it all before.'(10)

Gore and explicitness: the problem of violence

The imitative nature of the road-horror is not the first object of condemnation by its critics, many of whom have been appalled by the levels of violence characteristic of the subgenre. The prevalence of violence throughout the road-horror seemingly negates the willingness or ability of critics to further explore the potential meanings of the subgenre, instead dismissing it under the general consensus of 'a sickening orgy of torture imagery and graphic physical mutilation.'(11) The infamously disturbing content of Hooper's original *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* led it to be banned in many countries for several years, despite the fact that much like Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) it contained very little explicit gore; the subgenre has therefore been associated with ultra-violence since its nascent period. More recently, that reputation seems better deserved, as the modern road-horror cycle takes advantage of technology and dwindling censorship to maximise its explicit content, both violent and sexual. Roger Ebert, commentator on the original *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, has been a particularly vocal detractor of the road-horror's modern manifestation, even suggesting that a viewer who derives pleasure from such films must be psychologically unstable. Describing Nispel's remake of Hooper's work as '[a] contemptible film: vile, ugly and brutal', Ebert warned: 'There is not a shred of a reason to see it. Those who defend it will have to dance through mental hoops of their own devising […] Don't let it kill 98 minutes of your life.'(12) *Wolf Creek* fared little better, Ebert claiming: 'If anyone you know says this is the one they want to see, my advice is: Don't know that person no more.'(13) Other reviewers concur; commenting on *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning*, Maryann Johnson states that the film 'makes you question the mental well-being of the filmmakers…and their intended audience.'(14) In a review of *Wolf Creek*, Tyler

Hanley claimed that anyone who wished to see the film would be in need of ‘some serious introspection.’(15) The modern road-horror movie has therefore been received with considerable distaste and even with virulent disgust; although it is perhaps appropriate that this set of films should attract a body of criticism which, like the texts themselves, is filled with hyperbole, bombast, repetition and derivation.

Several critics have somewhat erroneously amalgamated the road-horror with other subgenres. In the understanding of many, the road-horror has been conflated with so-called ‘torture porn’ or ‘gorenography’, the post-millennial subgenre preoccupied by depictions of extreme violence and degradation. The article by David Edelstein, generally attributed with coining the term ‘torture porn’, cited road-horrors *Wolf Creek* and *The Devil’s Rejects* as part of the defining group of this newly violent subgenre. (16) Similarly, reviewer Linda Cook describes *Wolf Creek*, *The Devil’s Rejects* and French road-horror *Switchblade Romance* (aka *Haute Tension*) as ‘so-called horror films that are thinly disguised snuff pictures that border on porn.’ (17) The road-horror movie can be distinguished from the ‘torture porn’, however, in that the latter usually depicts a more rational antagonist, who kidnaps his victims often for the purpose of profit; for instance, by allowing them to be human game as in the *Hostel* series (2005-2007), or harvesting their organs as in *Paradise Lost* (2006), which depicts the fate of a group of tourists in Brazil. By contrast, the villain of the road-horror is motivated primarily by bloodlust, and enacts the logic of the teen horror by dispatching those victims who commit misdemeanours by initiating sexual contact, consuming alcohol or drugs. Both road-horror and ‘torture porn’, however, are saturated in the explicit, and both share the tenets of postmodernism as described by genre critic Barry Keith Grant in embodying the hypothesis that ‘[i]n the postmodern procession of simulacra, traditional images of violence have lost their affective power.’(18)

Certainly, it is often difficult to distinguish the many strands of contemporary horror from one another, to establish the differences between the road-horror and, for instance, the ‘slasher’ film and what has become known as the ‘torture porn’ (which also involves high levels of gore), the ‘motel-room horror’(19) (which also precedes violence by a journey into a hostile environment) and the road-horror. The road-horror is demonstratively influenced by several other ancestral and contemporary subgenres. It has inherited a preoccupation with violence from the ‘splatter’ film, the roots of which are detected by John McCarty(20) in the *Grand Guignol* theatres of Paris and London. As a cinematic subgenre, ‘splatter’ was consolidated on the fringes of Hollywood with such releases as *Blood Feast* (1963), Night of the Living Dead (1968), and *The Evil Dead* (1981). During the same era, Italian ‘Mondo films’, such as *Mondo Cane* (1962) and *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) depicted images of violence and often cannibalism in remote areas of Africa or South America; all of which reinforced racist fantasies of tribal culture. Both subgenres could be classed under the banner of ‘grindhouse’ or ‘exploitation’ film, which represented controversial imagery and was characterised by low budgets and an often purposefully poor quality. Hooper’s low-budget *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* engaged with the aesthetics of ‘grindhouse’, and most notably the misogynistic violence with which that cinema was most associated; tropes recently reiterated by Tarantino’s *Death Proof* and Robert Rodriguez’s *Planet Terror* (both 2007).

