"Headcheese and a Side of Benjamin:"
Aura and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974)'s Working-Class Gaze

Jerry D. Metz

When *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* appeared in 1974, *Variety*'s review enthused "director Tobe Hooper's pic is well-made for an exploiter of its type, and box office prospects are sanguine for the screamer trade;"(1) the film disappeared from national top-50 charts within two months. Yet *TCSM* endures as a bold statement about the value of authenticity and subjectivity that predicted much of the current scholarly debate about aura and the meaning of images in postmodernity;(2) the film literally embodies the conflict between auratic uniqueness and mass-mediated representation. But *TCSM*'s achievements are not just formal. Indeed, to abandon the film to purely aesthetic analysis is to strip it of its most defining characteristic: its working-class voice. The film also anticipates a current scholarly concern to reconcile history, memory, and aura with modern technologies and social change.

Lutz Koepnick notes that Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" needs updating, and aura should be reevaluated.(3) Because the elements of aura—authenticity, unique presence in time and space, tradition, that which absorbs the viewer and returns the gaze—have not withered but seem to pervade the content of mass communication (and what we desire from it) in surprising ways, it is vital to reconsider the nature and place of aura in contemporary terms. Against those theorists who assign subversive meanings to the fracturing of identity and the "roamings of cultural poachers," Koepnick proposes that aura may have social value: the endless de- and re-contextualization of identities in decentered, virtually imagined communities proves not to automatically emancipate anyone, and may augment the dangers of detachment and malaise. The contemporary desire for auratic experience Koepnick highlights may express the hope to "restore meaningful spaces to the exploded topographies of postmodern culture, secure forms of individual agency… and thus find remedies for the loss of memory in our fantastically unbound culture of channel surfers."(4)

TCSM proposes that memory, an underrated and undertheorized dimension of auratic authenticity, helps keep subject and object aligned in human frames of signification—even if the relation between them is always shifting and contested. When he rejects being photographed, Barthes asserts, "The 'private life' is nothing but that zone of space, of time, where I am not an image, an object. It is my *political* right to be a subject which I must protect"(5) —and by extension, so must all of us.(6) Aura, considered as individual historical testimony, is a space carved out by lived experience that is increasingly contingent on negotiating subject / object perspectives.(7) Aura restates the validity of history and memory, of the personal act in a world informed by images. Individually or collectively, experience and memory allow people to proclaim their unique humanity against consumer capitalism and the object world. Power relations in the gaze, analyzed by feminist theorists in terms of patriarchal dominance, must therefore also be examined in class and intercultural terms. After 1973, when "The living-room war was gone. It was as if TV canceled the war, and then the president recalled the actors,"(8) the working class bore the brunt of the conflict's real effects and traumatic memories. In a lax job market, the image economy was booming—"1974 looms as 28-year peak for box office," trumpeted *Variety* in December of that year (9) —but particularly for the working class and returning Vietnam veterans, it was an image world reflecting the omissions and incoherences of a larger social crisis of assimilation.

Emerging in this turbulent moment, *TCSM* evinces ambiguity over memory, aura, and the possibility of a Barthesian claim to subjective integrity, all within period contours of reference. Initially entitled *Headcheese*, the film was largely a working-class project, made by student actors, drop-outs, and small-time Texas actors, several of whom had served in Vietnam. It was at root a working-class confrontation with the crisis of assimilation in the new representational languages of postmodernity. A cultural product very much of its time, it was both "shadow and act" in the early 1970s, responding to social rupture and ambivalent technological developments while opening new cinematic space for the expansion of their representation in the horror genre.

In *TCSM*'s scopic regime, the gaze problematizes gender while implicating class difference. Through its staging of middle-class hippie passers-by who are (in the case of Pam and Sally) held still and forced to see a working-class family—to see inside their home, piled with the macabre visual tropes of Vietnam's physical ravages—*TCSM* lets boys root for the final girl while it accuses mainstream media of negligence in the task of exposing Vietnam's blue-collar impact. The positioning of the gaze sometimes shifts to that of the family; superficially suited to Benjamin's preference for ungrounded observation and the stripping of aura, this tug-of-war reflects the contentious desire of working-class people both to be seen as they really are, and to return the gaze of the middle-class. The film's postmodern awareness of its own contribution of images to an image-bound world leads it to bypass the *faux* reality of logical closure. *TCSM* evokes the giddy days of photography's invention, when Oliver Wendell Holmes declared in 1859: "*Form is henceforth divorced from matter*… Matter in large masses must always be fixed and dear. Form is cheap and transportable. Men will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt the cattle in South America, for their *skins*, and leave the carcasses as of little worth."(10) The nervous tension between skins and carcasses, and the taboo over their human separation, is central to *TCSM*'s power—but not only in the literal sense, where most criticism resides.

It may be noted how the film's proletariat takes hideous revenge on teenagers representing the privileged social category of hippies—a social group subsidized, we are led to surmise in the case of Sally and Franklin, through socioeconomic relations linking them back to Leatherface.(11) Their grandfather sold his cattle to the very slaughterhouse where members of Leatherface's family have been rendered obsolete; their family is implicated in Leatherface's creation through their deceased grandfather. Thus, in this view of the film as a dark Marxist fairy tale, the young scions of leisure get the justice they deserve at the hands of workers whom the system has irretrievably degraded.

