

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Regional Frames

*Forget the maze of state and provincial boundaries, those historical accidents and surveyors' mistakes. The reason no one except the trivia expert can name all fifty of the United States is that they hardly matter.*

Joel Garreau, *The Nine Nations of North America*

*I became stimulated by the idea of worlds within our world. And the world of cockfighters was right there for us in Georgia – we just stepped into the cock pits and started shooting.*

Monte Hellman

Ecocriticism, I have argued, can direct our attention to material matter in cinema, and can in the process help us rethink allegorical interpretations of New Hollywood films. Another way to complicate state-of-the-nation interpretations would be to read films such as these as being, in some way, sub-national. So, for example, *The Godfather* would be less about America and Europe, and more about New York and Sicily. And *Nashville* could be about the eponymous city, or Tennessee, or the American South. To some extent, this hermeneutic reframing is quite arbitrary and can be undertaken in response to any fiction. But, for reasons discussed below, it is an important ecocritical manoeuvre, and one that is especially appropriate for a number of New Hollywood films, which take on a new resonance and complexity when understood as regional fictions.

In one of the few attempts to address the question of what role region has played in popular American film, Peter Lev introduces three possible interpretations of regional cinema: the tendency to shoot Hollywood films on location,

---

the attempt to create an independent cinema rooted in particular regions, and the notion of region as a critical and interpretive tool (1986: 60).<sup>1</sup> The first of these will form a substantial part of the following chapter; the second has obvious limitations for a project focused on Hollywood; the third best describes how region will be understood, and utilized, in this chapter. And yet my argument also proceeds from the understanding not only that region exists as a socio-political construct or a hermeneutic tool, but that regions are also geographic, material areas. It will be argued in this chapter that these approaches (or positions) are not mutually exclusive, by moving from one to the other, showing how region-oriented interpretation and analysis can reveal ecocritical nuances and details throughout the films in question. I briefly discussed in Chapter One how *Chinatown* – widely acknowledged as a quintessential ‘Los Angeles Film’ – invites a regional interpretation; I now take the opportunity to develop this idea more fully, beyond *Chinatown*.

*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* depicts obscene and gruesome violence, and boldly makes the case that such violence is – rather than supernatural or demonic – the product of a particular time and place. *Cockfighter* also includes its fair share of transgressive behaviour, but frames its narrative in such a way that the transgressive becomes almost indistinguishable from the normative. As an interpretive approach, then, regionalism draws out quite different qualities in these two films, and also helps to clarify the ways in which the material environment retains a prominence and significance in both. But what will all this reveal about New Hollywood more broadly? It is fair to suggest that *Cockfighter* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* display many characteristics often associated with American film of the 1960s and 1970s – anti-heroism, cynicism, realism, generic playfulness, anti-authoritarianism, politicized violence, documentarist aesthetics, etc. And yet, unlike totems of 1970s American cinema, such as *Nashville* and *The Godfather*, these films sit somewhere on the periphery of New Hollywood, in terms of both their actual production circumstances (they were not produced by major studios) and their current standing; *Massacre* tends to be discussed mainly in relation to the horror genre, and *Cockfighter* has received almost no critical attention. Prioritizing films marginal to most studies of New Hollywood is, then, also meant as a reminder of regionalism’s potential to recalibrate some assumptions about American cinema – in this period and beyond.

## What is Ecocritical about Regionalism?

---

As part of a larger study examining New Hollywood ecocritically, a chapter proposing to interpret New Hollywood films in terms of regionalism brings with it the implication that regionalism is to some extent ecocritical. In many ways, the ecocritical application here is more straightforward than that carried out in the previous two chapters; certain conceptual leaps are required to think of materiality and genre critique as ecocritical, but less so regionalism. It is still necessary, however, to clarify how and why such a link is warranted. Wilbur Zelinsky declares that the existence of regions ‘is a large, truly significant fact in the human geography of this nation’ and that ‘Americans are spontaneously curious about the local peculiarities of their compatriots’ (1992: 109). Does the non-human world play an important role in this fact, and subsequently in this curiosity? What, in other words, is ecocritical about regionalism? To the extent that regionalism presupposes the importance of a spatial category broader than the domestic and urban, but narrower than the national, it is an issue of both human geography and artistic representation – and, of course, the study of both. These two strands of regionalism, the geographical and the representational, are closely intertwined, and no doubt mutually sustaining, as when regional myths and stories contribute to the resilience of regional identities. However, for the purposes of outlining what relevance ecocriticism has to regionalism, it helps to examine them separately. What relevance does ecology have to regional cultures; and what relevance does it have to regional aesthetics?

In *Regions and Regionalism in the United States* (1988), Michael Bradshaw examines the region as a complex phenomenon combining economic, political and environmental concerns, but ultimately implies that ecological conditions are the crucial foundation for regional identities. Regional boundaries often correspond with natural features, and even if this perpetuates a false sense of permanence, it provides a kind of earthbound legitimacy not always available to national or even state-focused rhetoric. The distinction between artificial states and other, more ‘natural’ borders may be spurious; as Bradshaw points out (1988: 28), important environmental policies in the USA are often carried out at state level (in this way naturalizing state boundaries). But the point remains intact; ecological features play a vital role in people’s negotiation of a sub-national identity. A slightly different tack is taken by Richard Nostrand and Lawrence Estaville in their edited collection *Homelands* (2001). Introduced as an alternative to the pervasive use of

---

Frederick Jackson Turner's 'frontier thesis' in discussions of American historical geography, the concept of 'homeland' emphasizes the strong influence of specific immigrant cultures. One chapter, for example, details how East Anglian architectural norms were gradually adapted to suit the New England climate during the consolidation of a Yankee homeland (Bowden 2001: 12). From this perspective, the vitality of sub-national identities in the United States is traceable to the encounters between various immigrant groupings and the natural conditions they faced upon arrival. To narrow the frame from national to regional, to move from a theory of broad frontierism to homeland pluralism, requires a heightened sensitivity to individual environments.

Turner's thesis, while responsive to environmental conditions (especially when homing in on particular areas of the country), operates with such broad strokes that their influence is minimized, as when he declares that 'the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe' ([1921] 2008: 4). Wilbur Zelinsky (1992), discussing regional variations in American agriculture and operating within a less 'top-down' model of cultural geography, notes how European farming methods transferred more smoothly onto the environment of northeastern states than that of the American South. Cotton and tobacco plantations, he argues, represented a doomed attempt to perpetuate cultural norms in spite of ecological conditions; into the twentieth century, the southern industry continually suffered the effects of 'a synthetic technology wilfully imposed by men who [were] still not psychologically at home in the region' (1992: 61). Whatever the merits or otherwise of these particular arguments, the focus on sub-national areas and cultures seems to necessitate a degree of environmental interpretation. Regional geography, however political, has vital ecological constituents.

What of regionalism as an expressive, representational, aesthetic consideration? Nina Baym, a specialist in the literature of New England, notes that 'writing about nature has always seemed a particularly national rather than regional undertaking, even though (obviously) nature writing must be local if it does its job of accurately representing natural phenomena' (2004: 300). And, in a logical progression which is particularly significant for the present study, Baym asserts that 'regionalism, insofar as it locates people firmly on the terrain they inhabit, cannot be other than a form of environmental writing' (2004: 300). Of course, ecocriticism is not solely interested in accurate representations of nature, but the gist of Baym's argument is hard to refute; the regional frame, in art as in geography

and history, lends itself more readily to environmentality than the national. The same argument is made in an influential essay by one of the central authors in the North American regional canon, Mary Austin: 'Art, considered as the expression of any people as a whole, is the response they make in various mediums to the impact that the totality of their experience makes upon them, and there is no sort of experience that works so constantly and subtly upon man as his regional environment' (1932: 97). Critiquing the attempts of writers, especially Sinclair Lewis, to tell stories of broad national applicability, Austin laments what she describes as the 'excursion of the American novelist away from the soil' (1932: 102). The title of one of Mary Austin's most famous books, *The Land of Little Rain*, is telling. 'Land' is deliberately denied its interchangeability with 'country' or 'nation' and is used instead to describe a locale defined by ecological conditions.