Despite its tendency to assimilate elements of other subgenres, the road-horror manifests its own uniqueness, which no theorist has yet suitably determined. Both Carol Clover(21) and Nicole Rafter(22) consider Hooper’s *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* to be the major antecedent of the ‘slasher’; whilst such a statement obscures the road-horror’s uniqueness, it is a pertinent statement of the two subgenres’ conflation. The road-horror certainly derives much of its influence from the ‘slasher’, which dramatises the dispatching of numerous young, and mostly female, victims by a psychopathic male killer. This subgenre was originally popularised during the 1970s and 1980s by films such as *Black Christmas* (1974), *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the Thirteenth* (1980), and Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). Clover, an early theoretical defender of the 'slasher', claimed that it had been considered 'beyond the purview of respectable criticism'(23); much like the road-horror, which has not yet been deemed suitable for serious or sustained academic analysis.

Clover defines the essential elements of the 'slasher' as encapsulated by what she posits to be the 'immediate ancestor' of the subgenre, Hitchcock's *Psycho*: 'the killer is the psychotic product of a sick family, but still recognisably human; the victim is a beautiful, sexually active woman; the location is not-home, at a Terrible Place; the weapon is something other than a gun; the attack is registered from the victim's point of view and comes with shocking suddenness.'(24) Clover's description in fact adheres less closely to the 'slasher', at least in its contemporary manifestation, than to the road-horror, a subgenre of which *Psycho* is certainly an antecedent. However, the terror of the 'slasher' film is that of being estranged from one's own familiar environment, which is breached by a murderous psychopath; such as *Halloween*'s Michael Myers, who preys on heroine Laurie Strode from within her own neighbourhood. By contrast, the road-horror dramatises the potential repercussions of trespassing into an alien environment. The 'slasher', therefore, is preoccupied with the fear of invasion; the road-horror, with that of the consequences of invading.

Before the popularisation of the 'slasher', narratives of the dire consequence of trespassing, such as *Psycho*, tended less toward the graphically violent than would the road-horror, and such films also tended to feature older characters. Pre-dating Hooper's and Craven's notoriously violent releases, for example, was 1972's *Deliverance*, based on the novel of the same title by poet James Dickey. *Deliverance* features a group of city businessmen, in their mid-thirties, who are pursued and attacked by local people, characterised as 'hillbillies', during a weekend canoeing trip. As evidenced by *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, released two years later, creators of the road-horror soon realised a greater potential for revenue by appealing to the youth audience who, it was becoming quickly apparent, formed the main demographic for horror cinema. As dawned the appeal of the 'slasher' cinema, which was as much preoccupied with sex as with violence, the groupings of protagonists in the road-horror quickly morphed into the younger, mixed-gender, more highly-sexed groups associated with the modern incarnation of the road-horror.

The road-horror also capitalised on the popularity of the 'slasher' by vastly increasing its violent content. During the earlier cycle, antagonists quickly became less recognisably human and more grotesque, their bloodlust dramatically accelerating and their means of torture and murder becoming ever more innovatively violent. Numbers of victims quickly grew, culminating in the twenty-first century cycle with the release of *Jeepers Creepers 2* (2003), in which an entire busload of college students is dispatched by the killer. Therefore, the road-horror may be considered part of the 'bodycount' strand of cinema, which also encompasses the 'torture porn'. This strand is preoccupied with depictions of the killing of as many victims as possible in the film's running time, and which may therefore be distinguished from 'psychological' horror, which privileges tension over gore.