In his 1974 review, Roger Ebert gave the film two stars, noting that it is an "unnecessary movie… as violent and gruesome and blood-soaked as the title promises," yet still belongs in a "select company (with *Night of the Living Dead* and *Last House on the Left*) of films that are really a lot better than the genre requires."(12) Few observers were as positive in their response to *Chain Saw* as Stephen King, who in his 1981 survey of the horror genre claimed that it is one of those rare horror movies that "achieve the level of art simply because it is looking for something beyond art, something that predates art… I would happily testify to its redeeming social merit in any court in the country."(13) A craftsman in the horror field, King articulates a perception of *Chain Saw* as "art" that likely refers to its evocative atmosphere and avoidance of much visible gore. King doesn't explain what he means by "social merit," but anyone familiar with King's own work might imagine he felt a kinship with the film's working-class texture and its service to the working-class gaze.

According to King's general survey of the genre's development, *TCSM* qualifies as one of the first inherently modern horror films for another reason: Sally's brother Franklin (a "good guy" and one of the main characters) is a physically unappealing, heavyset kid in a wheelchair. Such portrayals of humanity

on the protagonist's side were absent in 1950s- and 1960s-era horror films. Many critics dismiss Franklin as a whining bore, or worse. Wood calls him "as grotesque, and almost as psychotic, as his nemesis Leatherface."(14) Journalist John Bloom goes further: "[Franklin's] anger at everyone else for being ambulatory makes him one of the most despicable handicapped people in film history. He's the one only one who almost seems to *deserve* his death."(15)

Such vehement reactions are only partially explicable through the interpretation of Franklin's disability as a filmic technique of "othering" him away from "normal" humanity and into partial kinship with the film's monsters. Another possibility is that such comments are elicited from critics by the depiction in 1974 of an uptight young man in a wheelchair alongside a group of youths that is marked as more "groovy" and countercultural in appearance. As a purely visual presence, as well as an unaccompanied male tagging along with two couples, Franklin's character seems literally not to belong there. Although the reasons for his disability are never broached, Franklin's power to invoke the returning Vietnam veteran as uninvited guest is hard to escape. Prior to the 1973 cease-fire in Vietnam, images of death and maiming on all sides in South Asia were broadcast nightly into family homes; by the time the film was released, veterans were returning stateside en masse with all manner of scars, amputations, disabilities, prosthetic limbs, and wheel chairs—indelible evidence of participation in an unpopular war. In that sense, King's straightforward view about related period transformations in the representation of physicality in horror is helpful in locating aspects of *TCSM*'s visual signature, as well as some of its criticism, in history.

Prior to *TCSM*, Tobe Hooper's two largest projects had both focused on the war. In the mid-sixties, he went on tour with folksingers Peter, Paul and Mary as the principal shooter and director of a documentary featuring the group's post-concert rap sessions with fans about the war.(16) In 1970, he finished the low-budget *Eggshells*, about returning Vietnam veterans as seen from the perspective of a commune. "The subculture was beginning to split apart and go back out into the mainstream, even though they didn't know it," Hooper explained (most copies of the film, which starred *Chain Saw* screenwriter Kim Henkel, were later destroyed).(17) Lacking money for actors and desiring the spontaneous, *verité* quality of European art films he admired, Hooper fleshed out a rudimentary script with footage of scenes (often improvised or shot unannounced) in an Austin commune. Billed as *An American Freak Illumination*, a be-in experience, the film bombed; Hooper and Henkel began to brainstorm the roots of *TCSM*.

While I don't wish to repeat the details of its production, financing and distribution that are available elsewhere,(18) and Hooper himself had a middle-class upbringing,(19) I will emphasize that *TCSM*'s cast were all local working-class people. Some, like Marilyn Burns (Sally), Teri McMinn (Pam), and Ed Neal (the Hitchhiker), were students. Neal's biggest acting gig before *Chain Saw* was a two-year stint in the mid-sixties, doing Shakespeare with Sandy Duncan on a statewide tour of Methodist colleges, churches, and schools.(20) Some, such as Gunnar Hansen (Leatherface), worked odd jobs, including bartending, teaching, and carpentry, to support an interest in acting. John Dugan (Grandfather) was working in children's theater, making $75 a week, when family connections got him into *TCSM* (his sister, a schoolteacher, was the wife of Kim Henkel).(21) Jim Siedow (the Cook, a.k.a. the Old Man) was a Houston community actor whom Hooper knew from an earlier project; he was hired because the set mandated one union actor on board, and accepted $200 cash, instead of future percentages, for his participation. Both Ed Neal and Paul Partain (Franklin) served in Vietnam before enlisting in drama school at the University of Texas; Siedow, who died in 2003, was a World War II veteran.

None of the principal actors went on to any notable success, and no one but Hooper seems to have made any significant money on the film. Marilyn Burns had a few subsequent film roles, including the part of Manson family member Linda Kasabian in the made-for-TV fictive-reality composite *Helter Skelter*

(1976). Dugan and Hansen soon quit acting altogether, returning to blue-collar jobs; Dugan said in *A Family Portrait* (22) "I feel sad I didn't make any money." After years of small roles, Partain worked as regional sales manager for Zenith before making forays at a return to show business (he passed away in early 2005). Both Siedow and Neal became notorious for haunting rural drive-ins around Austin where *TCSM* was screened, scaring audience members by peering into their car windows. Neal has found work doing voiceovers, buying and selling memorabilia, and appearing at horror conventions. In *A Family Portrait*, Gunnar Hansen tells of how he once tried to show off his onscreen performance as Leatherface to win over a date at a screening; the attempt failed. "That's when I knew that I wasn't gonna capitalize on this movie," he laughed. He and Dugan are grateful for their involvement in the film, but a little weary with it all: "I get people talking to me in bars [about it], calling me up at night making chain Saw noises… People think that once you get fame, other things you do are not important in your life."

