The Demythologizing of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*

Jeff Jeske

Preface: In Memoriam

Will Dodson

I met my friend Jeff Jeske in the Fall of 1996, my first semester at Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina. He was my Composition (Advanced, I hasten to add) professor. Early in the course I wrote an essay on Flannery O’Connor’s short story, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” I titled my essay, “Good? Bad? … I’m the Guy With the Gun.” Now, if you’ve read O’Connor’s story, and you’re well versed in Bruce Campbell-isms, then you know that joke is genius-level. Jeff, as they say these days, saw what I did there, and noted his appreciation right below a large “B-.” Thus began the first of several courses I took with Jeff, and our twenty-year friendship. Jeff was a fascinating man who lectured on Herman Melville and Herschell Gordon Lewis with equal enthusiasm, who meditated daily and played the accordion in an oom-pah band, who enjoyed a fine whiskey and the odd-numbered *Nightmare on Elm Street* films. He loved cinema in general, but horror films particularly, both for their confrontation of existential dread and for their gleeful camp.

Jeff gave several memorable presentations in the Horror Area of the Popular Culture Association National Conferences, ranging in subject from the asceticism of the *Saw* series (2004-2010) to the apocalypticism of *Hell Ride* (Larry Bishop, 2008). But he shared most of his erudition on cinema, horror films in particular, in conversation with his students, and sadly few of his insights on cinema ever saw print. My friend Jeff died on 23 January 2017, and I’m grateful to the editors of *MONSTRUM* that the following essay, full of his wit and intelligence, can reach the audience it deserves. (Is it a coincidence that Jeff invokes O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find?” Perhaps my undergraduate essay impressed him more than he realized at the time ….)

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Tania Modleski suggests in “The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory” that slasher films are “engaged in an unprecedented assault on all that bourgeois culture is supposed to cherish” (1986: 158). In critiquing or overtly attacking dominant ideology—the consumer culture, technology, and/or the family—such films champion both a modernist and postmodern sensibility. In terms of aesthetic and narrative form, they may also exemplify a postmodern oppositional film art with respect to conventional Hollywood filmmaking, defeating viewer expectations of narrative continuity and/or closure and thus adding meta-terror to the fright a film’s story itself offers.

We can certainly make some of these claims for Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), a progenitor and ostensible prototype of the slasher genre. As early as 1979, critics like Robin Wood have studied the film as a critique of both capitalism and the family and widely recognized it as an outlaw film that challenged the Hollywood establishment. Its phenomenal success is well known. The film cost $250,000 to produce, and may have since grossed over $100 million, setting at its time a new standard for horror. Like *Psycho* (1960) before it and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) after, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* derived its inspiration from Wisconsin farmer Ed Gein, who killed women and wore their skin in the late 1950s. Unlike these other two films, however, it was an innovative indie that helped spawn a new genre, an overnight hit that, despite the disparaging criticism of periodicals like the *Los Angeles Times*, which dismissed it as “despicable … ugly, and obscene” (Gross, 1974: 14), went on to transcend its generation.

I would argue, however, that Hooper’s film did not succeed principally because of its postmodern impulses. On the contrary, it succeeds because it traffics in myth, providing a modernist encounter with evil that is so universal an experience for audiences as to explain why the film was named “Outstanding Film of the Year” by the London Film Festival in 1974, why it subsequently has been screened in 90 countries worldwide, and why it has become a recognized film classic. Mikita Brottman’s seminal essay, “Once Upon a Time in Texas,” published in her book, *Offensive Films* (1997), first contextualized *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* as myth, specifically in terms of
the fairy tale. Here I will consider the original film and its remake from the standpoint of “The Journey,” as described by Joseph Campbell.

The 2003 remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* directed by Marcus Nispel offers what its producers describe as a “reimagining.” In so doing, it follows its predecessor’s macro-structure: a group of five van-bound teens falls prey to a murderous family associated with a slaughterhouse in rural Texas and is dispatched one-by-one until only a single female escapes. Despite the considerable narrative similarities, however, this film dismantles the original’s mythic structure and, by extension, the earlier film’s modernist assumptions about story. In pointing to the possibilities for retelling a classic film for a postmodern age, the sequel offers us something of value. Its lack of critical success, however, offers us a cautionary tale of what happens when the “reimagining” does not go far enough, resulting in a muddle of good intentions compromised by cliché.