Woodlands and wolves: the folkloric prehistory of the road-horror

Although it shares many elements with other strands of horror cinema, the uniqueness of the road-horror must be determined. The subgenre has maintained its own, unique story type, that of a group of young people taking a journey into a remote location and there encountering human antagonists. The genesis of this narrative form is the folklore of the European Middle Ages, and specifically the tale type known as the *Warnmärchen*, which encompasses those stories that involve an act of transgression followed by a delineation of consequences. The progenitor of the road-horror is the central *Warnmärchen* described by folklorist Jack Zipes; that of a child threatened by an ogre, man-eater, or wild animal in the forest or wilderness.(25) Much like the road-horror, the *Warnmärchen* is characterised by revision and imitation; Zipes counts thirty-five different versions of *Little Red Riding Hood* (26), and traces the geneses of these to locations spanning the globe. The subgenre is demonstrative of its links to such lore; visual references to folk and fairy tales can be found in abundance, from the red (riding) hood(ie) sported by a character in Aja's *The Hills Have Eyes* to the discovery by *Wrong Turn*'s protagonist of an abandoned, steaming pot of meat, reminiscent of that spotted by Goldilocks prior to her encounter with the 'three bears'. The road-horror has unabashedly appropriated the narrative logic of the *Warnmärchen*; both are retellings of the archetypal tale of a young trespasser, in a threatening and disconcerting location, whose moral fortitude determines whether he or she will succeed in defeating a malevolent predator. Both narrative forms are keen to maximise their impact on listener and viewer respectively, and so both have an ambivalent relationship with their fictionality, attempting to impart 'true story' status on their tales, no matter how far-fetched.

Although the road-horror is saturated by visual and thematic references to folklore, the subgenre's creators have rarely acknowledged the influence of older narratives. The European road-horror tends to be more conspicuous about the homage which it makes to such narratives; *Deep in the Woods*, one of France's contributions to the subgenre, shows a character reading aloud from *Little Red Riding Hood*, and features a young troupe of travelling actors who are performing a revisionist version of the story. By comparison, admittance of folklore's influence upon the American road-horror by its creators is rare; during a documentary visible on the film's DVD edition (27), the creators of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* reference the folkloric trope of the 'bloody chamber', transmuted into the subgenre's macabre interior locations, but there are few similar cases of acknowledgement. Nevertheless, it is possible to posit that folklore, and specifically the *Warnmärchen*, has been sufficiently assimilated into the collective psyche that it may have a tangible influence upon the road-horror, even if its creators negate this fact. In Jungian terms (28), the characters, events and tropes of the *Warnmärchen* have become archetypal, its dissemination sufficient to be familiar to the producers and recipients of the road-horror; even if such a familiarity may not immediately be manifested beyond the unconscious.

The most well-known and enduring *Warnmärchen* is probably *Little Red Riding Hood*, which is also the text from which the road-horror derives most inspiration. *Little Red Riding Hood* is an early articulation of the elements present in the subgenre; namely, the centralisation of a strong female protagonist, her entering into danger by straying from the path into the woods, and her resultant encounter with an antagonistic force, the wolf. This story developed as a means by which to mythologise the dangers of becoming lost in an unnavigable forest and meeting a wild animal; both very real dangers for rural citizens of the European Middle Ages; it was an attempt to warn people, particularly children, of the literal dangers of straying from the path. To achieve its intended affect upon its original audience, the *Warnmärchen* was necessarily based in a narrative world in cohesion with the reality familiar to listeners, for whom dangerous, dark woods and man-eating animals were not mere fantasies. Such fears are no longer felt by a contemporary audience, and so the road-horror must articulate new terror; the devouring wolf of folklore has been replaced by the murderous, rural-dwelling human. For the British road-horror such as *Straightheads*, a sylvan setting is still a source of terror; in America, much woodland has been eradicated or contained within the boundaries of national parks, and the desert and ghost town have emerged in its place as the key locations of fear. For the Australian road-horror such as *Wolf Creek*, terror is to be found in the scorching, flat bushland which seemingly collaborates with the film's antagonist to keep his victims disoriented and vulnerable. Generally, the terror of the road-horror is not that of finding oneself in a labyrinthine wood, but rather that of finding oneself in an utterly open, vast, and unnavigable environment without recourse to modernity, technology or logic.