The profile of these people is significant for several reasons. First, Hooper and Henkel provided only a barebones script to the cast, allowing them to improvise to develop their characters. Cast members have suggested that during filming, they were unaware of any guiding notion or vision for the film's meaning that Hooper and Henkel might have had. Siedow reminisced about that freedom in *A Family Portrait*: "It was a lot of fun to run around like that, to just let yourself go." The footage that makes up the film can in part be understood as the emergent result of a collective production among people sharing general as well as local class experiences and perspectives.(23) Ed Neal said that the film's popularity is deserved because it was a genuine group effort, something that would be impossible in a Hollywood production: "Tobe was so interested in the technical side of it that he didn't work with us very much… *TCSM* in my opinion moved away from the 'so bad it's good' into the 'so real, it's *too* real.'"(24)

Second, although George Lipsitz has shown that a well-defined working class identity was largely shut out of post-war Hollywood cinema representations (except in film noir, and in some limited tropes and allusions),(25) *TCSM* suggests that an innately blue-collar project developed far outside the mainstream can ultimately reach Hollywood levels of popularity.

Third, recognition the film's working-class foundation grounds it in the history of independent American filmmaking in the early 1970s, not just the history of horror films. If the class anonymity pervading its analysis is a gesture by critics to level the aesthetic playing field across scales of production, it is not clear that it really works in practice—and it is not too far from the sort of misrepresentation and distortion of the working class that *TCSM* was responding to in 1974. For instance, Sharrett's analysis of how the film depicts the death of pioneer mythology;(26) Dika's recycling of Sharrett to show how the film brings us to the logical end of the great westerns, the slaughterhouse;(27) Newman's discussion of its new-urban-youth, rotten-Southern-rural dynamic;(28) these and many derivative interpretations seem to posit Hooper's choice of setting the film in Texas as a purely creative, theoretically-informed one. But Hooper was stuck in Texas with no way out. The working-class texture of the film gets effaced, smoothed over, in this theoretical discourse—particularly so when the film is repeatedly compared on a purely aesthetic level with *Psycho*. Even granting the difficulty Hitchcock encountered producing that film, his popular appeal, elite status as an auteur, and ability to negotiate with studios and stars makes his development of *Psycho* different in fundamental ways from Hooper and *TCSM*.

That the working-class attire of the family seems to match the blue-jeans look of the kids has been criticized as confusing, bad directing. Yet while it echoes the recent turn in horror to exploring humanity's monstrous potential, it topically asserts the difficulty in relying anymore on once sharp establishment / countercultural visual codings (a theme also explored in Wes Craven's 1972 *Last House on the Left*), recalling Hooper's ambiguous visual appearance as both hippie and "the Man" when he

filmed anti-war meetings. And it hints at the actors' actual connections as low-budget people shooting a low-budget film that, even if most of them expected to fail, could still stand as their own collective statement about life in 1973. At some level in this film what we see is the working class having a conversation with itself.

One of their topics is the difficulty of maintaining a stable subjectivity in a period marked by the incoherence of representations in Vietnam-era postmodernity. This heightened a sense of unreality that already afflicted many veterans, and which their family and friends had also to confront.(29) *TCSM* operates on our own perceptions by a concentric revolving of subjectivities: Sally, Franklin and the other kids are terrified by Leatherface's family. We also fear the family, but—as so many critics have noted—we are not able to identify with Sally or the others either; "We sympathize with the kids, not because they are particularly pleasant but because the only other choice Hooper gives us is walking out."(30) And yet the foundational horror of the film, the "motivation" which Roger Ebert could not find anywhere, afflicts the Hitchhiker, as much as it does Sally at the dinner table, or the viewer in his chair: coping with the danger that we all may lose control of our own subjective integrity to the irrationality of representation. Correspondingly, the film's thrust is less hopeless nihilism than the urgent need to maintain the integrity of our own subjectivity and test images against our sense of reality. *TCSM*'s metatext provisionally accepts Benjamin's statement that film's social significance is "inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage."(31) It literalizes this process onscreen, displaying its violent social potential in the post-Vietnam crisis of assimilation.

The alienation suffered by Leatherface's family is twofold—the obvious economic obsolescence, and the reflexive condition of taking on an outward identity formed by media images. This postmodern quality so familiar to us is related directly to the decay of aura, which for any historical actor is inevitable once the camera replaces the public to intervene on historical testimony and witnessing.(32) But it is revealed in *TCSM* to be part of a *recent* transition, a dynamic, uncertain process still in formation and still being contested—corresponding to the immediate effects of Vietnam (and Watergate), the onset of economic and cultural postmodernism, and the identity drift of the working class. Similarly, even in hiding, the family is not isolated in an oppressive, decaying backwater mirroring their own alienation (as most critics have posited): the landscape is in transition. The slaughterhouse has modernized, not closed down. In this rustic setting, using gasoline has become a way of life, to run generators, vehicles, and chain Saws—an ambiguous development in the wake of the 1973 global oil crisis. The kids' mobility is limited by the lack of gasoline, and it was by stopping at the gas station that they first meet the Old Man. Sally is ultimately helped by one passing driver, and saved by another: if gasoline made Sally vulnerable, it rescues her in the end. The film's final sounds are screams and engines, the primal and the modern, the human and the mechanical. To attribute the nightmare vision of this film to deterministic conditions at the (distinctly Texan) ends of the earth is to deny that its composite elements exist around us everywhere.