Besides deep structural similarities, the two films share other, more direct connections. The remake’s opening voiceover narration is provided by John Larroquette, who also did the voiceover for the original. According to *Fangoria*, Nispel explored the possibility of including cameo performances by the original’s Gunnar Hansen (Leatherface) and Marilyn Burns (Sally) (C. Allen, 2003: 21). Even more remarkably, Nispel chose the original’s cinematographer, Daniel Pearl, to reprise his role.

Pearl’s visual style features more prominently in the remake than it does in the original. He devotes more attention to aesthetic surfaces than he did in the original, perhaps because (as anecdotal accounts of the original’s filming suggest) inadequate equipment caused Hooper and Pearl to focus their creative energies on simply getting shots filmed. Whatever the reason, the remake offers stunning individual shots that call attention to the film’s style in a self-conscious way, one that can invoke a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*—or distanciating effect—as the viewer momentarily suspends his or her identification with the unfolding plot and characters to gaze on striking images. Two prominent examples are the panoramic recessive shot through a bullet hole in the female hitchhiker’s head and a later, aesthetically splendid backlit shot of the Hewitt house, a grey-weathered, brooding Gothic horror house that is a far cry from the normal-seeming, white-painted farmhouse of the original (See Figure 4 below).6

A greater divergence of remake from original is evident in the narrative style. Whereas Kim Henkel’s original script features causal simplicity and straightforward exposition, the remake offers subplots, a more complex narrative, and less useful exposition. We might describe the latter as a nod
toward postmodernist discontinuity. Certainly, the loosening of the original’s more episodic narrative order, combined with increased attention to aesthetic surface, shifts the focus away from the original’s thoroughly modernist project: the elaboration of myth.

The Journey

Both films can be viewed as products of a particular time period. The original evokes the malaise of early 70s American capitalism, the corrupt Nixon presidency, and the end of the Vietnam War—a period marked by generational conflict that gives metaphoric value to Hooper’s young flower-power teens being slaughtered and devoured by a murderous Southern family. Nispel’s remake, according to the Village Voice’s Michael Atkinson, suggests a metaphoric agenda as well: “Texas is the dark heart of Bush Country, a self-expanding territory where business eats the young, death rows teem with the helpless, and Christ-righteous gun law rules from Waco to Tikrit” (2003: n.p.).

The original, however, tilts its localized (national, cultural) concerns towards myth—defined here as a story containing a set of images/symbols that organize and focus unconscious processes of a group or society. The myth begins as the photos flash out of the darkness before the opening
credits, photos of the exhumed corpses that will soon draw Hooper’s band of teens to the cemetery. A mythic journey outside of a particular time is about to begin, a journey fraught with apocalyptic foreshadowing. Premonitory sunspots and solar flares appear over the opening credits; then we see the malevolent sun, suggesting that nature itself is out of joint. A close-up of a dead armadillo on its back along the road appears just as the teens’ van pulls into view. As Jerry maneuvers Franklin’s wheelchair out of the van so that Franklin can urinate alongside the road, we hear a string of news reports on the van’s radio: 20 killed by a collapsing building, the mutilated bodies of a young man and woman found in Gary, Indiana, a Dallas couple arrested for chaining their 18-month-old daughter in the attic.

Human affairs in the film’s immediate locale are equally foreboding. Several of the cemetery’s graves have been opened; there are a dozen empty crypts. Two corpses are artfully arranged in what appears to be a parody of a married couple sitting atop a headstone (See Figure 1, above). Others are missing, or parts have been removed. Sally, Franklin, and their friends join local residents to check on whether her and Franklin’s grandfather’s grave has been disturbed. A drunk lying on the ground, his face turned to the sky and beating sun, comments, “Things happen here they don’t tell about.”

As the group drives away, having satisfied themselves that the grandfather’s grave is intact, Pam renews the foreboding suggested by the scene’s layered intimations of dread as she shares bad news from a copy of American Astrology. Saturn, she points out, has entered retrogradation: its maleficence is increasing. She will later confirm the magazine’s authority by noting that Franklin’s horoscope for the day—“upsetting persons around you could make this a disturbing and unpredictable day”—accurately describes the experience he has with a terrifying hitchhiker.

This heavy concentration of foreshadowing devices resembles that in another tale of a journey gone awry, Flannery O’Connor’s short story “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” in which a family also wanders off the main road into strange territory to find a house, only to meet three homicidal males who slay them one by one. In O’Connor’s story, the Grandmother who initiates the unfortunate side trip will learn that she is strangely connected to the Misfit, the chief figure of menace. Franklin, too, will share a sort of connection to the Hitchhiker in his fascination with the violence of the slaughterhouse, a vocational practice that unites their ancestry in a past of brutality (discussed further below). O’Connor’s story offers psychological doubling and a trip into the subconscious, and as in Hooper’s film, laces the exposition with devices pointing inexorably toward the conclusion: graves alongside the road—the
same in number as the family—a hearse-like automobile, the town of Toombsboro. Strangely, despite the two stories’ chaotic irrationality, primal order prevails in an ironclad causality. This is the world of myth.