Both *Warnmärchen* and road-horror are keen to maximise their impact on listener and viewer respectively, and so both have an ambivalent relationship with their fictionality, making a somewhat tongue-in-cheek attempt to impart 'true story' status on their tales, no matter how far-fetched. The first potential connection, therefore, between the *Warnmärchen* and road-horror is that despite their mutual fantastical elements, both are characterised by an attempt to locate themselves within an environment made all the more frightening by the fact that it is recognisably real. In its various transcriptions by Charles Perrault (29), the brothers Grimm (30), and others, European folklore obtained a pseudo-factual status with the adoption of the standard introduction 'Once upon a time'; a promise that the story to come is grounded in some reality, but will not be bound by logic or verisimilitude. This prefix acts as a sort of disclaimer to guarantee that the events about to be depicted have truly occurred; and, therefore, that the lesson provided by the story is to be heeded. The road-horror utilises an equivalent strategy; numerous members of the subgenre, including *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Wolf Creek*, make the dubious claim to be 'based on a true story', a manipulative technique intended to provoke a more dramatically fearful reaction from an audience.

The title sequences of road-horror films often begin with text detailing statistics of deaths and disappearances in the area of the film's setting, in an attempt to make the viewer believe that what they are watching is a fictionalised retelling of real events. Perhaps the most notable example of this technique within the road-horror is that of the subgenre's landmark text, Hooper's original *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. Even before cinemagoers watched the first reel of Hooper's film, they were enticed by the prospect that they were watching a fictionalised depiction of real events – 'America's most bizarre and brutal crimes!'; the tagline of theatrical posters promised, 'What happened is true. Now the motion picture that's just as real.' Nispel's 2003 remake furthers this technique by inserting a section of black-and-white 'police walk-through' footage, replete with the filmic scratches and frame judders intended as an aesthetic guarantee of authenticity. Ironically, this immediately renders the sequence less believable, especially as the aesthetic aped is anachronistic to the film's 1973 setting. This 'mockumentary' footage ends with the apparent attack and murder of the police officer and cameraman by the film's villain, 'Leatherface', after which overlaying narration informs us that the killer still remains at large. Similar techniques are used in several other road-horrors, including *Jeepers Creepers*, *Wrong Turn*, *House of 1,000 Corpses*, *The Hills Have Eyes* and its sequel, the antagonists of which outlast the final credits. This narrative device, whilst compounding the films' potential for fear and their pseudo-factual quality, also has intimations of folkloric tales which warn that the monsters that they depict are still living and still, therefore, a potential threat to the reader or listener; a technique often used to conclude folk stories about the Devil and other terrifying, supernatural entities.

Evidently, the claim originally made by Hooper is false; there is not, and has never been, a killer synonymous to Leatherface. However, the real-life killer who did inspire *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and, by extension, the road-horror subgenre, was Ed Gein, of Plainfield, Wisconsin. Gein, who also inspired Robert Bloch's 1959 novel *Psycho* and Hitchcock's subsequent film adaptation in 1960, committed two known murders, but achieved true notoriety for his grave-robbing and the creation of items of furniture and clothing from corpses; pursuits also followed by the family of 'Leatherface' in Hooper's film. McLean's *Wolf Creek* also proclaims its veracity, with the tagline 'Based on a true story', and two killers are thought to have inspired the film; Ivan Milat, who was convicted of the murders of several backpackers in Australia during the 1980s-90s, and Bradley John Murdoch, convicted for the murder of British tourist Peter Falconio and for an assault on his girlfriend, Joanne Lees. Although the director has never confirmed which 'true story' inspired his film, the Australian release of *Wolf Creek* was delayed to avoid influencing the trial of Murdoch, who was convicted in 2005.

The impact of the road-horror's claims of authenticity is heightened by its attempts to reflect its audience in the characterisation of its protagonists, who are universally depicted as homogenous, white, middle-class travellers searching not for transcendental freedom but for a simple good time, and suffering from an extreme spell of bad luck. The typicality of their situations theoretically aids audience identification with characters, and thereby increases both the road-horror's potential for terror and the fortitude by which its warning is articulated. The depiction of protagonists as 'everymen' is an inheritance from *Deliverance*, an early cinematic version of the narrative appropriated by the road-horror, the tagline of which reads, 'This is the weekend they didn't play golf'. Several texts of the modern road-horror subgenre attempt to compound this audience empathy by a unique strategy of transposition. Rather than focusing upon the tribulations of 'them', as in the films' characters, the road-horror attempts to convince an audience that the experiences depicted will vicariously be theirs. This strategy is evident in the taglines of various releases, which are reproduced on theatrical posters and on DVD covers. *Jeepers Creepers* utilises the tagline, 'Evil is right behind you', its sequel, 'He can taste your fear'; *Wrong Turn* proclaims, 'It [this journey] is the last one you'll ever take'; New Zealand road-horror *The Locals* warns of its antagonists, 'They're dying to meet you'; and *House of 1,000 Corpses* asks, 'Dare you enter?' This strategy of integrating an audience into the narrative, and of furthering their potential identification by reflecting viewers in the characters depicted onscreen, is reminiscent of one utilised by tellers of folklore. Some contemporary Irish storytellers in particular may often begin a tale with the standard introduction of 'once upon a time, there was a boy' – and here a member of the audience will be identified – 'who was around your age, and in fact who looked a lot like you'. The name this listener may be ascertained and attributed to the story's hero, to further the enjoyment (or the fear) of the audience. By depicting the fate which befalls groups of young adults, the primary demographic to which the road-horror appeals, the subgenre similarly ensures maximum impact upon its audience.