How do people confront the withering of their own personal aura? Barthes refused to be photographed, to be captured as an image; when a camera replaces the live audience (as Benjamin cites Pirandello), the actor experiences feelings of exile and emptiness, loss of corporeality, the deprivation of life and reality. While many critics see in the family a project of senseless violence to terminate history, perhaps we have a group of people struggling to maintain their subjectivity in a period of cultural and psychic upheaval. They work together in a complementary fashion to try to remember, to reassert their historical testimony and auratic sensibility. The generational nature of the crisis in assimilation is echoed here by the older man's relative tranquility and the younger men's intense psychological absorption in probing the nature of images.

The Old Man is the authority figure, scolding and directing Leatherface and the Hitchhiker. He stands up for down-home values when he warns the kids at the gas station to stay away from "other folks' property." He has a philosophical view of duty: "I just can't take no pleasure in killing. There's just some things you gotta do. Don't mean you have to like it."(33)   However, his principal function is as the oral historian, keeper of the lore. It is he who tells the tale of Grandpa's exploits as a killer to the younger men. When the Hitchhiker decides that Grandpa should "have some fun" with Sally, he appeals to the Old Man: "You always said he's the best," and the Old Man eases in to his account: "He's the best, all right… Did sixty in five minutes once. Coulda done more if the hook and pull gang had gone faster."

The nostalgia of this scene, which praises the sense of camaraderie in shared human labor before the introduction of mechanization, evokes the tale of John Henry, a Virginia rail line worker in the early 19th century. Because of its grotesqueness, the scene is often cited by critics who claim the film's basic conflict is the dead weight of the past trying to smother innocent youth. This fairy-tale view is weakened by the economic ties linking the family of Sally and Franklin with Leatherface's family. The mobility of the youths, however, their capacity for distraction by astrology, and their relative lack of concern for a past beyond their immediate recollection all establish a contrast between them and the family in the value placed on remembering and heritage.

For his part, Grandpa is not the fetish some critics claim, but the (barely) living proof underlying family memories; he is placed at the head of the table. Sally doesn't know where her grandfather's plot is at the cemetery; his house has been abandoned and left to decay. She reminisces about wallpaper there, but says nothing of her grandfather himself.   Similarly, Franklin recognizes the slaughterhouse where his grandfather sold cattle, but voices no personal recollections of the man. Their grandfather, who exists for them as only a dead cattleman, is for all intents and purposes out of sight, out of mind.(34)

The first family member we see, the Hitchhiker, is typically dismissed as demented or insane, but in his fascination with images and the limits of aura, he explores the border between corporality and image. Through his Polaroid-type camera and his relation with pictures, the Hitchhiker balances the two distinct, supposedly incompatible qualities of cult value and use value. We perceive that he shot the ghoulish stills of exhumed corpses that run during the opening credits, a nice sequence that implicitly contrasts still versus moving images while playing on photography's longstanding connotations of death and an irretrievable past (the sound of the camera's mechanics recalling the whine of a dentist's drill). In the van, after examining the hippies one by one through the camera lens, he takes a picture of Franklin; when Franklin refuses to buy the picture, the Hitchhiker places herbs from his neck-pouch on it and burns it with a ceremonial flourish.   This rapid switch in his attitude toward the photograph is remarkable. Observing him, the sensation is again one of cultural transition—as though what Benjamin described as the cut-and-dried process of aura's withering in the age of mechanical reproduction of images has not quite taken hold fully here yet.

In terms of cameras, the Polaroid is suggestive. It would qualify as an early manifestation of what Koepnick called the "postmodern regime of mobile virtual looking,"(35) because it was a fully portable self-sufficient image taker. It fostered a daring individuality, since one didn't have to take embarrassing negatives to others for developing. Ironically, by the late 1970s, Polaroids had lost their trendy chic and were obsolete, just like Grandpa. However, in the context of *Chain Saw*, the Polaroid helps reinforce a thematic contradiction in attitudes towards pictures as historical evidence and pictures as detached, anonymous, dubious representations.(36) The Polaroid was a useful way to mediate as well as record

reality for someone who either doubted his own subjectivity or memory, or who wanted to be able to prove his own subjective identity to others through an authoritative medium.

While in the van, the Hitchhiker expresses the following correlation: "It's a good knife." "It's a good picture." The language is simple, but it remembers Barthes's notion of the *punctum*, that inexpressible quality of an effective photograph.(37) The *punctum* operates on both subject and object. A good or effective picture can leave the viewer physically affected, vulnerable, somehow opened to a new thought or sensation (most directly when the viewer has a bridge of personal experience with the pictured person or scene). Yet the act of taking pictures of people pierces them in a different way, by weakening their aura, separating the image of the person from the living physical presence of which no replica can be made. The Hitchhiker fuses these two positionalities in his enigmatic account of life at the slaughterhouse. He states, "My brother worked there. My grandfather too." He then passes around Polaroid shots of corpses; to Franklin's question, "You do that?" he replies "I was the killer!" If he equates the photographing and killing of cows, he will also make manifest the *punctum* and turn it on himself. Carol Clover notes that when he slices his own "hand for the thrill, the onlookers recoil in horror—all but Franklin, who seems fascinated by the realization that all that lies between the visible, knowable outside of the body and its secret insides is one thin membrane, protected only by a collective taboo against its violation."(38) While this is literally true, the scene also works if we understand the "visible, knowable outside" and "secret inside" as not physiological spaces but planes of identity. The outside is photographable and reproducible. That thin membrane protects the aura, the secret inside, the essential subjective self-ness, and the collective taboo against its violation was the target of Benjamin's invective for political reasons.