Moving towards New Hollywood, it is perhaps important to recall that regionalism in American literature, although normally associated with nineteenth-century writing and the rather reductive notion of 'local colour', continued to exert a strong influence throughout the twentieth century. Willa Cather, William Faulkner and Cormac McCarthy all achieved considerable prominence by developing this tradition and the list need not be confined to non-urban settings. Walter Wells (1973) has interpreted Hollywood fiction of the 1930s – novels such as James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), Nathaniel West's *Day of the Locust* (1939) and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Love of the Last Tycoon* (1941) – from a regional perspective, and the qualities he uses to define the place in question are indeed not reducible to the city of Los Angeles. They include 'a geophysical immensity and an unparalleled variety of landscape; a societal newness and a lack of history save for a relatively recent frontier and agrarian past'; 'a static and languorous subtropical climate'; and 'a sprawling stucco and neon landscape set precariously in a land of drought, flood and earthquake' (Wells 1973: 10). (A number of the novels singled out by Wells were, significantly, adapted into New Hollywood features.) A more direct inheritor of the Mary Austin tradition, albeit with a countercultural twist, was Edward Abbey. His novel of eco-inspired sabotage, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), makes a direct connection between anti-governmental sentiment and regional preservation. The two main members of the eponymous gang (one a disillusioned war veteran) are bitterly angry about the industrial despoilment of their beloved southwest, and the novel's general dynamic of heroic topophilia and intimate local knowledge versus faceless corporate authority shares distinct similarities with the New Hollywood fugitive film – right down to the principled

---

distrust of helicopters. *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, published in the twilight of the New Hollywood period, gives a vivid sense of how certain principles and priorities of this generation were conducive to regional thinking.

As I have introduced it here, regionalism – whether regarded in reference to a geographical area or an artistic creation – is bound up with considerations of environment and ecology. Not only does the very use of region as a structuring spatial frame imply (and demand) an intensified awareness of environmental conditions, but America’s rich tradition of regional writing is invariably sympathetic to the importance of natural features, and may – as Nina Baym suggests – even be deemed *automatically* environmental. In recent years, this position has received an increasing amount of critical scrutiny. Ursula K. Heise’s *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008) carefully dismantles the grounds upon which localism has been understood as ‘more ecological’. Concerned that such an assumption represents a failure to respond to the challenges of modernity, Heise argues that environmentalist discourse should become more self-critical with regard to its ‘persistent utopian reinvestment in the local’ (2008: 28). Such discourse, the argument goes, represents something of a hangover from ‘green’ political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and as such is hampered by a confusing and contradictory marriage between faintly Marxist materialist analysis and New Age-inspired spirituality. Heise also makes a convincing case that subsequent debates in anthropology and philosophy (not to mention ecology) have yielded a number of insights which could prove very useful in rectifying this prejudice – Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s writings on (de- and re-)territorialization are a case in point, and Heise also notes Arjun Appadurai’s thoughts on the production of locality, which will be discussed later in this chapter. In short, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* mounts a comprehensive critique of the idea, raised early on in this chapter and sustained, implicitly, throughout, that local and regional frames have an inherent and automatic call on our ecocritical attention.

But the regional–natural paradigm, however pervasive it may seem in literary and environmental discourse, has rarely been adapted to discussion of popular American cinema. Ecological progressiveness, Heise’s ultimate concern, is a slightly different question, and one which casts the region–ecology interplay in a more problematic light. Timothy Morton is another advocate of this move away from localism and regionalism as default frameworks for ecocriticism, urging instead that ‘the best environmental thinking is thinking big – as big as possible, and maybe bigger than that’ (2010: 20). In this vein, both Heise and Morton

make convincing arguments about the exciting ecocritical potential of reclaiming notions of cosmopolitanism and globalism. And yet, looking back to American cinema of the 1960s and 1970s – the very period which Heise identifies as that in which ideas about locality and ecology became so deeply enmeshed – it is important to keep in play the values and assumptions which seem to have informed their vision. In other words, the contention that regionalism's ecological credentials are culturally and historically determined is an important warning for the field of ecocriticism at large, but it need not deter study of those themes and their manifestations in art and literature. That some New Hollywood films operated as regional works is a feature that warrants ecocritical attention, irrespective of concerns about the ecological validity of localism in the twenty-first century.

### **Region as an Undervalued Notion in American Cinema**

---

'I like to think that a giant vacuum in American film production is slowly being filled [...] The vacuum I refer to is the absence of regionally inspired and regionally produced film work' (Spears 2008: 223). Ross Spears is here referring to the work of the James Agee Film Project, which was established in 1974, and which aimed (in part) to nurture a 'sense of place' in American filmmaking beyond New York and Los Angeles. It is interesting to consider that such a project gained momentum in the early 1970s, and one could reasonably speculate that the vacuum identified by Spears was just as apparent to many other young and ambitious filmmakers, both within and beyond Hollywood. However, the focus here will not so much be on the production circumstances of filmmaking, but rather the challenge of *responding* to films as regional creations as opposed to national or even worldly fictions (as is often the case with American cinema).

When watching films, a crucial part of the interpretative process is to negotiate an idea about where the action, or inaction, is taking place. Immediate locales may be obvious – a school, a tavern, a train, a rowing boat – but to stretch much further beyond this 'zone' is to enter what Deborah Thomas calls a 'sliding scale of generality' (2001: 9). Does *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) take place on the eponymous street, or in Los Angeles County, or in North America? The question is, of course, not unique to cinema; Wallace Stevens begins one of his most famous poems ('Anecdote of the Jar') with the line, 'I placed a jar in Tennessee', and it is a poem which goes on to satirize humankind's (or Americans', or perhaps

---

poets') penchant for thinking that geography surrounds and complements our actions. But the question is perhaps especially vexed in cinema, because the content of the text will invariably be intensely localized (even an extreme long shot might only 'cover' one or two acres); we are obliged to develop a sense of wider framing beyond the camera's, a frame without which virtually no narrative cinema would make sense. The critic Manny Farber describes 'the area of experience and geography that a film covers' ([1971] 1998: 3) as 'negative space'; as he explains, 'the command of experience which an artist can set resonating within a film [...] is a sense of terrain created partly by the audience's imagination and partly by camera-actors-director' ([1971] 1998: 9). In film studies, the language used to describe and interpret a film plays an important role in this negotiation, constantly locating the action of films somewhere on Thomas's sliding scale.

Studies of American cinema, I suggest, have generally overlooked region as a possible category of wider framing, and have often reached for other scales of contextualization: the home, for example, or the city, or (especially) America. Some writers (Shiel 2001; Webber and Wilson 2008) have argued for cinema's status as an inherently, almost automatically urban form, and the historical significance of cinema's rise alongside American urbanization is undeniable. Likewise, there is ample reason to sympathize with Leonard Quart and Albert Auster's claim that Hollywood films 'reveal something of the dreams, desires, displacements, and, in some cases, social and political issues confronting American society' (1991: 2). The urban and the national are two of the most exhaustively referenced spatial frames in studies of American cinema. As I argue for the usefulness of a new frame, however, I will instead critique a particular tendency (most visible in aesthetic analyses of classical Hollywood cinema) to opt for 'world' as an appropriate theatre of reference, and will do so for two reasons. Firstly, to collapse the ideas of resonance and world into one another so readily is problematic from an eco-critical perspective; it proceeds from an unambiguously anthropocentric starting point, implying that the world exists to the extent that humans perceive it to. Secondly, to better appreciate the spatial invocations of classical Hollywood can only enhance our understanding of the shift (if any) signalled by the rupturing of that mode, in the shape of New Hollywood.