The secondary protagonists of the road-horror are easily recognisable as stock types inherited from teen cinema; jocks, stoners, nerds, oversexed couples and so on, many of whom may be dispatched quickly and with little consequence to the narrative. These characters commit the deadly crimes known to all horror movie fans; having sex, taking drugs, drinking alcohol; what Randy Meeks in *Scream* terms 'the sin factor' which invites violent punishment. With these horror movie 'rules' in mind, it is often possible to delineate from the groups of youths who will die first, and who will die most graphically. However, it is also often possible to detect a female character unique to horror cinema; the virtuous, most moralistic member of the group whom Clover has famously termed the 'Final Girl', claiming 'she is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise and scream again. She is abject terror personified.'(31) Clover claimed that 'Final Girls' such as Sally Hardesty in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* were established as the intended point of identification for the audience, therefore reversing the gender bias observed by Laura Mulvey (32), who had posited that viewer identification with a masculine protagonist would relegate female characters to objects of this protagonist's 'gaze'. According to Clover, horror cinema engages the viewer not in the gratification of the bloodthirsty male, but in the plight of the female victim. Therefore, Clover suggests, an audience does not celebrate the subjugation of the female, but her triumph, which is often manifest in a climactic moment of victory during which she outwits or overpowers her enemy. This central, triumphant female character is reminiscent of the strong and moral heroines, such as ‘Goldilocks’ and ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, who are amongst the most memorable and enduring figures of folk and fairy lore.

It is often possible to detect the ‘Final Girl’ within moments of the road-horror film’s opening. As in folklore, the surviving heroine is conspicuous by her ethical fortitude, which distinguishes her from her fellow travellers. Erin (Jessica Biel) and Jessie (Eliza Dushku), the respective protagonists of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Wrong Turn*, embody the characteristics which, by the logic of the road-horror, indicate survival: rationality, resourcefulness, moral upstanding, especially by comparison to the libertinous friends alongside whom they travel; and, in terms of physical appearance, neither overt femininity nor androgyny. The two actresses share a number of physical similarities, both having athletic physiques and long, dark hair (as opposed to the blonde hair which is often aligned with immorality in the subgenre’s female characters). Both characters sport an item of clothing which, like Little Red’s ‘riding hood’, has become a visual signifier of ‘Final Girl’ status: the tight white vest or T-shirt, an image of masculine strength previously associated with the prowess of Marlon Brando and James Dean, or the dynamic ‘Die-Hard’ heroism of Bruce Willis. The opening sequence of Nispel’s *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* clearly isolates Erin from her companions; her enduring, monogamous relationship with her boyfriend distinguishes her from the new couple making love behind her as they drive, and she is singled out as the only character to express consternation at the drug usage of the others.

As the road-horror’s female characters develop a conspicuous animus, the strength of their male counterparts ebbs away. Indications of the decline of masculine power in the subgenre are apparent in the naming and the physical representation of certain male protagonists. Whilst few, with the possible exception of Morgan in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, have names which are entirely androgynous, many of the male characters are given diminutives with a ‘-y’ suffix normally associated with female names, such as Darry (*Jeepers Creepers*) and Scotty *(Jeepers Creepers 2*). For the most part, the male protagonists are not aesthetically emasculated, the muscularity of their bodies being particularly emphasised. Nevertheless, this very eroticisation of the male body suggests an enforced passivity, as male characters become ‘objects of the gaze’, adopting a position traditionally associated with femininity under Mulvey’s terms.(33)