It is also the world of Freud and Jung. To a much greater extent than its successor, Hooper’s film provides a modernist nightmare that depth psychology can explicate. In Freudian terms, the teens are voyaging into the unconscious to meet the id, and more terrifyingly, Freud’s Thanatos, the death drive that expresses itself in aggression, destructiveness, sadism, and cruelty; if the goal of Freud’s other great force, Eros, is to promote creation, family, and world unity, Thanatos’s goal is to destroy it. In Jungian terms, our characters are voyaging into the unconscious, but with a different aim and trajectory. In the opening narration, John Larroquette describes how “For them an idyllic summer afternoon drive became a nightmare.” The news about the cemetery desecration becomes, unwittingly for them, what Jungian mythologist Joseph Campbell names the call to adventure (1968: 51). In response, Sally performs an act of intergenerational family piety. Perhaps motivated by this family duty, the group sets off in search of Sally’s grandfather’s now-vacant house.

En route, the group picks up the Hitchhiker, who clearly typifies the Shadow figure, embodying repressed elements that Jungian psychologist Marie-Louise von Franz identifies as representing the first stage in the quest into the unconscious (1964: 168). Hooper’s Hitchhiker is a nightmarish figure, too grotesque to be pitiable, a displaced slaughterhouse worker who carries photographs of steers he has killed with a sledgehammer. What is most remarkable is the fascination that he inspires in Franklin, who engages in a spirited conversation with him about the craft of killing steers: the sledgehammer versus the pneumatic gun. Franklin acknowledges a direct connection with the Hitchhiker—his own grandfather used to send his steers to the Hitchhiker’s slaughterhouse. And even more telling, Franklin has an uncle who works in one. Franklin and the Hitchhiker also discover that they share an enthusiasm for head cheese. After the Hitchhiker demonstrates his bravado by laughing while using Franklin’s knife to cut open his palm, Franklin finds himself admiring the act—even though the Hitchhiker also cuts Franklin’s arm with his knife, against Franklin’s will. Although the two do not exchange blood, the corresponding cuts via the shared knife suggest blood brotherhood. And when the group forcibly puts the Hitchhiker out of the van, he smears its side with his bloody palm, marking it. Later when the van reaches the family homestead, Franklin gazes ruefully at the bloody mark and says, “I bet it’s about me.”

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The opening segment of Hooper’s film, then, is rich with mythic markers. The innocent teens have embarked on a quest and have even received a direct invitation to the Sawyer family home, an invitation that they will unwittingly and tragically accept. The film’s interconnected imagery points forward to a dire outcome. We are on a voyage that we deeply understand, for its terms and symbols are the stuff of great art, whether film, painting, or literature.

In sharp contrast, the Nispel remake strips this mythic meta material from the narrative. Instead of a group of teens performing an act of filial piety and then searching for the family homestead, we are given five companions headed for a Lynyrd Skynyrd concert. Nor are they depicted as innocent Everyman figures. As the scene in the van opens, we see Pepper and Andy making out in the back seat; they have known each other only 19 hours, the group having picked up Pepper by chance as she hitchhiked in El Paso. Meanwhile, Morgan lights a joint and passes it forward to the driver, Kemper, who we learn in subsequent conversation has concealed in a piñata two pounds of pot that he just purchased in Mexico where, as his girlfriend Erin disgustedly comments, she watched him “getting shit-faced for four days” on weed and tequila.

Instead of the original’s concentrated imagery of bad omens, bad news on the radio, and flash-photography shots of the cemetery remains, the remake opens with “Sweet Home Alabama” on the radio and retrospective, faux documentary footage of the film’s crime scene, the Hewitt house (formerly the Sawyer house in the original). Rather than suggesting a journey into darkness that is just beginning, the footage signals ahead to its conclusion.8 And instead of foreshadowing associated with that outcome, we are given only Morgan’s warning to Pepper and Andy about STIs and the strong hint that Erin, who has abstained from dope and booze in Mexico and is now nauseous, may be pregnant.