Subverted and inverted by the mass media, from the movies to the evening news, the taboo that supposedly protects the aura has not been operant for this working-class family struggling to maintain subjective coherence in 1970s postmodernity. Aware of their existence as two-dimensional images, constructed to suit a distracted, (upwardly) mobile middle class gaze, the Hitchhiker and his kin nonetheless assert a startling capacity to rupture the image. Franklin, staring in wonder at the Hitchhiker, receives his own literal *punctum* from the view when the Hitchhiker slashes out at his forearm.

As a subject, Leatherface grotesquely demonstrates the political dangers and psychological contradictions of the ungrounding of identity, the meaningless roamings of cultural poachers in postmodernity. As an object, he is the vengeful return of the distorted and alienated mass-culture representation. Consuming our own images and reflecting them back at us on his face, thwarting our categories, he is an angry free-floating referent, an uncontainable, uncertain sign. We know that his character was inspired by the real killer Ed Gein, who dismembered his female victims and stitched together lampshades, decorations, and even a costume out of their skin; as a child, Tobe Hooper heard chilling stories about Gein from Wisconsin relatives. *Psycho* was based in part on Robert Bloch's novelization of Gein, and *Chain Saw*'s uses of and references to *Psycho* are widely known. Rather than simply recycling visual tropes, however, Chain Saw changes the equation in two ways.

First, Leatherface's third mask, the female dinner mask, raises the question of gender in a different context from *Psycho* and even from that of Sally, the Final Girl. Where is the mother in the family's household? The matriarch, Grandpa's counterpart, is present in mummified form (an obvious bow to *Psycho*), but she was clearly too old to have been mother to Leatherface and the Hitchhiker. Here, not only do we not see these characters' mother, we are left to imagine how they were raised. One possibility is that in her absence the father, as patriarch, simply brought them up with him in the workplace, teaching them early on to find their place in the system of labor, even as it is transforming. This would help

explain their extreme reaction to losing their jobs to machines at the slaughterhouse, and the family's bloody pastime.

Critics have noted the absence of sexual predation on Sally among the family; psychoanalysts took it as proof that the men's violent behavior is based on sexual repression. But there is another way to comprehend the mystery. We do not see the mother, the unique exemplar of human reproduction in the family, nor do we understand the relation between the Old Man and the younger men; is he their father, or their older brother? Rather than a flaw in Hooper's directing, this is one of the film's central ambiguities. The power of woman is to create new life, leading to men's "fear and awe of woman-as-mother," Molly Haskell wrote.(39) In a sense, what we have here is an ambiguous collection of figures lacking their original, lacking any living progenitor to whom we can appeal for logic and rationality. Absent the proof of human derivation, we are forced to accept the Old Man, the Hitchhiker, and Leatherface as they are and as they appear to us—mechanically reproduced images onscreen. This is brought to a shocking extreme in the dinner scene, in which Leatherface wears a female face and an apron. The very agent of reproduction, of human authenticity and uniqueness, is here reduced to an image of a woman's face sewn together with the dead skins of others. A scene cut from the original film, but included in the DVD release, shows Leatherface before dinner applying cosmetics with absurd exaggeration, picking up limp skin faces and studying them as models. This convergence of the fictive and the real rejects detached observation and makes us question our own sense of the real, both onscreen and off.

In 1859, Oliver Wendell Holmes predicted that "The time will come when a man who wishes to see any object, natural or artificial, will go to the Imperial, National, or City Stereographic Library, and call for its skin or form, as he would for a book at any common library."(40) Once we have our negatives, shots taken from different points of view, "that is all we want of it… Pull it down or burn it up, if you please." Four generations later, Leatherface suggests that this has become a destructive way of "seeing" people in mass-mediated culture—be they workers, soldiers, Vietnamese people, anyone at all. Clover notes that the Other of contemporary horror films transcends the conventional reading of the killer as the phallic mother of the transformed boy; modern texts present us with hermaphroditic constructions that demand to be taken on their own terms.(41) As a comment on images and filmic reality, Leatherface is able to serve the onscreen purpose of "the woman of the house" by merely looking like one. At the same time, Leatherface is menacing because he himself remains unknowable.

The second notable dimension of Leatherface is his technological modernity, and in this, his relation with his brother the Hitchhiker. I have noted that in the critical rush to view the family as backward and decadent (the term "tribe" connotes primitivity) they are depicted as ignoring the world's changes and fleeing from reality. But the world's changes came decisively to them through unavoidable reliance on expensive gasoline and electricity, media images, and postmodern economic, political, and cultural forces. Both Leatherface and the Hitchhiker are consummately modern.