Male characters are rendered passive through the protracted mutilation of their bodies, lingered upon with a voyeurism previously reserved by the horror genre for previously reserved with beautiful female victims. In this respect, a marked development can be detected by comparing the original version of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* with its remake. Hooper’s film allows male characters quick deaths, which often occur in darkness or off-screen, whereas female victims undergo prolonged ordeals. In Nispel’s remake, male protagonists are subject to pursuit, flaying and all manner of tortures. The ambiguity of the male protagonist in the modern road-horror is encapsulated by Nispel’s Andy (Mike Vogel), whose eroticised body is emphasised through lighting tailored to the contours of his muscles, but which undergoes protracted dismemberment and torture. Andy is apprehended by ‘Leatherface’ after a tense sequence during which he is chased through a constricting web of sheets hung out in the sun; in one of the film’s many ironic touches appreciable by cineliterate audiences, this is an inversion of a sequence in Hooper’s original version, in which it is Sally to whom ‘Leatherface’ gives chase through branches equally as claustrophobic as the sheets. Hints of Andy’s enforced feminisation are compounded by his mutilation; his leg is severed by the chainsaw, a wound which is immediately interpretable as a symbolic castration. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that Andy is punished for his overt sexuality, a transgression for which it is more traditionally a female character who would be cinematically castigated. Wounds are suffered by the protagonists of *Deliverance*, who are punished for their attempts to prove their primal masculinity through conquering nature on a dangerous canoe expedition, and it is the most overtly masculine character, Lewis (Burt Reynolds) who is similarly crippled with a leg injury. *Wolf Creek*'s male lead, Ben (Nathan Phillips) is removed from the film's action at an early stage, rendered literally passive by his nailing to a makeshift crucifix. Also, as is more traditionally the case with female characters, the violence inflicted upon road-horror males is prolonged and calculated; Andy's wound is salted by 'Leatherface', who also impales him upon a meat-hook, penetrating him in an act connotes sexual violation, and rendering him powerless to retaliate; a fate suffered by a female character in Hooper's original. After his grotesque torture, Andy's death is delayed until he begs a weeping Erin to kill him from mercy; a mortal blow which is dealt with the penetration of a knife, a phallic symbol if ever there was one in the horror genre. By contrast, Kemper (Eric Balfour), the driver of the group's van, is the most traditionally masculine of the group, his moustache, lacquered hair and costuming in a workshirt and dark jeans having connotations of mid-century machismo. Kemper is dispatched with a blow to the head, a quick means of death for male characters reiterated throughout the horror genre, and he does not suffer the torture normally reserved for female, or feminised characters, although his body is defiled after death. Morgan (Jonathan Tucker), another member of the film's trio of males, is more explicitly emasculated; the only character in the group without romantic attachment, his nervous verbosity and tendency toward panic compound the relative femininity of his appearance by comparison to the other males. His masculinity is continually undermined; he is left behind with the female characters as Andy and Kemper attempt to seek help, and is mocked as a 'faggot' by Sheriff Hoyt (R. Lee Ermey), the adoptive father of 'Leatherface'. In a neat, dual metaphor of both his sexual passivity and impotence, Morgan is forced to take Hoyt's gun into his mouth; and, when he eventually manages to turn the weapon onto the Sheriff, he finds the barrel empty. Morgan's literal castration by 'Leatherface', whose chainsaw slices him in half from the groin upwards, renders him a physical and psychological embodiment of Corrigan's theory that the road movie, ancestor of the road-horror, is preoccupied with 'the fracturing of the male subject.'(34)

Few male protagonists in the road-horror are furnished with the ability to comprehend and thus survive their situations, and in several instances this causes the downfall of their entire group of friends. For instance, it is the failure of Dean in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* to fulfil his masculine 'duty', by submitting to the draft which calls him to Vietnam, which indirectly results in his demise after Sheriff Hoyt becomes enraged by the sight of his destroyed draft card. The insistence by overbearing fathers upon taking shortcuts in both *The Hills Have Eyes* and French made but American-set road-horror *Dead End* leads to violence and murder, and in recent British road-horror *Straightheads*, perhaps the subgenre's most explicit depiction of male incapability and female power, the recklessness of a callow young man sets in motion a series of vengeful and violent acts. The road-horror's construction of gender difference is, therefore, reminiscent of the folkloric *Warnmärchen*, which is full of examples of strong heroines; for example, in the case of the story of Hansel and Gretel, in which there is a brother-sister pairing as in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *Jeepers Creepers*, Gretel rescues her brother, who has been incapacitated by being fattened by a witch who has kidnapped them, as a precursor to her dining on him. Gretel releases her brother from his cage and murders the witch, allowing them both to flee.