When this group encounters their narrative equivalent of the original’s Hitchhiker, it is not a member of the murderous clan inviting them to visit but a mysterious girl who soon shoots herself in the head with a pistol that she pulls from beneath her skirt. As we will learn at the end of the film, Nispel is using her here to set up a framing device that will be completed by Erin, who like this girl, ultimately escapes from the Hewitt house. At the time, however, this episode’s function is less mythic than expository: with a dead body on their hands, the group must now figure out what to do with it. This leads to their encounter with Sheriff Hoyt, who will provide the logistics for his, Leatherface’s, and other local residents’ malevolent designs on the group. The remake’s “hitchhiker” episode also complicates the viewer’s task. Rather than
providing a straight arrow into the heart of the story, it opens a subplot that will never clearly resolve. The girl tells the group “they’re all dead” and “He’s a really bad man.” It never becomes clear who “they” are—just as it never becomes clear who the “really bad man is”—Leatherface? Sheriff Hoyt? Old Monty? The girl is the first in a series of minor characters whose relationship to others in the story is hazy at best.

The Terrrible House

After their respective hitchhiker scenes, the two films move forward with different narrative speeds and degrees of unity: the remake diverges sharply from its predecessor’s mythic and focused linearity, loosening the narrative. Hooper’s teens make one stop before pushing on to the grandfather’s house and the adjacent Sawyer house. This stop is at the combination gas station/general store/barbecue operated by Cook, the elder brother of the Sawyer clan. His role is authoritative, and his appearance draws us directly toward the coming confrontation. Interestingly, Henkel’s script provides a more marbled characterization of Cook than we otherwise might expect—he initially tries to discourage the teens from visiting the Franklin house. The effect is to heighten the menace.

From there, Hooper’s teens head on directly to the Franklin homestead and the Terrible House. With the cruel logic of the nightmare, all subsequent action will enfold here, except for a brief segment when Sally escapes to the Cook’s roadside store only to be returned to the tale’s horrific center, the Sawyer dining room. Throughout this action, no extraneous characters appear and the script observes tight unity of space and time: the first killing, Kirk’s, occurs at 35:50 and the following murders (or in Pam’s case, impalement on a meat-hook—she will die not long after in a freezer) occur at regularly spaced five-to-six-minute intervals. In the remake, on the other hand, the choreography is more diffuse, both spatially and chronologically, and the extraneous characters multiply. At the barbecue/gas station, the group meets a middle-aged woman presiding over a fly-infested meat counter; she calls the sheriff and delivers his instructions to the group to meet him at the Old Crawford Mill. Once they arrive, the action moves between the mill and the Hewitt house, as well as to a trailer, the slaughterhouse, and other outbuildings. New characters appear, including women who may or may not be related to the sheriff or to Leatherface, and a mysterious feral child who
may have been abducted from a hapless family of travelers, or who may, given his severe malocclusions, be the child of inbred residents.

The Sheriff is instrumental in the remake’s long middle section and plays a central role analogous to the original film’s Cook. Unlike Cook’s textured characterization, however, the Sheriff’s is rendered heavily in terms of the “Southern sheriff” stereotype, beginning with the pronounced swagger and spitting of tobacco juice with which he exits his police car when he arrives at the Crawford Mill. The actor, R. Lee Ermey, does deliver a powerfully menacing performance, but the viewer’s psychic involvement is undermined by this stereotyping as well as by confusingly disparate narrative elements involving a suicide subplot and the back-and-forth movement of the main plot toward its climax. Where Hooper’s film draws the plot linearly toward its primary mythic element—Sally’s encounter with the cannibal family—the remake dispenses with a central focus altogether and substitutes a more familiar slasher-film strategy. The series of chase-and-kill episodes are here amplified by 1) self-conscious cinematography and gore, 2) resonant but oddly inappropriate images like that of Andy on his meat hook rendered as Jesus on the cross, and 3) an unnecessarily long sequence in which the Sheriff terrorizes three of the teens at the Crawford Mill for no thematically significant reason.

Central to the deep psychological truth of the quest horror tale is the Terrible House, an image that critic Robin Wood says “stems from a long tradition in American (and Western capitalist) culture” (1979: 20). In mythic terms, it may be the climax in the hero’s road of trials as s/he journeys into the exotic realm of the unconscious: the cave of the dragon, the castle of the black knight, the witch’s house in the woods, the place of greatest danger (Campbell, 1968: 97-109). For Freud, this place might represent the center of the id, or the source of the death drive. Wood notes further that “traditionally, it represents an extension or ‘objectification’ of the personalities of the inhabitants” (1979: 20). Not surprisingly, both films associate these houses closely with the respective murderous families. In each, the house overflows with decay and menacing artifacts as well as with live pigs and/or chickens and the implements of slaughter. These are spaces associated with death and death-dealing, though they encourage an uncanny fascination with their excessive contortions of the usual comforts and accouterments of “home.”