Leatherface's weapon of choice is the chain Saw, distinguishing Hooper's film from Clover's analysis that the emotional terrain of the slasher film is pretechnological.(42) It is true that several methods of pretechnological killing are depicted onscreen, but the way the chain Saw is selectively applied as a killing machine is consistent with the film's other modern tropes. Sally and Franklin are the most complex and modern of the hippie characters: Sally as an innovative model of the still-developing cinematic Final Girl, and Franklin as a disabled protagonist whose visual presence connotes the contemporaneous Vietnam veteran anti-hero. These are the only two characters that Leatherface tries to kill with the chain Saw (Franklin successfully). Insofar as it also suggests the working-class revenge theme—the family was put out of work by machines in the factory where the siblings' grandfather sold

his cattle, Leatherface chooses a machine to kill them—there is a revolutionary implication of turning the dominant regime's technologies against it. Still, the film adopts a consistent position: modern characters merit modern techniques (of killing or visual reproduction). Leatherface and his chain Saw should be understood in parallel with his brother, the Hitchhiker and his camera; they are two aspects of the same phenomenon.(43) In a changing rural landscape, each brother—the youngest cohort of the family—deploys a machine that allows him to both remember and to dis-cover, to explore the murky border between past (tradition, authenticity, uniqueness) and present (mass media and the economic, perceptual, and socio-cultural costs of progress).

Both machines, on the face of it, contribute to the withering of aura in Benjamin's sense. This is theoretically clear in the case of pictures. And what does Leatherface do with the chain Saw (in killing Franklin, but also to corpses) if not to reduce unique individuals to mobile piles of identical-looking bones? Does he not contribute to the degrading of a taboo that once protected a unique auratic entity from succumbing to interchangeable images that have no subjectivity, no "historical testimony"?

Yes, and no. As they are used here, the camera and the chain Saw are modern machines of memory—problematic ones, to be sure, but they are a compelling partnership in their ambivalence. The fact that the only living character on whom both are deployed was Franklin—the Hitchhiker takes his picture in the van, Leatherface kills him with the chain Saw—reaffirms the special tragedy of his visual modernity. related directly to the irrationality of Vietnam. A formal correspondence emerges: Camera is to chain Saw, as a photograph's single piercing *punctum* is to the whirling chain Saw teeth of edited scenes in cinematic film (Hooper's "real" movie boasts 900 edits). Hooper plays with this aesthetic by introducing the film with the photographic stills of corpses exhumed from a graveyard, accompanied by the camera's shrill, metallic whine. As razors and chain Saws can cut away flesh indiscriminately, mechanically reproduced images impact the aura of subject *and* object in diverse ways. Both the Hitchhiker and Leatherface are themselves physically compromised, opened up, by a knife and chain Saw: the Hitchhiker in a quiet moment of absorption in the van, and Leatherface during the film's climactic chase scene.

In *TCSM* the images that machines produce inherently convey humanity's need to "have the last word in the argument with death by means of the form that endures."(44) The family's growing fascination with the ultimate malleability of even that form—jumbled bones, arm chairs, a cow's horn stuck in a skull's mouth—expresses again that their own auratic sensibility as subjects is troubled and vulnerable, articulating the ambivalence of postmodern subjectivity. Critics who argue that *TCSM* denigrates the human body out of a morbid materialistic idolatry are too literal in their interpretations. Given the claims made for photography by early inventor-boosters such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, who exulted "Every conceivable object of Nature or Art will soon scale off its surface for us," and dreamed of the day when someone who "wishes to see any object, natural or artificial, will go the Stereographic Library and call for its skin or form, as he would for a book at any common library,"(45) the Hitchhiker's photographing of decaying corpses is a peculiarly devotional act in postmodernity: a pathetic way of *giving them their skins* back in an era of withered aura.

If we are treated overlong to the image of degraded bodies, this is not without reason. The gruesome decoration of the family home indicts the false reality in the way conventions of mainstream film and mass media images generally focus attention on the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world.(46) Hooper's critique of the mass media's facile aesthetic of domesticity, a representation that normalizes middle-class values by displacing the hardships of average people, blue-collar workers and veterans, could not be clearer. The plate of

unidentifiable cuts of meat put in front of Sally at the dinner table may be intended to jolt us from our own distraction in a society of spectacle, where we are regularly invited to evade reality either by consuming images as if these were more real than life itself, or by downplaying the power of images to communicate human reality. That sausage is mass-mediated representation made corporal.

During the dinner scene, in which Sally passes a night of psychological torture tied to a chair, the men's lack of interest in Sally's frantic offer to "do anything" has been given a consistently psychoanalytic reading, yet there is another dimension. One of the remarkable cinematic aspects of the family is that we are left wanting to know much more about them, who they are, their history, their experiences, what their familial relations are. The film leaves us curious to know more about these people—a working-class cinematic coup. Sally wants to escape, but for hours, she is forced to see these people, to pay attention to them. Just as important, this working-class family gets to return her gaze. They look back at her, touch her, mock her—and during the dinner hour, which for years was the time for middle-class America to eat while watching the war on TV, consuming the images of anonymous tragedy along with dinner. "I thought you were in a hurry," jeers the Hitchhiker; Sally's postmodern mobile gaze has been temporarily held on the shabby people who live in an old house bearing the decay of economic stagnation and the material and psychological scars of war in Vietnam.