Possibly the most sustained exposition of the film-fiction-as-world approach is the essay 'Where is the World? The Horizon of Events in Movie Fiction', in which V.F. Perkins sets out 'both to show that the fictional world of a movie is indeed a world, and [...] to sketch some of the ways in which it matters that a



fictional world is a world' (2005: 17). Perkins argues for a better appreciation of what lies beyond a frame (both spatially and temporally), what he calls a film's 'worldhood', and makes a convincing case for the importance of this appreciation in any comprehensive analysis of narrative and style. What is not clear, however, is why 'world' stands as the most appropriate perimeter of significance. Of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), Perkins writes: 'Of course this is our world. It shares our economy, our technologies, our architecture, and the legal systems and social forms that yield complex phenomena like slum landlords, divorce scandals and fame. Its history is our history of wars and slumps and the rise of mass media' (2005: 19). In an essay generally characterized by acute attention to descriptive precision, this passage contains certain questionable leaps and assumptions, at least from the perspective of this study. Are legal systems and architecture best understood as *worldly* details? Do they not resonate more meaningfully in other frames of reference, such as federal or urban or Christian? It is perhaps disingenuous to interpret Perkins so literally, and ignore the fact that his choice of terminology is used to emphasize as fully as possible the vital importance of attending to the web of implications and inferences which stretch beyond a film's immediate frame. But it is also important to remember that, at one point or another, that web becomes so threadbare as to become unhelpful or even meaningless. 'To be in a world', writes Perkins, 'is to know the partiality of knowledge and the boundedness of vision – to be aware that there is always a bigger picture' (2005: 20). But do all films point to a picture of the same, worldly size?

A number of writers sympathetic to Perkins's mode of analysis adopt a similar approach. James Walters, in *Alternative Worlds in Hollywood Cinema* (2008), proceeds from the understanding that 'world' is a vital structuring concept. He explicitly endorses Perkins's essay and its forensic attention to the ways in which a film's on-screen fiction constantly interacts with off-screen, implicit currents. However, like Perkins, he does not entirely explain the particular usefulness of 'world' as a descriptor for this, or its advantage over alternatives. Instead, he selects frames and contexts which are appropriate for his case studies. 'In *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968),' writes Walters, 'it is particularly important that the phone booth scene takes place within the city, where methods and communication and travel are different from those found in a desert, or in a forest' (2008: 23). Like Perkins's comments on *Citizen Kane* (quoted above), Walters's analysis itself concedes the need to sub-categorize, to establish a frame

---

which is narrow enough to be meaningful and constructive (a city) but broad enough to give full credit to the drama's resonance (a whole city).

Deborah Thomas, quoted above, deftly juggles a variety of spatial concepts, and – like Perkins and Walters – urges readers to be mindful of the meaningful potential of geographical settings and how viewers are invited to see and know those settings. In her analysis of *My Darling Clementine* (John Ford, 1946), Thomas investigates the significance of various geographical markers (the church, the frontier, East and West etc.), generally preferring these to 'world' as useful reading tools. It is perhaps significant that she invokes 'world' most consistently when turning to questions of diegesis and ontology. 'A film's diegesis is the narrative world and all that happens within it' (2001: 97), Thomas explains. Concluding her sub-chapter 'Diegetic and Non-Diegetic' she develops this idea of 'world' as a phenomenon of film spectatorship, rather than (as in Perkins and Walters) narrative richness:

*Because we are located at the outer layer of the overall structure, physically grounded in the non-diegetic world and looking in, we have a much greater awareness than the characters can ever have, embedded as they are in a world which makes them largely blind to our own world outside it and only occasionally and dimly aware of their fixture in a larger structure. (Thomas 2001: 108)*

This passage closely resembles the concerns of Stanley Cavell, a writer explicitly invoked by both Walters and Thomas, and an acknowledged influence on Perkins too. In his first book about cinema, *The World Viewed* ([1971] 1979), Cavell mounts a philosophical investigation of the medium, and continually reaches for the term 'world' (the book's epigraph is taken from Thoreau: 'Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world?'), but essentially with the aim of considering questions of ontology, rather than questions of narrative and setting. 'How do movies reproduce the world magically? Not by literally presenting us with the world, but by permitting us to view it unseen [...]. The explanation is not so much that the world is passing us by, as that we are displaced from our natural habitation within it' (Cavell [1971] 1979: 40–41). It is a mistake, I believe, to take from these ontological insights the lesson that film narratives are always most fruitfully understood as happening first and foremost in a, or the, world. As a synonym (however imprecise) for a kind of totalized reality, 'world' does help us towards a better understanding of the philosophical and aesthetic strangeness of

film spectatorship. But approaching film from an ecocritical point of view troubles this key term and obliges us to think especially carefully about its appropriate positioning in discussion of a film's environmentalty.

My concern here can be most clearly illustrated in contrast to Adrian Ivakhiv's writing on 'the geomorphology of the visible' in his book *Ecologies of the Moving Image* (2013). As already mentioned, this is a rich and generous book, and perhaps the most far-reaching and abundantly imaginative work on cinema and ecology that has yet been published. Because it is a very carefully structured account of cinema's process-relational capacities, we must hesitate before critiquing its passages out of context. That said, Ivakhiv's chapter on territorialization seems to be broadly summative of his overall approach, which sees cinema as a medium of three simultaneous ecologies (the material, the social and the perceptual); turning to the 'where' of film texts, Ivakhiv is too careful to use terms such as 'setting' or 'backdrop' in an all-encompassing way, and instead describes cinematic geography as 'the *given* against which, or in front of which, actions take place' (2013: 70, emphasis in the original). The rub, as I see it, comes when each film's distinctive relationship to its environment, its physical 'given', is characterized as world-creation – and the attendant implication that the 'weaving together' of images and sounds is enough to constitute a world:

*Through a perceptual dramatization of space, enacted by action-dramatic relationships such as the shot-reverse shot, the cutaway to something that is being viewed by a character, and other classical film techniques, filmed space takes on a naturalness that feels not fragmented but normal. Film thereby takes pieces of world and fuses them into a synthesis, a newly produced world. (Ivakhiv 2013: 75)*

There is a valuable reminder here that narrative cinema invariably overcomes its inherent discontinuities not simply because certain norms have been industrialized and globalized, but because those norms are of a piece with our strategies for comprehending the real world. But the leap between something 'feeling natural' and qualifying as a 'newly produced world' is a significant and problematic one; it seems to overstate the 'visuality' of the world (filmed space certainly doesn't 'feel real' in terms of touch or smell) and understate the futility that cinema so often invokes. There are crucial features of being in the world, including decisions about movement and attention, that cinema spectatorship cannot grant

---

us (Cavell's description of cinema as granting us presence to something that has passed is pertinent here ([1971] 1979: 26)). Recognizing the capacity of film to develop complex and illuminating responses to the world is a project shared by writers across ecocritical film studies; whether to draw an absolute distinction between a 'film world' and *the* world is an ongoing debate, to which it is hoped this discussion of New Hollywood will contribute.

Of course, engaging in this debate by way of a particular historical period changes its terms. In other words, it may be acknowledged that the worldly frame is to some extent embedded in classical Hollywood (the main point of reference for Cavell, Perkins and Thomas) but should not be seen as natural or inevitable throughout Hollywood, and film, history. (Another valuable feature of Ivakhiv's theorizing is his keenness to adapt the model to different film-historical contexts.) From this perspective, it is telling to return to Mary Austin's thoughts on the virtues of region-based art and literature, and note the terms on which she critiques the work of Sinclair Lewis. Novels such as *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922), Austin complains, constitute a 'broad, thin, generalized surface reflection of the American community and American character' and join a trend of 'fiction shallow enough to be common to all regions, so that no special knowledge of other environments than one's own is necessary to appreciation of it' (1932: 99). The all-embracing aesthetic she finds and regrets in Lewis bears more than a passing resemblance to that which so many commentators (and audiences) appreciate in classical Hollywood. The buoyant universalism of Frank Capra is perhaps the most vivid example, but the films of Howard Hawks, William Wyler, Vincente Minnelli, Douglas Sirk and Preston Sturges (for example) are shot through with what Austin describes as the 'deliberate choice of the most usual, the most widely distributed of American story incidents' (1932: 101). If, then, regionalism was somehow anathema to the design and success of classical Hollywood, the question arises: what role did it play in the dissolution or redefinition of that model? Was New Hollywood attuned more to lands of little rain than to main streets?

### ***Nashville* and Critical Regionalism**

Before turning to this chapter's main case studies, it is perhaps useful to return briefly to a film sequence already discussed in some detail, the final scene of

*Nashville*, and suggest some ways in which it can be interpreted as regional. This will act as an important reminder that the premise (and findings) of this discussion are relevant to the broader scope of New Hollywood cinema, and not only the two films analysed in detail here. How, then, would the climax of *Nashville* look in a regionalist reading?