The house in the original film exudes more cumulative power because of the greater thematic focus on it as the place where bad things happen (See Figure 2, next page). Cinematographer Pearl frames it claustrophobically, and Hooper fills the “living” room with unsettling images: a live chicken hanging in a birdcage, a piece of furniture artfully constructed out of human bones,
testifying to the inhabitants’ odd creativity and reduction of the human body to use value and objet d’art (Figure 3 below). Pam rightfully falls on her knees and vomits when she stumbles into this profusion of irrationality that epitomizes the unconscious. Aply, when viewed from the outside, this is a normal-looking farmhouse; the juxtaposition between outer and inner is itself exceedingly creepy and fearful, and again, it bears psychological truth.
The house in the remake is less chaotic internally except for the cluttered basement that serves as Leatherface’s lair. Pearl does not frame this house tightly. It sits on an open space of land, and the cinematographer uses this topographical fact to present stylized shots of the two-story Southern Gothic against the sky, including one in which the house is menacingly backlit, invoking the sense of effulgent evil (See Figure 4). In treating the house with such aesthetic self-consciousness, Pearl instills fear in the viewer, but it is a detached fear. We do not have the unsettling juxtaposition with normalcy that occurs in the original. Moreover, this is a house with open balconies and porches, and the interior rooms are correspondingly large. There is more room for victims and imagination to roam.

When Erin and Kemper first visit this Terrible House, they are greeted by Old Monty, an irascible, legless cripple who tells them the Sheriff whom they seek does not live there, a statement that may or may not be true, just as Monty may or may not be related to him. It is on this visit that Kemper encounters and is killed by someone who does live in the house: Leatherface. It is Leatherface who theoretically serves as the chief antagonist in both films, the embodiment of the irrational, the principal Other. Certainly, in the first
film, he is the monster who typifies an inner primitivity that must be repressed and who is most dangerous when his vile space is invaded. He represents the worst, most grotesque of one’s inner urges—even in his quieter moments where he frets nervously, whimpering over the continued invasions of his space by the teens. This Leatherface is both sub-human, grunting like a pig, and meta-human, unknowable and, appropriately, given his role in Hooper’s mythic drama, an agent of seemingly motiveless malignity. Leatherface’s multiple roles in the family as infantilized brother, housekeeper, and butcher render his motivations even more inscrutable. Not so in the remake.

Andrew Bryniarski’s reprise of Gunnar Hansen’s original Leatherface offers us a similarly conceived but less mythically realized version. This more pitiable Leatherface has a name—Thomas Hewitt—and more importantly, he has a motive for mass killing. We learn that since he was a young boy, Thomas had a disfiguring skin disease which caused his face to rot away. Not surprisingly, he was teased mercilessly in school; his mother will say later in the film, “nothing but cruelty and ridicule for my boy all the time he was growing up.” Activated both by vengeful anger and the need to cover his deformity, this Leatherface takes off his mask to reveal a skeletal void in a scene reminiscent of Lon Chaney’s removal of his mask in the original Phantom of the Opera (Rupert Julian, 1925). He immediately replaces this mask with a face recognizable as the recently removed Kemper’s. Both give this more recent Leatherface a recognizable human appearance, unlike the original greenish mask, unrecognizable as human skin and with surface features like eyebrows that seem to have been superficially added. Whereas the first Leatherface remains a dark enigma, his successor shows human vulnerability, as evidenced when he falls while climbing through a barbed wire fence in pursuit of Erin and cuts his leg open with his chainsaw. Tanya Modleski suggests that when characters such as Leatherface remain undeveloped, “narcissistic identification of the part of the audience becomes increasingly difficult” (1986: 161). In the remake, greater character development increases the chance of such identification, altering the traditional dynamic of myth in which the audience identifies primarily with the protagonist.

The Final Girl

The original film’s Sally first meets Leatherface when he kills her brother Franklin and then chases her. She escapes to the barbecue/gas station, only to be apprehended by Cook and returned to the family house. What ensues is the
notorious dinner scene in which Sally is nearly brained at the table by the clan’s grandfather. Here, she is menaced not only by Leatherface but by the entire family. It is a powerful image that epitomizes the film’s horror and both anchors the dynamic of Sally’s journey and suggests its meaning for the viewer (See Figures 5 and 6). For in the deepest sense, Sally has come home … to herself. She should indeed be familiar with this house, if not with its inhabitants. Sally tells Kirk early in the film that she had spent a summer right next door at her grandfather’s house when she was eight, just after her grandmother died. She likely has been there many other times as well. The Sawyer house is visible from the nearby swimming hole to which Franklin directs Pam and Kirk; he too has doubtless spent much time in its vicinity. This locale has been an important, emotionally cathected place of their youth.