Sally's experience is different from Pam's. Earlier in the film, Leatherface, wearing an apron and surrounded by the tools of his trade, impales Pam on a meat hook. The scene shocks because Leatherface displaces Pam with an emotionless, mechanical efficiency that evokes both the capitalist imperatives of the slaughterhouse, and the individual subject's vulnerability to the risks of distraction in an industrialized mass-culture regime. Pam's fate reminds us that the postmodern anarchic freedom of cultural poachers (in Koepnick's words) is supported by a technological and economic *system* that has real power, is increasingly integrated, and that by its nature functions to make itself and its social consequences invisible. For Sally, tied to a chair at the dining-room table, that system's capacity for alienation is a subtext—but here the human, social dimension of subject-object positioning is foregrounded. The dinner scene is about people looking at each other, and who controls the gaze. But the frenetic changes in camera angle between (and outside) Sally's and the family members' perspectives reinforce the feeling that what is at stake is not so much "control" as even the possibility of a mass-mediated regime in which diverse constituencies are equally posed as subjects and objects.

In that sense, leaving aside the many regrettable films in *TCSM*'s franchise (and also sidestepping the "legitimate" aesthetic experience of hyper-real plastinated human corpses in the *Body Worlds* exhibits), its most direct contemporary heir might be the independent Iraq war documentary *Gunner Palace* (2004). Director Michael Tucker filmed a field artillery unit for two months, bunking with them in a bombed-out palace once owned by Uday Hussein, determined to "tell the soldiers' story… [looking] at the subject not as news, but as living history; an experience, not an event."(47) He was motivated by the soldiers' frustration that privileged Americans, losing interest in the war, were changing the channel to the more diverting realities of *Survivor* and *American Idol*. Tucker: "The war had become an event, something to be watched from a distance without consequence… I wonder how the *Iraq Experience* will be defined in twenty years: will the voices of those who were there shape the collective narrative, or will we see the experience through the lens of Hollywood?" Responding to the hunger for auratic experience among both his viewers and his actors, *Gunner Palace* achieves a sort of self-conscious auratic effect indicative of our media-saturated moment; a soldier notes, "For y'all this is just a show, but we live in this movie." One of the ironies of Tucker's film is that the largely working-class, volunteer soldiers who "tell it like it is" do so through recreating scenes and elements of mass-culture war entertainment, from *M*A*S*H* to *Platoon*; their own perceptions of their experience rely on previous mass-media images. The filmmaker

acknowledges this fact, but does not explore its deeper implications—whose film is this, whose experience, and whose gaze? It seems that now, as in the 1970s of *TCSM*, the reconstitution of aura—a sense of mutual authenticity and personal subjectivity—is fundamental to coming to grips with violent conflict, social turmoil, moral ambiguity, and the power of images to distract. Through its augmentative recycling, its fictive reality and the puzzling complexities of its own auratic effect, *TCSM* reaffirms the place of aura in postmodernity by showing us the human impact of its withering.

1 *Variety*, 6 November 1974.

2 The terms of this debate on the significance of an image's original referent originated in the 1930s writings of German philosophers Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, colleagues who disagreed strongly on the subject. In *Adorno on Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2003) Robert W. Witkin ably contrasts their positions: "The special authority that the unique object or work of art possesses and which sets it at a distance from us is what Benjamin termed its *aura*… In his view, the decay of aura is inevitably linked to a democratization of arts practice… the audience takes the position of the camera" in his favorite examples, photography and film, and absorbs the work distractedly—defusing its potential as hegemonic expressions of authority and social relations (51-3); conversely, for Adorno, mass-culture commodities dangerously cloaked the power structures behind their production (his concept of *fetish*), so allowing serious and challenging art to maintain its distance from the engaged viewer helped foster a critical consciousness of broader processes of alienation (54-5). In "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" (Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic* [Port Townsed: Bay Press, 1983]), Frederic Jameson analyzes postmodernity's state of pervasive mass-mediation and unstable categories (in which subjectivity itself is questioned) and relates the effects of structuralism to a form of "schizophrenia… the breakdown of the relationship between signifiers. [It] is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up… The schizophrenic does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the 'I' and the 'me' over time" (118-9). Regarding *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, the tension over aura and subjectivity I examine was dimly perceived but discarded by J.P. Telotte in "Faith and Idolatry in the Horror Film" (Barry Keith Grant, ed. *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film* [Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1984], 25), when he declared that by attending such films as *TCSM*, "we become temporarily involved in an idolatry of sorts, for we celebrate deviation from the human… erecting in its place a distorting mirror through which we see ourselves as objects deprived of life and abandoned among a world of similar objects." Similarly, Ken Hanke (*A Critical Guide to Horror Film Series* [New York: Garland, 1991], 265), describes the film's "cannibalistic chainsaw" family thus: "Their nightmare world of filth, artistically arranged skeletons, stuffed pets and ancestors, and butchered human beings has become their norm. Rather than face reality, they have perverted it into their own reality." The question is *how*, and also, what their reality is.

3 Lutz Koepnick, "Aura Reconsidered: Benjamin and Contemporary Visual Culture," in *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, ed. Gerhard Richter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 114. For Koepnick, aura is not only a function of fascism: "Benjamin generically defines fascism as the attempt to recycle auratic modes of perception in the context of a postauratic culture: fascism reinscribes aura in order to masquerade hierarchy and power as spectacle. How useful, then, we must ask, is Benjamin's conceptual apparatus when discussing the spectacular elements of contemporary media societies and their massive reproduction of auratic values?"

4 Koepnick, "Aura Reconsidered," 110-111.

5 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 15.

6 Barthes' robust subjectivity should be read against Benjamin's endorsement of a rootless, distracted gaze that poaches indiscriminately. "Although meant to offer a site of critical exchange and cultural empowerment, Benjamin's postauratic auditorium is populated by spectators who have nothing left to see or say anymore." Koepnick, "Aura Reconsidered," 101.