The geographical specificity in the film's title is one clue; often interpreted as a metonym for the nation, Nashville could also be interpreted as a victim of it, as local people become unwitting puppets of a national presidential campaign. We never see candidate Hal Phillip Walker (only his duplicitous assistant, John Triplette), but the film essentially details the ripples of local consequence which arise from his visit. In many ways, the national and the local are antagonists in *Nashville*; when Barnett (Allen Garfield) erupts in anger at the prospect of his wife performing in front of political banners, he is anxious about letting her be used for a broader purpose in which neither he, she nor any of her true fans have a proper stake. Immediately after the shooting, Haven Hamilton (Henry Gibson) addresses the crowd with desperate defiance: 'This ain't Dallas, it's Nashville. You show 'em what we're made of. They can't do this to us here in Nashville'. The reference to the assassination of John F. Kennedy of course invites us to interpret events through a national frame, but it simultaneously challenges us to think beneath the national. Hamilton's instinct is to characterize the shooting *not* as sadly typical of his country (perhaps the most common critical interpretation of *Nashville*), but as an alien phenomenon, more characteristic of a distant community and culture. Altman's film can thus be thought of as performing the role that Stephanie Foote associates with regional writing: 'representing non-normative communities or cultures to a national audience' (2001: 30), Nashville acting not as a symbol or a microcosm, but as a distinctive subset.

An obvious and important objection could be raised at this point: Nashville is a city, not a region. This is certainly true, but *Nashville* bears such little resemblance to conventional depictions of urban space in American cinema that it invites us to bring a different spatial perspective to bear upon it. The almost total absence of the pedestrian experience, for example, precludes the bustle, sensory variety and dynamism we associate with the city in film, from *Sunrise* (F.W. Murnau, 1927) to *Lost in Translation* (Sofia Coppola, 2003). The characters arrive by aeroplane and are then dispersed across various spaces whose proximity it is almost impossible to determine. In this respect, the film is in some sense the polar opposite of *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954), a quintessentially urban text.

---

Numerous scenes, such as the funeral of Martha's aunt and Haven Hamilton's party, take place in settings which appear to be beyond the city, but no reference is made to their whereabouts. In many city-based films, when characters leave their native environment to spend time in suburban or rural surroundings, the shift is pronounced and profound (*Sunrise* again stands as a prime example). Equivalent movements in *Nashville* barely register; if the film's spatial frame is narrower than national, it also appears to be broader than urban.

In suggesting the relevance of regionalism to *Nashville*, I am broadly following the model developed by Douglas Reichert Powell in his book *Critical Regionalism* (2007). An attempt to resist the nostalgic, reactionary and anti-modern lapses to which regionalism is sometimes prone (in politics as well as art and literature), critical regionalism looks to embrace the importance of region as a relational concept: a spatial category which does not bring with it the 'juridical, insulating force' of other divisions (2007: 4). Powell is keen to distinguish regionalism from parochialism and the ahistoricism of shallow localism, and also to counter the idea that 'life outside the cosmopolis is inert, unchanging' (2007: 13). Critical regionalism comes into its own, Powell explains, 'where something unique and isolated seems to be going on, but something else – something complex and interconnected – is also happening' (2007: 18). This is a deliberately basic formulation, and is no doubt applicable in one way or another to any number of accomplished Hollywood films. But I would maintain that it answers to the challenges of *Nashville* especially well, and to the conundrum offered by that film on the question of scale. Critical regionalism encourages us to stay simultaneously aware of local particularity (the intensified significance of country music, say) and broader cultural currents (such as acute generational schisms) – and *Nashville* warrants just such a reading.

*Critical Regionalism* contains a chapter on cinema, the main element of which is an appraisal of *Fargo* (Joel Coen, 1996) which lauds the film's ability to depict aberrant violence as resulting from complex material and economic conditions, rather than the inherent perverseness of regional cultures. Films such as *Deliverance* and *Cape Fear* (Martin Scorsese, 1991) are, according to Powell, guilty of depicting regional environments as stagnant and uncivilized, threatening because of their terminal disconnectedness from broader flows of exchange. In them, 'travellers enter a timeless space, where the landscape and its inhabitants are seen through the eyes of the travellers and understood in terms of their vocabulary of cultural meanings and interpretations, juxtaposing a cosmopolitan, mobile sensibility with

its apparent, isolate opposite' (2007: 106). In contrast, *Fargo* 'encourages people to see local problems and priorities enmeshed in broader patterns of history, politics and culture' (2007: 143). The following analysis of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *Cockfighter* will draw on two recurrent themes in Powell's argument, each of which relates particularly well to one case study: the ability of some films to locate regional people and communities within broader historical and material conditions, and tropes of illiteracy, silence and muteness as (problematic) signifiers of regional otherness. Neither of these approaches focuses directly on depictions of environmental conditions, but in their scope and frame of reference, they cannot help but lean towards the ecocritical.

### **A Regional Chain Saw Massacre**

---

To what extent can *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* be considered as a pastoral nightmare? Innocent and naïve young people venture into rural Texas, apparently on little more than a whim, and are brutally murdered by a family of cannibals. (In what is perhaps a vital point of distinction, these youngsters are much less willing than their equivalents in the fugitive film to adapt to new conditions.) Not only does the film's narrative deliberately manipulate certain pastoral conventions – the implicit nostalgia, the romanticization of rural labour – but *Massacre* is also punctuated by beautiful images of the natural environment, in which the blazing sunlight invariably plays its part. However, if pastoralism is often criticized for offering up a saccharine take on non-urban life, drained of historical or political urge, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* does quite the opposite. Here, images and events establish connections and correlations between natural resources, industrial capitalism, violence and landscape – and although the logic of these is never clear enough to constitute anything like a theory or argument, we are nevertheless left in no doubt about the deep interconnectedness of nature, industry and horror. The oblique environmentalism of this film has already attracted study and comment; in particular Carter Soles's 'Sympathy for the Devil' demonstrates how the 'crushing eco-paranoia' (2013: 235) of early-1970s America found a gruesome and affecting expression in the 'New Horror' of Hooper, Romero, Craven and others. As will become clear, my reading of Hooper's film is broadly supportive of, and supported by, Soles's account. But once again I am reluctant interpret a film's environmentality in terms of its rhetoric register; the question most pertinent

---

to my exploration of New Hollywood is not whether *Massacre's* themes cross paths with environmentalist politics, but rather the extent to which its extraordinary effects are somehow dependent on its unusually particularized 'negative space'. To watch *Massacre* as a regional film is to appreciate not only the profound importance of the non-human elements, but that those elements are embedded in the social and political realities of a time and, more specifically, a place.

Critical of the way in which *Deliverance* reduces Appalachian people to extensions of the landscape, Douglas Reichert Powell similarly finds fault with *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) for venturing too far in the other direction; for locating violence in 'a self-contained world with its own internally consistent rules and regulations' (2007: 127). If the riverbanks in *Deliverance* are too determinative, *Pulp Fiction* instead presents an environment which is more or less impotent, offering as it does 'a kind of mythopoetic rendering of Los Angeles with scant connections to any material place' (2007: 129). Part of this rests on the way in which violence is rendered apolitical and ahistorical, and 'supernatural trappings mystify for the viewer the relationship of the film's violence to social conflicts in the places they inhabit, by making violence a cosmological occurrence rather than the local manifestation of broader cultural crises' (2007: 128). At first glance, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* may seem to repeat the sins (as Powell characterizes them) of both films; as in *Deliverance*, terrible violence is inflicted by rural locals on cosmopolitan visitors, and as in *Pulp Fiction*, there is the suggestion of cosmological (or at least astrological) fate. This premise – of a gruesome crime in a deserted rural outpost – is not one which seems to hold out much hope for the kind of nuanced and thoughtful probing of extra-urban places for which Powell argues. But, as I will suggest, there is also much in the film which 'grounds' it both historically and geographically, and in this sense the seemingly inexplicable crimes become, as the film's title suggests, Texan.