Figures 5 and 6: Sally has “come home.” The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974)
In search of one family, here close to the center of her unconscious world, Sally has discovered another. Ironically, she finds a grandfather, but not the one she had sought. Instead of an animus/protector, Sally finds the paterfamilias of a family that collectively aims to kill and consume her. This monstrous family of displaced slaughterhouse workers exudes a pathology organized both by their victimization and by what they lack: the feminine. No civilizing influence intrudes on their dinner rituals and noisy sibling confrontations. There is no grandmother here—only the mummified remnants of one upstairs—just as there is a missing grandmother in Sally's own life. Interestingly, when Kirk asks Sally “what happened?” in response to her telling him that her grandmother had died, Sally does not answer him. Her grandmother, with her potential for beneficent influence, is simply absent.

Similarly, we do not learn the reason for the absence of the Sawyer grandmother from this other family that provides a negative image of Sally's, complete with a grandfather connected with a slaughterhouse and at least one family member who, like her uncle, works there.

In Hooper’s film, unlike in the remake, the cannibalism practiced by the Sawyer family serves as a powerful mythic symbol. Linda Badley compares the cannibalistic action to George Romero's zombie trilogy in both symbolizing and parodying consumer capitalism (1995: 74)—or perhaps America's devouring of its own young. It may be more satisfying, from a psychological perspective, to regard the cannibalism as a symbol of the perverse nourishment that human flesh in fact is, imaged by the grandfather’s sucking blood from Sally’s finger. In psychological terms, the family’s attempt to consume Sally may represent their unconscious desire to internalize the missing feminine principle that she embodies. For Sally, meanwhile, what is imagined is the prospect of her consumption by her rapacious id, or by irrational and now uncontrolled repressed maleness. No grandmotherly internal feminine steps forward to intercede with magical powers.

The remake, on the other hand, subtracts the original’s cannibalism and thus the latter's mythic resonance. There is no attempted sacrifice of the heroine by the grandfather at the table, no certainty that she will be devoured like her slaughtered peers. We do not see the family pathology of the original’s powerfully unifying dinner scene because that scene has been deleted. What Nispel's film offers in its place is a brief scene set in the Hewitt living room. Erin has been brought here after being drugged by Henrietta and the “Tea Lady,” two adult occupants of the trailer to which she runs for help while Leatherface chases her. In the living room, we find the Sheriff, the older woman from the barbecue/gas station, Old Monty, and, eventually
Leatherface. We learn that the Sheriff and Leatherface are the woman’s sons. While the woman angrily describes the ridicule young Thomas had suffered for his disfigurement, the Sheriff grapples with Erin erotically. His crude lechery reinforces a theme present from the film’s opening. Whereas the motive in Hooper’s film is definitely not sexual predation, despite the possibility of interpreting Leatherface’s chainsaw as a phallus (the family laughs at Sally when during the dinner she offers, “I’ll do anything you want” to save her life) we are led to conclude that Nispel poses sexuality as a primary motive. We have no evidence that the Sheriff or Leatherface intended to kill the hitchhiker we meet at the opening of the film. But the blood on the inside of her thighs strongly suggests that she has been raped. Even after death the Sheriff jokingly “cops a feel” as he shrink-wraps her body and jokes about her being “kinda wet down there.” Now, he gropes Erin just as Old Monty had when she first visited the Hewitt house. Other than this common element, we do not learn a motive for the group’s waylaying of travelers. If not cannibalism, then what? The Hitchhiker was possibly spared, as has the kidnapped baby that Henrietta, who may or may not be the Sheriff’s wife, wants to raise as her own. The feral boy may also be a spared traveler’s child.