Rednecks and hillbillies: the villains of the road-horror

Having unwittingly trespassed into the environment of the antagonist, often against the better judgement of the 'Final Girl', it is not long before the hapless protagonists suffer recrimination, just as in the *Warnmärchen*. In the American road-horror, the executor of such punishment is most frequently characterised as an impoverished, white inhabitant of the rural South; either a 'hillbilly' or 'mountain man' associated with the Appalachian area, or a 'redneck', associated with the Southern flatlands. The subgenre's antagonists are predominantly male, and there is often a sexual motivation, expressed implicitly or explicitly, to their pursuit of their female victims. The road-horror makes the poor, white male a scapegoat by its propagation of stereotypes inherited from earlier cinema; ‘white trash’ serial killers had already sated their bloodlust in such films as *Kalifornia* (1993), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), and *Copycat* (1995). Both *Wrong Turn* and *The Hills Have Eyes* make it apparent that antagonists are seeking female victims with whom to breed, in a bid to further their increasingly-degenerate line; the subgenre’s fear of the ‘redneck’ or ‘hillbilly’ male is therefore culminated by the danger of contamination. The proliferation of such character types in successful cinema seems to suggest that there is a marketable credibility in representing ‘rednecks’ or ‘hillbillies’ as deformed, inbred monsters, which must be symptomatic of a fear which exists in real life, not only in cinema, as suggested by Robin Wood’s claim that ‘the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses.’(35) It seems, therefore, that the ‘redneck’ is the last remaining stereotype upon which American media can call, without fear of repercussion. Jim Goad compounds this, claiming that ‘[t]he trailer park has become the media’s cultural toilet, the only acceptable place to dump one’s racist inclinations.’(36)

The antagonists of both Hooper and Craven’s productions are members of families within which the lineage is difficult to determine, are partakers in cannibalism, and suffer grotesque physical deformities; all of which are features characteristic of the killers who haunt the twenty-first century road-horror. Thus, the road-horror’s representations contribute a great deal to the denigration of the ‘redneck’; whilst also dramatising the fantasy of retribution, as such a figure takes revenge through violence. The ‘redneck’ of the American road-horror is someone left behind by progress, by the onslaught of modernity and capitalism, as is evidenced by *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, in which the antagonists have become a horrible parody of the working, successful American family; they maintain a maternal figure in the shape of a preserved corpse, and treat murder as a job synonymous with their previous work at a slaughterhouse. Therefore, the road-horror’s ‘redneck’ gives the lie to the ‘American Dream’, by showing that the rural poor have been concisely excluded from it, and largely obliterated from American history. The antagonists of *The Hills Have Eyes* have been left behind by progress; their homes have been eradicated to make way for a nuclear testing facility, which has left them physically deformed, bestial and vengeful. The three villains of *Wrong Turn* are left-over pioneers; adept with a bow and arrow, they inhabit a woodland cabin, and defend their territory with the ferocity of their ancestors.

Several theorists have commentated upon the estrangement of ‘rednecks’ from dominant American society. That America has maintained a ‘deep-seated cleavage between urban and rural life’(37) has historical precedence in anthropological writing; an 1847 magazine article described poor whites as ‘as distinct a race as the Indian’(38), and upon an expedition to the rural South during the 1950s, John Dollard commented, ‘[t]hese white people down here […] seem very much like the psychotics one sometimes meets in a mental hospital. […] One has exactly the sense of a whole society with a psychotic spot, an irrational, heavily protected sore through which all manner of venomous hatreds and irrational lusts may pour.’(39) Surveys of the genesis of ‘poor white’ stereotypes have been completed by several theorists; Anthony Harkins describes the means by which the image of the ‘hillbilly’ has changed from ‘slightly isolated but generally unremarkable folk’ to ‘picturesque survivors of an earlier era’ to ‘dangerous moonshining and feuding savages.’(40) Henry D. Shapiro discusses the configuration of the ‘redneck’ as an ‘other’ reminiscent of earlier anthropological discourse; mountain life, Shapiro argues, had to be represented as ‘squalid and degenerate’ in order to justify missionary expeditions to the Appalachian region. (41)