7 If Baudrillard was right that the commodity production of consumer capitalism marks our object world with a mechanically-reproduced unreality and a free-floating absence of the referent, Barthes would qualify that in photography, the referent adheres—although it can only be recognized as such by viewers who are linked to it by memory. An image can be copied, even if personal auratic engagement (a bridge to the referent constructed through original, non-reproducible experience) with it can never be. "I cannot

reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture." Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 73.

8 Rick Berg, "Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology," in Rowe and Berg, *The Vietnam War and American Culture*. 118-119.

9 According to *Variety*'s key city domestic box office tallies, 1974 registered 18% growth over 1973; the peak was attributed in large part to the oil crisis and high gas prices, which led people to forego travel and tourism for diversions close to home (18 December 1974). The headline on 8 January 1975 proclaimed "'74: Economic Gloom, Show Biz Boom."

10 Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," first appearing in *Atlantic Monthly*. Emphasis in the original. Reprinted in Alan Trachtenberg, ed. *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 71-82.

11 Analysis of the cannibal family as an "exploited and degraded proletariat," common to film reviews in the popular press, was made most forcefully by Robin Wood in "An Introduction to the American Horror Film" (*Planks of Reason*), 188.

12 Roger Ebert, "*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (R)," *Chicago Sun Times*, 1 January 1974.

13 The film "skates right up to the border where 'art' ceases to exist in any form and exploitation begins." Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Berkley, 1981), 4-5, 130.

14 Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film" (*Planks of Reason*), 189.

15 John Bloom, "They Came, They Sawed," *Texas Monthly*, November 2004, http://www.texasmonthly.com (accessed 11 January 2005). Emphasis in original.

16 Alluding to the heightened sensitivity to visual codes pervading the counterculture, Hooper remembered how the presence of the camera complicated his own appearance in the eyes of those he filmed. "[The work] was interesting, but I was kind of a nonpolitical hippie. I had the long hair, and I walked around with a movie camera in my hand, which was kind of a hippie thing to do. But in fact it made me a suspicious character. I was FBI. I was a narc. I was with the Feds. Why else would I be taking everyone's picture all the time?" Bloom, "They Came, They Sawed."

17 *The Onion*, 11 October 2000 (http://www.theavclub.com/feature/index.php?issue=3636&f=1).

18 Standard references are Bloom's 2004 "They Came, They Sawed," and the *Los Angeles Times*'s 1982 two-part exposé by Farley and Knoedelseder, "The Real Texas Chain Saw Massacre."

19 Hooper's father owned a hotel in Austin and regularly took young Tobe to movies; Tobe began experimenting with his father's video camera at age three (Bloom, "They Came, They Sawed").

20 John McMarty, *Splatter Movies: Breaking the Last Taboo of the Screen* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 91.

21 *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre: A Family Portrait* (Revisited); interview with Paul Partain by Petch Lucas, http://www.pitofhorr.com/main/partain.html (accessed 15 March 2005).

22 Brad Shallady, *The Texas Chainsaw {sic} Massacre: A Family Portrait*, Doornail Fils / MTI Home Video, 2000.

23 John Bloom ("They Came, They Sawed") suggests of the film "The more you learn about its making, the less it seems the invention of a screenwriter of a director or an acting company than the product of Austin itself at the end of the Vietnam era."

24 Neal: "Paul and Marilyn didn't like each other much, so that helped [their portrayal of sibling friction]… For example, in one scene, Marilyn grabs a flashlight away from Paul, and he just about tears her head off. It was great. It was also real, but that's beside the point." McCarty, *Splatter Movies*, 94-5, 99.

25 George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (University of Illinois Press, 1994), 298-299.

26 Sharrett, "The Idea of Apocalypse," 255-276.

27 Dika, *Recycled Culture*, 70.

28 Kim Newman, *Nightmare Movies: A Critical Guide to Contemporary Horror Films* (New York: Harmony Books, 1988), 50-53.

29 Christian Appy analyzed the illusion that the war existed in a physical and moral vacuum, which helped soldiers deal with the madness of war: "if the war itself seemed like an illusion, maybe one's own participation was illusory as well." Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 252.

30 Newman, *Nightmare Movies*, 53.

31 Benjamin, "Work of Art."

32 Benjamin, "Work of Art."

33 This comment looks forward to the line in *Coming Home* (1978): "I'm here to tell you that I have killed for my country, and I don't feel good about it."

34 As Benjamin warned in his fifth thesis on the philosophy of history, "Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably."

35 Koepnick, "Aura Reconsidered," 114.

36 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*: "Photography's inimitable feature is that someone has seen the referent (even if it is a matter of object*s) in flesh and blood*, or again *in person*… The Photograph does not call up the past. The effect it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I see has indeed existed."

37 It "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me… For *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)." Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26-7.

38 Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (Princeton University Press, 1992), 32.

39 Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1974), 342.

40 Holmes, "Stereoscope and Stereograph."

41 Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, 55.

42 Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 31.

43 Holmes described the effect of the stereograph: "We see something with the second eye which we did not see with the first; the two eyes see different pictures of the same thing. By means of these two different views of an object, the mind, as it were, *feels round it* and gets an idea of its solidity."

44 In "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," Bazin writes of the "mummy complex," the desperate attempt to preserve life by preserving a representation of life.

45 Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph."

46 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (1975), 6-18.

47 Tucker's comments and synopsis are on the film's Website, www.gunnerpalace.com.