Both Erin and Sally escape from the respective families, though in significantly different ways. Sally’s escape anticipates a pattern for the slasher genre to follow: she breaks free of the family, runs screaming from the house,
and rather than confronting her pursuers, is rescued from Leatherface and Hitchhiker by two truck drivers, one of whom rams Hitchhiker with his 18-wheeler, and another of whom happens to be passing by and drives her away from Leatherface in the back of his pick-up (See Figure 7). She ultimately does not directly save herself. This ending, while not rendering women totally powerless, nevertheless offers a nihilist conclusion: Sally escapes, but not intact. The truck drivers did not actively “save” her but rather came along by happenstance; had they stopped to help defend Sally it is unclear they would have had any different outcome than Franklin, Jerry, and Kirk. In fact, the cattle truck driver who gets out of his cab immediately flees to an unclear fate. Leatherface is left relatively intact—minus a nasty self-inflicted leg wound—in the road swinging his chainsaw. Sally’s journey is only partly over, and she does not return, in terms of the Campbellian heroic quest, with an elixir. She does, however, offer the possibility of masochistic identification to the male viewer whose journey this may really be (Clover, 1992). Such may be the true elixir. For it is through experiencing one’s repressed femininity, represented here by Sally, that the male viewer’s wholeness of self may emerge.

Erin offers a seemingly different, though conflicted outcome. Only at moments does she show passivity or powerless. In the cab of the truck driver who picks her up when she escapes from Leatherface, for example, she initially shows the same mild catatonia that the hitchhiker did at the film’s beginning, responding to this trucker with the same answers that the earlier hitchhiker had given to the van occupants: “I just want to go home”… “You’re going the wrong way”… “I can’t go back there.” But this behavior is atypical for Erin, who, unlike Sally, is more action than reaction, and in that sense resembles less the Final Girl archetype identified with the slasher film and more a hyper-masculinized action hero. From the film’s start, Erin shows tomboyish resourcefulness, as when she picks the lock on the outhouse door at the barbecue/gas station; later when making her final escape, she hotwires the Sheriff’s police car. Most importantly, she affects her escape, the rescue interlude with the truck driver being only a minor exception to a larger pattern of her agency. The escape begins when she breaks free from the Hewitt basement. There, after trying unsuccessfully to lift Matt off of the meat hook, she stabs him to put him out of his misery. She then rescues Morgan at great personal risk. Later, when pursued by Leatherface in the slaughterhouse, she turns on her pursuer, symbolically castrating him by cutting off his right arm, the arm that holds the chainsaw, with a cleaver. And finally, she steals the Sheriff’s car and kills him with it, not only running him down but stopping to run him over two more times. She kidnaps the abducted baby and drives off
under her own power. As in the original, Leatherface stands in the road waving his chainsaw, but this is a greatly diminished Leatherface, thanks to Erin’s resourcefulness.

The remake thus offers a what it sees as a revision of the Final Girl, that type of heroine Carol Clover discussed in her groundbreaking *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992). Clover suggests that typically the Final Girl acts as a stand-in for masochistic identification—adopting a masculine agency and becoming a kind of wish fulfillment figure for masculine identification with a masochistic subject position. Several subsequent theorists have argued Clover may be short-sighted in regarding the Final Girl as finding agency only through traditionally masculine traits. As Cynthia A. Freeland and Barbara Creed note, Clover’s thesis depends upon masculine readings of agency (Freeland, 1993; Creed, 1993). My interpretation of Erin is in keeping with Clover’s thesis and leads to a similar conclusion: Erin blends both feminine and masculine traits and draws upon the latter when needed. Nispel’s sequel de-essentializes gender, creating a new portrait of a woman whose attractive truth may help explain why the movie tested higher with females than with males.

Unfortunately, the remake neutralizes this move by fetishizing Erin throughout the film—something Hooper’s original film does not do with Sally. Her chest is well lit throughout and often wet. *Fangoria* magazine describes Erin/Jessica Biel as “so gorgeous in this film we could just eat her up” (Allen, 2003: 20). *San Francisco Examiner* reviewer Jeffrey Anderson suggests that “The real star of the picture […] has to be Biel’s belly button” (2003: n.p.) (See Figures 8 and 9, this page). While depicting Erin as New Woman, the film simultaneously
regards her like the slab of meat within which she hides when Leatherface chases her through the slaughterhouse. Erin’s sexuality reminds us, too, that this is a film where the superego rather than the id appears to play the role of punisher. As in many slasher films that preceded it, the underlying motive for violence against Nispel’s teens may be their immorality. Although Sally and Pam dress semi-provocatively in Hooper’s film, they are Aquarian innocents. Nispel’s group, on the other hand, are portrayed as devotees of sex, drugs, and rock ‘n roll. Erin may survive because she is the least self-indulgent of the group. The camera’s fetishizing of her is so pronounced, however, as to qualify the healthfulness of the female viewer’s identifying with her. 11