Texas, of course, is a political entity, and thus threatens to compromise the notion of region as an ecologically, materially defined area. It is important to point out at this early stage, then, that many of the Texas 'signposts' in the film – the wildlife, the climate, the agriculture, the natural resources – lean more towards the ecological than the cultural and political. (Peter Lev (1986: 60–62) has spelt out his own reasons for interpreting Texas films as regional films.) I will begin by tracing such signposts throughout *Massacre*, arguing that the regional specificity is vital to the film's richness. I will then discuss its historicity, a quality which Powell finds so lacking in *Deliverance* and *Pulp Fiction*, and which stands as an



important factor in distinguishing *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* as a peculiarly insightful, even sensitive, regional film.

### *The Texan Terrain*

Accompanying a close-up on, and gradual zoom out from, a carefully arranged rotting corpse, radio reports provide the film's only real exposition in the opening moments of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*: 'Grave robbing in Texas is this hour's top news story'. Some details are offered up about the scale and strange execution of the crimes, but all that the Sheriff is willing to reveal is that he does 'have evidence linking the crime to elements outside the state'. As in another key horror film from the period, *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968) – throughout which radio and television reports provide updates on the gruesome crime wave enveloping 'the Eastern third of this nation' – the geography matters. The fact that, in *Massacre*, 'area residents' gather at the cemeteries to discover whether their loved ones have been abused only deepens the sense of locality, situating the crime and its aftermath at a communal site. The radio news continues over the opening credits, and although the second story has, unlike the first, no direct bearing on the narrative, neither is it an arbitrary topic: 'Oil storage units continue to burn out of control at the huge Texaco refinery near the Texas–Louisiana border'. If there was any doubt as to the importance of this film's regional setting, the immediate prominence given to oil (just as the film's title appears on screen) dispels it.

In 'The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s' (2003), Robin Wood identifies something of a geographical pattern in American horror films, whereby villains and monsters, traditionally conceived of as foreign (invariably European), begin to be depicted as products of America itself (2003: 77). He suggests that *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) was a crucial turning point in this phenomenon, but – despite the obvious influence of Hitchcock's film on Hooper's – the regional specificity evident in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* seems to represent its own development or intensification, as if the 'home' that horror came back to during this period might not just be thought of in national terms, but as something more localized. Although, in *Psycho*, Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) ventures into somewhat unfamiliar territory, her journey provides nothing like the environmental shock experienced by the teenagers traversing rural Texas. Following Wood, Marion's experience of growing tired and bored on a long dual carriageway, and

---

her early exchanges in the Bates Motel, could be understood as just the kind of ‘American story incidents’ which Mary Austin found so wanting from a regional (and proto-ecocritical) perspective. In *Massacre*, we once again see the film’s protagonist(s) grow uncomfortable whilst travelling through unfamiliar terrain, but the nature of this discomfort is quite particular. The friends, and especially Franklin, are obviously affected by the stifling heat, and this poses a particular problem when they drive past a slaughterhouse and become physically sick from the stench, forcing them to wind up the van windows.<sup>2</sup> Their squeamishness towards these unfamiliar conditions – local climate and local industry – takes an ironic twist moments later, when they decide to pick up a hitchhiker (despite protests about him smelling like the slaughterhouse) because they worry that he will be suffering in the heat. It is, of course, a fateful decision, and the teenagers’ initial revulsion toward the Texan environment has continuing echoes throughout the film, when the awful violence inflicted upon them continues to be intertwined with the specifics of place.

Central to this is the role of both oil and agriculture in the fate of the youngsters; it is their reliance on fuel, for example, which leaves them susceptible to the murderous family, and that family’s brutal techniques are explained as being the fruits of their agricultural training. The implications of this (which a number of other commentators have remarked on) will be discussed in slightly more detail below, when situating the film in more of an historical context. At this stage, it is useful to consider how the film’s drama is also dependent on quite basic, essential ‘qualities’ of Texas. The intense heat and bright sunlight, for



**Figure 4.1** Revolting surroundings: *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Vortex)

example, surely make the exposed corpses and DIY abattoir *even more* gruesome prospects.<sup>3</sup> There is, also, the famous sparseness of the region; the sense (and fact) of considerable distances between points and centres. *The Last Picture Show* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1971) draws on just this aspect of Texas to generate an acute pathos; it is as if in a place as vast as Texas, small towns such as those depicted in the film are liable to be forgotten, and their inhabitants with them. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* performs a comparable manoeuvre, only pathos is replaced with fear and terror.

Nowhere is this clearer than at the film's climax, when Sally (Marilyn Burns), having been imprisoned and tortured for a whole night, eventually manages to scramble to a window and launch herself through it. Writing in *Film Comment* a few years after the film's release, Roger Greenspun described the moment thus:

*Possibly the most startling image of the movie is the sight of the morning daylight after Sally hurls herself out of the window of the modest dining room that was to have been her death chamber. You had forgotten the dawn, and to rediscover it is again to be confronted, almost against your will, with larger necessities than those governing the madman with his chainsaw. (1977: 16)*

The move from what seemed like terminal darkness to a hazy morning light at first seems to underscore the ecstatic relief of Sally's escape. (It also 'answers' an earlier moment when, taking refuge in the petrol station, Sally stares through the door out towards pitch blackness, and realizes the true extent of her hopelessness.) But this is soon undone by a series of long shots, positioning Sally – now essentially disabled by the abuse she has suffered – as a small and feeble figure with virtually no hope of running to safety, no chance of reaching anywhere out of the range of her tormentors. In the end, of course, she does manage to escape, but the absurd happenstance of her rescue (a man miraculously drives past at just the right moment and bravely battles Leatherface, Sally's tormentor) only confirms quite how desolate her situation was. Sally is saved in spite of, not because of, where she is.

Rick Worland (2007) begins his analysis of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* by considering the richness of its title, noting that exploitation films, in lieu of stars and promotional budget, would have to work particularly hard to invest their titles with drama. He points to the inherent intrigue of a common tool (the chain saw) being commandeered for horrific ends, and to the inescapable Vietnam

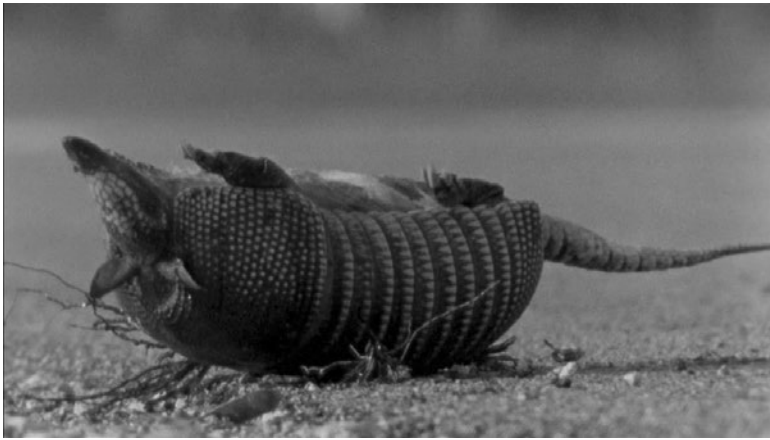
---

connotations of ‘massacre’. But Worland is most interested in the significance of ‘Texas’:

*Texas in the American imagination meant the rural South with its tragic dynamics of race and class; but it also symbolized the West itself, with all the accumulated cultural mythology from cattle drives and Indian fighting to the Alamo. Throughout the Vietnam era, many Westerns inverted the genre’s prior assumptions with the frontier disappearing under the advance of modernity, and violent struggle often bringing only fruitless carnage rather than a promise of individual and social renewal. It would have been extraordinary indeed if frontier motifs referenced even indirectly in a horror film at this point had done anything other than continue those revisionist trends with still bleaker irony and violence. (2007: 211)*

In many ways, Worland’s analysis complements an interpretation of the film as a fiction whose regional basis is hugely significant, and he even establishes connections between this and the distorting impact of the Vietnam war on generic syntax, as has been discussed in Chapter Three. But there are also suggestions in this passage that *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* broaches Texas primarily as a symbol or idea (Worland goes on to talk about the cattle business as a ‘motif’). It is a convincing analysis, but one that an ecocritical approach is obliged to critique, or at least adjust, concerned as it is with the danger of doing away too quickly with the material referent.