The punishment suffered by the road-horror's 'Final Girl' and her compatriots represents the dramatisation of a fantasy recurrent to the subgenre, that of the return of the repressed rural poor. The attribution to the 'poor white' antagonist of tendencies of extreme violence and cannibalism is reminiscent of anthropological discourse which, as hypothesised by Arens (42) and Obeyeskere, was frequently exaggerated as it tantalised what Obeyeskere terms 'the European dread of being eaten by savages.'(43) Arens claims that reports of cannibalism amongst remote tribes were often exaggerated, as a means by which to justify violent repression. The antagonists of *Wrong Turn*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Hills Have Eyes* are all explicitly coded as cannibals; strips of indefinable meat hang from the ceilings of their homes and boil in grimy pots, and human body parts are stored in refrigerators and preserved in jars. If 'civilization is based on the permanent subjugation of the human instincts'(44) , the road-horror antagonist embodies the refusal to sacrifice the cannibalistic impulse which Freud attributes to childhood (45); the 'redneck' represents the triumph of the unregulated id.

After suffering the violence of the 'redneck' antagonist, and witnessing the demise of her companions, the lucky 'Final Girl' will, most usually, succeed in making her escape. However, this standard road-horror conclusion does not obliterate the nihilism embodied by the subgenre, nor is it a simple resolution; by contrast, it is unlikely that the surviving heroine will ever recover from her experiences. Again, the two versions of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* demonstrate difference; Hooper's film ends with the manic laughter of Sally as she is driven by a terrified, passing motorist from her ordeal, 'Leatherface' left behind, waving his chainsaw in frustration. Nispel's version, however, follows Erin past the conclusion of the narrative; a deleted sequence visible on the film's DVD edition shows that she has been institutionalised, presumably maddened by her experiences. This trajectory toward more explicit nihilism culminated with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning*, in which apparent 'Final Girl' Chrissie (Jordana Brewster) makes her escape in a hijacked car, and almost reaches the closing credits before 'Leatherface' emerges from the rear seat to dispatch her. *Wolf Creek* has a similarly grim conclusion, with both likely 'Final Girl' candidates Liz and Kristy abruptly and shockingly dispatched. This pessimism, coupled with the road-horror's tendency toward explicit depiction of violence, has propelled the subgenre firmly into the realms of postmodern horror as defined by Tudor, who has claimed that the genre is now characterised by 'blurred boundaries and endemic danger; rationality questioned and authority undermined; rejection of narrative closure [and] extreme violence.'(46)

The road-horror subgenre, which by its nature is sufficiently malleable to allow for sequels, prequels and remakes of all forms, and within various national contexts, is universally characterised by its resistance to closure. The subgenre propagates the reactionary myth, as did the *Warnmärchen*, that travel and trespass bring punishment; and it specifically locates its environment of terror in the rural American South. The road-horror has isolated the 'poor white' as the last remaining constitutor of 'otherness' in post-millennial America. The ultimate fear for contemporary cinemagoers is not that of discovering a refined psychopath living next door, but of being utterly isolated in an unnavigable environment, without recourse to rationality and to the tenets of modernity. The road-horror dramatises the perverse prolongation of America's pioneering past, previously a source of Transcendental awe for writers such as Henry David Thoreau, who privileged the wilderness as the source of enlightenment, with wonder remarking 'Our ancestors were savages'.(47) The savages of the road-horror are not reduced to the ancestral, but are contemporary and invincible, roaming the vanquished wilderness behind the border posited by Frederick Jackson Turner, 'the meeting point between savagery and civilization.'(48) For contemporary urban America, evidently, there is terror to be derived from the potential of an unconquered, unsafe wilderness representative of ancient chaos. Although its violence and nihilism have propelled it toward postmodernism, the road-horror is a conservative subgenre; even its violence is by no means a new invention, Zipes having claimed that the endurance of the *Little Red Riding Hood* tale is partially due to its privileging of ‘rape and violence.’(49) Much like the *Warnmärchen*, which in the transcriptions of Perrault would be concluded with a moralistic phrase or couplet, the road-horror reaffirms and modernises a conservative and defiantly antiquated warning: that of the dire consequences of straying from the path.

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15. Hanley, Tyler, ibid.
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http://uk.rottentomatoes.com/m/wolf_creek/articles/1467881/1.php
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