Conclusion

So how, then, do we evaluate Nispel’s remake as a postmodern phenomenon? On the positive side, it joins Hooper’s original in being oppositional in attacking what bourgeois culture cherishes—“the specious good”—such oppositionalism being a trait that modernism and postmodernism share. It then breaks from the original’s modernism in rejecting myth as a narrative ordering principle and by avoiding territory that easily lends itself to Freudian and/or Jungian analysis. It shows other postmodern traits as well: most notably, attentiveness to aesthetic surfaces. And in breaking with some stereotypic genre conventions regarding the Final Girl, it de-categorizes some gender roles with true postmodern spirit. 12

On the negative side, in giving us an inspirational ending with Erin intact, triumphant, and bearing the future—not only the child she has rescued but the child within her—the film foregoes the fundamental alienation and asocial individualism that is at the core of both the modern and postmodern. It has also undercut its portrayal of the heroine as a new type of heroine through conventional fetishizing. Meanwhile, despite Leatherface’s survival, he is not whole and thus less of a threat. The film may not give us the full closure that postmodernism decries, but we do have a partial one: that human agency can suffice to neutralize the forces of darkness. Or, in Freudian terms, Eros can overcome Thanatos. A postmodernist would reject such optimism, likely finding more congenial the original’s embrace of Thanatos, or, to avoid Freud somewhat, what Cynthia Freeland calls “uncanny horror: a disturbing and relentless vision of evil ‘out there’ in the world” (2002: 244).
As for the remake’s more comprehensive, retrospective relationship to its genre, Jeffrey Anderson sums up the film’s lack of postmodern imagination in noting:

One thing the original had was the outlaw factor. It was made completely outside the system and invented all-new rules for itself. Despite its grungy look, Hooper’s original had a very deliberate pace and tone to it; it was made by an artist with something interesting to say during a specific time in history. This new version […] was made completely inside the system and dutifully follows every rule long ago established by the horror genre. It has far more to do with commerce than art. (2003, n.p.)

Finally, then, though we might argue the film tweaks—to little thematic significance—some of the genre rules, the remake fails as a postmodern project, occupying an unsatisfying middle ground somewhere between the postmodern, the modern, and “the specious good.” This may help to explain why the meta-review website Rotten Tomatoes awarded the remake a 36 percent (where 60 percent is “fresh”) compared with the original’s 90 percent, and why Roger Ebert, who admired Hooper’s 1974 version, declared of Nispel’s remake, “there is not a shred of reason to see it” (2003, n.p.).

Editors’ Notes

1 The full text of “A Good Man is Hard to Find” is available here: http://xroads.virginia.edu/~drbr/goodman.html.

2 For reference to the scene, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d73XkPQPkiY.

3 An early version of the following essay was, in fact, presented in the Horror Area at the PCA/ACA National conference, which convened in April 2010 in St. Louis, Missouri. The session was entitled, “The Horror Canon Under Review.”

4 My gratitude also to Chelsea Korynta, who edited the first full draft of this essay with the kind of care and exactitude that Jeff would have appreciated.

5 This essay has been edited by Korynta, Dodson, and the MONSTRUM editors to maintain Jeff Jeske’s intended economical style and structure. We offer this note because Jeff did not have the opportunity to respond to slight revisions made to the text.

6 In fact, the façade of the terrible house in Nispel’s film more resembles that of the abandoned Franklin home, which is the teens’ ultimate intended destination in Hooper’s film.

7 The abandoned Franklin home also contains such portentous markings, particularly in several ominous figures seemingly constructed out of wood, bone, and feathers, and bearing
resemblance to similar artistic expressions in the furniture and décor of the Sawyer home where the teens meet their fate.

8 The remake builds itself literally around the original film’s opening scroll suggestion of a “true” crime scenario, which Hooper then abandons to create an atmosphere of mythical determinism and cosmic dread.

9 Not to mention the typecasting of R. Lee Ermey, forever associated with his sadistic drill sergeant character in Full Metal Jacket (Stanley Kubrick, 1987).

10 The same could be said for Sally, who shows similar resourcefulness.

11 Nispel’s film also misses the mark on any kind of productive mythical reading in terms of the female community it creates, an element absent in the original film. Nispel’s remake wastes this community in the film—that is, this is a film filled with alternatives to masculinity (a monstrous Mother, a community of misfits) that, like a number of the film’s subplots, go nowhere.

12 On the other hand, it reinforces in almost parodic fashion newer gender stereotypes in which women are promised they can “have it all,” in this case as an action hero and single mom.
References


Hooper, Tobe, dir. The Texas Chain Saw Massacre. 1974; Vortex.