As an example of this revised approach, I will turn to an establishing shot which appears early on in the film, immediately following the prologue described above. It is a close-up of an upturned armadillo, lying dead on a road – presumably the same stretch of road on which the young friends park their van moments later. The shot lasts almost twenty seconds, which, considering the absence of any ‘helpful’ or orienting information from the soundtrack (instead the barely audible radio reports from the prologue bleed over into this sequence), is a considerable duration. Because of this, although we might initially see the armadillo as a kind of Texas indicator, equivalent to red London buses or Australian koala bears, the opportunity is presented for us to rethink its role or its meaning. As in *Nashville*, where a lingering close-up on the US flag seemed to bolster its material independence and counter its iconographic potential, this moment seems to lead us in a particularizing direction; the time allocated to the shot allows us to



**Figure 4.2** More than a Texas indicator: *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Vortex)

consider the armadillo as more than a trope. We have, for example, the opportunity to notice that it lies dead, and therefore has presumably been killed, on a busy road; the prolonged stillness of the camera (and the armadillo) makes it possible to notice the movement of small insects feasting on the corpse; the deliberate framing sets the groundwork for a clever graphic match in the following cut, which draws (ominous) parallels between the hard-shelled animal and the metallic van, from which the main characters shortly emerge.

Why do such implications have any bearing on the question of *Massacre* as an ecocritically regional film? Because they spring from an establishing shot which is simultaneously concerned with locating the narrative in a particular environment *and* ensuring that such an environment is far more than a setting. We are prompted to see an armadillo, rather than ‘an armadillo’; to ponder the circumstances of its death (presumably traceable to oil-guzzling trucks) and its fate as a corpse – and even to transpose these concerns over to the doomed characters we see soon afterwards. To this extent, it would not be too outlandish to declare this close-up establishing shot as critically regionalist. And it is important to note there are a number of other moments in *Massacre* which operate in similar ways, including lingering shots of the setting sun and a windmill, both of which hover between being signs and material contributors to the environmental conditions of the story. To better appreciate the way in which such moments draw not only on an environment but a *significantly historicized* environment, it helps to locate *Massacre* in some environmental historical context.

### *An Unsettling Time*

Just a few years after the release of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and in the same year as *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven, 1977), the poet and farmer Wendell Berry published *The Unsettling of America*. It is a haunting title, but rather than narrate the exploits of crazed cannibals, it details the decline and fall of American agriculture. Berry's central claim is that the industrialization of farming (and the accompanying rise of specialization) has had a profoundly detrimental effect on American society, 'a disaster that is both agricultural and cultural: the generalization of the relationship between people and land' ([1977] 1996: 33). Describing the unhappiness of the average American citizen in the 1970s, Berry talks of how 'from morning to night he does not touch anything that he has produced himself' ([1977] 1996: 20) and ultimately begins to understand locality less as homeland or dwelling place than as backdrop; a separate entity from one's life and livelihood.

Berry's is a familiar critique of industrial capitalism, and one which clearly chimes with *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, in which skilled slaughterhouse workers are superseded by technological advances. But is it sensitive enough to the specifics of the film to interpret this, as does Robin Wood, as an attack on capitalism per se (2003: 82–84)? Is this not another form of the generalization against which Berry (not to mention, in another context, Mary Austin) argues? In his appraisal of *Fargo* as a critically regionalist film, Powell observes that the character of Gaear, the uncommunicative kidnapper, is a redundant lumberjack whose skills have been perversely redirected to the (criminal) service economy (2007: 139). The violence he unleashes is not as spectacular as that dealt out by Leatherface, but it springs from the same well. Details such as this perhaps reflect the universally alienating potential of market capitalism, but they also depict its particular ramifications in different corners of the world, where different industries and cultures of expertise will inevitably suffer and react differently. The plight of the cannibals in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is, as Berry's work helps to illuminate, simultaneously a sign of the times and of the place.

It is possible, however, to be more specific than this. As Chuck Jackson has perceptively argued, commentators on *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* are too quick to declare the cannibalistic family as redundant and unemployed, whereas in fact they operate a service station (2008: 52). Jackson's article is an attempt to explain, in considerable detail, how 'the film smartly tracks a concentration of geopolitical events that emerged during the early 1970s, including the drying up

of Texas oil fields; the strengthening of a corporate-controlled, transnational oil economy; oil wars in the global South; and the creation of a more urgent demand for the oil-based products in first-world countries like the United States' (2008: 48). Once again, it is telling to refer back to *Psycho*, and Hitchcock's famous disinterest in what propels Marion Crane to the motel; the \$40,000 stolen from her employer is one of the director's most famous 'MacGuffins', and does indeed have quite little purchase on the following drama. In *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, the friends' lack of oil is much more than a narrative ploy, and the subsequent parallels and exchanges established between blood and meat and oil and capital make for a startling commentary on the environment and culture of the region.

And yet, as Jackson's mention of 'geopolitical events' and the 'transnational oil economy' suggests, such regional specificity is drawn in relation to, rather than in denial of, wider currents and broader fields of circumstance. Again, this attempt to recognize the singularity of a place without constructing it as an hermetically sealed Other chimes with Powell's endorsement of *Fargo* and his critique of *Cape Fear* (and others) for failing to achieve that balance with their characterizations of regional spaces and places (2007: 110–146). Jackson, offering some theoretical context for this counter-balancing of the local and the global, turns to Fredric Jameson and *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992). Discussing the perplexing role of conspiracies and assassinations in American film narratives (particularly those of the New Hollywood period, and particularly those in the films of Alan J. Pakula), Jameson worries about how any effective representation of political actions might hope to locate them, given the 'enlargement of the social totality or operative context out into the uniquely distended proportions of the new world system of late capitalism' (1992: 49). Such quandaries fall into the category of what Jameson calls 'the dilemmas of cognitive mapping' (1992: 49). If Pakula's films offer one response to that dilemma, perhaps regional films of the period offer another, in which the priority is not to locate dispersive power struggles, but rather attend to a particular location, and find the political within such a context.

In *Modernity at Large* (1996), Arjun Appadurai raises similar concerns to Jameson's about the rupturing impact of post-industrial capitalism. 'What can locality mean in a world where spatial localization, quotidian interaction and social scale are not always isomorphic?' (1996: 179). This question, which I would suggest relates very revealingly to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, comes at the beginning of a chapter entitled 'The Production of Locality', in which Appadurai

---

describes the dangerous (and productive) instability of local and regional identities. This is particularly true from the perspective of the nation state, for which regional subsets ‘represent a perennial source of entropy and slippage’ (1996: 191). This potentially explosive national/local stand-off is glimpsed in *The Hills Have Eyes*, in which a clan of inbred social outcasts hide amongst desert terrain which is officially designated as property of the U.S. armed forces – they even ambush an airfield in search of food. In line with this dynamic, the awful treatment of the young travellers in *Massacre* might be interpreted as a volatile reaction to the national on behalf of the local. After all, Appadurai explains how localities are often abused as sites for ‘nationally appropriated nostalgias, celebrations and commemorations’ – as good a description as any of the teenagers’ ‘use’ of rural Texas. In the early stages of the film, after reaching the abandoned house in which Franklin and Sally grew up, Pam (Teri McMinn) and Kirk (William Veil) go off in search of a nearby swimming hole (their directions are based on childhood memories), which turns out to be empty. They then search for the elusive petrol, before being butchered to death in a nearby house shortly after. Whatever ideas these young people had about this territory’s familiarity, any assumptions about abundance and acquiescence are undone in the most brutal way. As the couple walk towards a windmill in search of fuel, Kirk’s (William Vail) macho confidence in his ability to get what they want – ‘I’ll give ’em a couple of bucks’ – begins to make Pam uneasy, as if she senses the worst. At the very least, Pam seems to suspect, rightly, that a fundamental chasm exists between the world of her friends, waiting a few hundred yards back, and the people she is about to encounter. An eerie travelling shot, navigating through bushes and trees, ensures that we feel closer to Pam’s creeping fear than Kirk’s cocksure familiarity. Neighbourliness becomes a black joke; a source of horror. As Appadurai has it, ‘locality is no longer what it used to be’ (1996: 11).

However, while Appadurai’s discussion of locality does point to another level of political pertinence in *Massacre*’s regionalism, his approach is in danger of reducing the notion of region to a purely social construct. As Hooper’s film demonstrates, some works succeed in depicting and defining region as something in which the ecological and the material are symbiotic with the social and the historical. So, while Appadurai might interpret the swimming hole sequence as something like the unveiling of the region’s hollowness and brittleness as an idea and its reliance on myth and sentiment, it would be a mistake to read the violent comeuppance wreaked on nostalgic regionalism as a total rejection, or



demystification, of regionalism per se. Instead, what this sequence might actually be offering is the playing out of a conflict between the material and the social, in which Pam and Kirk's rose-tinted view of the region (locality as a construct or product) is severely tested by their experiences of its terrain and its political economy – which *Massacre* reminds us are deeply intertwined. It is as if their romantic (and borrowed) nostalgia collapses in the face of the conditions in Texas, a region of depleted resources in a time of agricultural breakdown. If the region is no longer what it used to be, or what some people imagine it used to be, it is no less a region for that.

### **Cockfighter and Regional Culture**

---

Douglas Reichert Powell's takes issue with films such as *Deliverance* and *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), and the way in which they depict regional peoples as extensions of their exotic land. At times, Powell develops this into a more specific criticism, regarding *Apocalypse Now* and the character of Kurtz (Marlon Brando), who is shown to embrace the 'culturally unacceptable hybrid' of literacy and savagery (2007: 107). For Powell, these two extremes are often invoked in (shallowly) regional films, and silence and uncommunicativeness – as distinct from urban, suburban and cosmopolitan fluency – become convenient markers for the regional and regressive Other. This is taken to something of an extreme in *Cape Fear*, in which the savage Cady (Robert De Niro) embarks on a radical mission of self-education which, according to Powell, the film characterizes as a horrific transgression: 'This film says Cady is separated from the society of the Bowdens [the victimized family] by a gulf no amount of literacy can overcome, because their differences are not cultural and constructed, but natural' (2007: 113). He continues: 'Audiences are actively discouraged from entertaining the possibility of multiple literacies [...] but instead urged to see deviation from the cultural norm as just that' (2007: 113–114). Just as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* initially seemed to caricature its region as a realm of other-worldly terror, so *Cockfighter* offers itself as an interesting example of regional cinema *precisely because* it comes so close to invoking those stereotypes of regional illiteracy critiqued by Powell (its main character is, for most of the film, mute), while somehow retaining the prospect that an 'alternative literacy' is viable.

---

---

Frank Mansfield (Warren Oates) is a dedicated and respected cockfighter in the ‘Southern Conference’. His devotion to the sport makes for a disjointed and unsettled personal life, which is marked by a troubled long-term relationship and a peripatetic routine on the highways of the American South. *Cockfighter* is something of a modest record of Mansfield’s attempt to balance and resolve these features of his life. Until the final scene, he does not speak on screen, although passages of voiceover allow us some access to his thoughts and intentions. This silence does initially seem to align *Cockfighter* with those films Powell accuses of regional reductionism; like the Appalachians in *Deliverance*, the Vietnamese in *Apocalypse Now* and Max Cady (also from ‘Deliverance country’) in *Cape Fear*, Mansfield is pre-discursively violent. However, his lack of communication is a decision on his part. It is, we learn, an act of penance: an attempt to atone for an escapade in which he drunkenly boasted about his abilities as a trainer, and lost a costly bet as a result. Friends, colleagues and even lovers are unsure whether his silence is a disability or an act of supreme stubbornness – it is simultaneously respected and taken with a pinch of salt.

The way in which *Cockfighter* begins to present Mansfield as an exotic mystery, but then contextualizes and justifies his position, is a subtle but significant feature of its regional scope. ‘I discovered that these guys are not inarticulate rednecks’ was Monte Hellman’s frank assessment of his experience on location in Georgia (Stevens 2003: 105). The film does not deny the possibility of regional and cultural separateness, but neither does this divide remain absolute; indeed, to complicate matters, it is a divide *within* the communities to which Mansfield belongs. To this extent, his peculiar brand of communication – his facial expressions, his quasi-formalized sign language, his assured and sensitive handling of birds – is given credence as something like an ‘alternative literacy’. Bearing in mind the connections already drawn between regionalism and ecocriticism, it is of course significant that the qualified otherness generated in *Cockfighter* is characterized in terms of Mansfield’s deeply complex relationship with animals. To even begin to invoke the thorny questions of animal ethics in relation to *Cockfighter*, its production and its narrative, is to risk confusing the focus of this study. However, the disorientating mix of exploitation and sincerity which marks Mansfield’s treatment of birds is central to the film’s difficulty and richness, and – for the purposes of introducing this discussion – brings together questions of regionalism, otherness and the non-human world as deeply interrelated.

---

### *Cockfighter* and Cockfighting

In *The Chess Players* (Satyajit Ray, 1977), there is a quasi-documentary sequence early on, during which a narrator introduces viewers to Lucknow, 'India's bastion of Muslim culture'. Accompanying images of birds and kites circling in the sky, the narrator informs us that 'not all their games had the elegance of pigeons or kite flying'. Moments later, the film cuts to images of baying and taunting spectators, who, it transpires, are watching a cockfight. 'That notable culture had its cruel side, too', intones the narrator. This seems to be a common interpretation or deployment of cockfighting, as a practice whose moral transgressiveness qualifies it as a clear indicator of cultural separateness. In one of the most famous treatments of this subject, 'Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight', the anthropologist Clifford Geertz notes that the outlawing of this sport in Bali was a result of 'the pretensions to puritanism radical nationalism tends to bring with it' (1973: 414), and so positions cockfighting as an activity in tension with the national.<sup>4</sup> He also goes on to suggest that, just as 'much of America surfaces in a ball park, on a golf links, at a race track, or around a poker table, much of Bali surfaces in a cock ring' (1973: 417). My analysis of *Cockfighter* adheres to Geertz on this point, if only in a roundabout way; while golf, baseball and poker may be revealing of US national characteristics, cockfighting is not so much foreign, but more specifically localized – it is a Southern activity. In *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (1982), Bertram Wyatt-Brown discusses how the sport developed a significant popularity in the South from the late eighteenth century onwards, and suggests that historians of this region have mistakenly overlooked the importance of cockfighting in favour of more immediately accessible and more easily quantifiable practices, such as churchgoing (1982: 341). There is not the space here to comprehensively establish the regional specificity of cockfighting in America, and neither is that completely necessary for treating *Cockfighter* as a regional film. However, we can nevertheless begin with some assertions to this effect: cockfighting is often understood as a geographically and culturally separate activity; in the United States, that separateness is Southern; therefore, the ways in which this sport is depicted in *Cockfighter* are crucial to the film's regionalism.

Perhaps the first thing to say about cockfighting in *Cockfighter* is that the film barely addresses its cultural-taboo status. *Cockfighter* does not mount a defence of cockfighting, and in fact seems to ignore the prospect that any defence is necessary. (In one scene, a young and inexperienced cockfighter inserts his finger

---

---

into the anus of his prized bird, thinking this to be an acceptable means of energizing it. Frank, the umpire and the crowd are shocked, and their consternation only serves to normalize and legitimize the sport at large, as a principled and ethically safeguarded pursuit.) Frank's long-term girlfriend, Mary Elizabeth (Patricia Pearcy), objects to cockfighting, or at least to Frank's devotion to cockfighting, but she is an isolated exception, and is even satirized by the film for her 'pretensions to puritanism', to borrow Geertz's phrase. Also, while *Cockfighter* is in some senses a story of an obsession (although much less so than the novel on which it is based), the sport is introduced early on as part of a community event, and there is no sense of subcultural transgression. We see the social niceties surrounding the sport – the friendly bartering, the family atmosphere, the pleasant riverside setting – before any fighting takes place. And the fight itself is filmed without any special emphasis or sense of intrigue, mainly in medium shots looking downwards, as if from the perspective of the onlookers. We share the space with, and even occupy the position of, weathered enthusiasts, and there is no equivalent to the normalized visitors seen in, for example, *Deliverance*. In the build-up to this fight, Frank has deliberately cracked the beak of his bird, in the hope of getting improved betting odds. This then has interesting implications for how we are invited to watch the fight. Rather than an exhibitionist display of cockfighting as a curious practice, this first fight is given another dimension, a detail which particularizes it. Much like the armadillo in *Massacre*, which was shown to be more materially specific than an iconic stereotype, the contest here presents not so much 'cockfighting' the phenomenon as a game in which we already have some interest, some stake. Mansfield loses the fight (his trick backfires) and the crowd trundles away, leaving behind them an empty pit.

Such a matter-of-fact presentation of the sport recurs throughout most of *Cockfighter* – the *Variety* review, published 4 June 1975, notes that the film 'supplies lots of technical detail about the weird sport' (19) – but there is one particularly significant exception. A short while after losing this first fight, Frank remembers the episode in which, while drunk in a hotel room, he challenged Burke (Harry Dean Stanton) to a high-stakes hack. In the flashback scene recounting this fight, *Cockfighter* seems to play up to the sport's contraband image. The setting is unambiguously disreputable (a dingy hotel room in the middle of the night) and the contest is prompted by an unpleasant mix of alcohol, egotism and aggression. The filming of the fight itself is also markedly different from the one described above; it is shot from ground level, in close-up and in slow motion, and

---

accompanied by a barroom-blues guitar theme. It would be fair to suggest that these techniques combine to present more obviously exploitative conditions, in which the fight is orchestrated solely for the perverse pleasure of the cockfighters (and the audience), and that pleasure is firmly aligned with anti-social behaviour. Animal-on-animal violence exists here as a fetish object, a cultural abnormality. It is therefore hugely significant that this scene appears as a traumatic memory for Frank, a source of shame and embarrassment. When the scene ends, Frank leaves the hotel room and walks out into a pitch black corridor; we then cut to another blackness, a light is switched on, and Frank is stirred from his sleep.

For this 'version' of cockfighting to be characterized as a nightmare, and for Frank to redeem himself by vowing to take cockfighting more seriously, says a great deal about the film's particular cultural scope. Its parameters of normativity position cockfighting as a given; not an offshoot, rebellion or perversion. And if it were suggested that such boundaries have geographical equivalents, they would surely be regional. As Monte Hellman put it, 'the world of cockfighters was right there for us in Georgia' (Stevens 2003: 105). This approach, in turn, allows us to dwell less on the sport's moral status or controversial reputation and instead attend to its material conditions. In his account of *Cockfighter* in *Monte Hellman: His Life and Films* (2003), Brad Stevens details a fascinating contrast between Charles Willeford (who wrote the originating novel and screenplay for *Cockfighter*) and Hellman in their treatment of the story. According to Stevens, Willeford was primarily interested in the idea of obsession, and turned to cockfighting as a way of exploring this theme; but what Hellman does 'is begin with something concrete – a lifestyle, a story, a relationship – and allow the theme to emerge naturally' (2003: 107). Examples of these concrete details include the settings of the hacks, or the confidence and tenderness with which Frank handles his birds, or the physical majesty of the birds themselves, or the hazy and dusty light of small-town Georgia. Not all such details are so pleasant, of course, and there is one scene in which *Cockfighter* thrusts the physical, bodily gruesomeness of the sport to the centre of its emotional drama. But that is a moment which is likely to mean much more if it is arrived at by way of some thoughts on the American South.

### *Cockfighter* and the South

According to Chuck Stephens, in his glowing appraisal of Monte Hellman's career, the packaging for the *Cockfighter* VHS release (under the title *Born to*

---

*Kill*) offered this tagline: ‘The woods are scary ... the people are worse!’ (2000: 63). It is hard to think of a less accurate evocation of the film’s treatment of the cultures, communities and landscapes it depicts, and the present analysis has suggested some ways in which *Cockfighter* defiantly avoids just that kind of rural and regional fetishization which the tagline promises. And yet one can sympathize with the confusion facing anyone whose job it was, or is, to position *Cockfighter* as a marketable product. The film, according to Roger Corman’s biographer Beverly Gray, ‘was to be one of Corman’s biggest miscalculations. He arranged for a world premiere screening in Atlanta, then discovered that most Georgians view cockfighting as an embarrassment. Vocal opposition by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to the movie’s on-screen treatment of chickens didn’t help’ (2004: 120). It is telling to compare this local hostility to the jubilation and pride which greeted *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) at its almost-legendary Atlanta premiere. According to one account of the event, ‘Hollywood’s romantic evocation of the South struck a chord that vibrated strongly throughout the evening. Great waves of nostalgic Southern fervour engulfed the audience. Every reference to the South, every snatch of Southern music in the score, was applauded. When war with the North was announced, the cheers in the audience drowned those on the screen’ (Flamini 1975: 330). There is little sense in placing these vastly different films in any kind of evaluative stand-off, but their wildly contrasting fates on ‘home territory’ can nevertheless stand as some sort of testimony to the notion that *Cockfighter*’s regionalism is an uncomfortable and awkward one. One can hardly be surprised that (low-budget) matter-of-fact depictions of cockfighting failed to ignite regional pride, but it is important to recognize the implicit regional orientation which forms the foundation of such a depiction – as well as the eco-critical insights which emerge from it.

V.S. Naipaul, in his travel book *A Turn in the South* (2003), describes a party to which he was invited – a small gathering in northwest Georgia:

*The party was ‘Southern’ in its motifs. A Confederate flag fluttered in the sunlight in the rough field between the woods. A skinned pig, fixed in the posture of a hurdler, had been roasting all day, held on poles a little to one side of slow-burning hardwood logs [...]. And a band played bluegrass music from the wooden hut. Flag; pig; music: things from the past. (2003: 34)*

The South in *Cockfighter* is not nearly so readily accessible, so iconographic. On the face of it, the film seems to be far more interested in cockfighting than in anything along the lines of what might be called Southernness, Southern culture or even ‘the myth of the South’. That is partly what makes it so interesting as a regional film, and partly why this analysis did not begin by positioning *Cockfighter* in terms of those broader ideas and themes. But they cannot be overlooked, either. After all, although the introduction to this chapter made reference to the general underestimation of region and regionalism in studies of American cinema, representations of the South have, of course, commanded a good deal of attention. Not only do films such as *Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915), *Gone with the Wind*, *Mississippi Burning* (Alan Parker, 1988) and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Joel Coen, 2000) sit comfortably in the historical trajectory of Hollywood cinema, but they are happily seen as films set in and about the South. In other words, it does not seem to require a particularly critical or revisionist approach to understand these films regionally.

*Cockfighter* sits slightly apart from this tradition (if it can be called that) not by ignoring Southern myths and stereotypes, but by largely eliminating any sense of context or alternatives against which to observe those myths and stereotypes. *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*, by dint of their status as films about the American Civil War, cannot help but posit the South as an idea and a cause whose doomed fate separates it from the normal, normative ‘America’. *Mississippi Burning* has at its centre a Northern-cop/Southern-cop pairing, allowing us once again to interpret the South opposed to and against the normalized North. *Wild River* (Elia Kazan, 1960), a film which can hardly be accused of ignoring the South’s status as an ecologically and culturally distinct region, nevertheless invites us to ‘visit’ that region along with Chuck (Montgomery Clift), who is literally an agent of the federal government. In the film’s final moments, we leave with him also. Flannery O’Connor – who, incidentally, lived in the town (Milledgeville) where much of *Cockfighter* was filmed, and even raised birds there – writes about this balance between context and separateness with regard to regional fiction. Referring to the tendency of Northern critics to identify in Southern literature an ‘anguish’ rooted in ‘isolation from the rest of the country’, O’Connor writes:

*I feel this would be news to most Southern writers. The anguish that most of us have observed for some time now has been caused not by the fact that the*

---

*South is alienated from the rest of the country, but by the fact that it is not alienated enough, that every day we are getting more and more like the rest of the country, that we are being forced out not only of our many sins, but of our few virtues. This may be unholy anguish but it is anguish nevertheless.*  
(1969: 29)

In Douglas Reichert Powell's appraisal of *Fargo*, he does, it is important to acknowledge, argue that the film should be applauded for situating its regional subjects amongst broader inter-regional and national contexts, rather than segregating it as an enclosed realm of perversity. However, the 'contexts' provided by these films set in the South, I would argue, are quite different. Instead of a web of interconnectedness, they generate a value-laden binary, in which the South is essentially alien.

What, then, sets *Cockfighter* apart as something aside from, and perhaps even in contention with, this tradition? How does it envisage the South in ways which suggest that its frame, and not only its subject matter, is Southern? It is possibly too reductive to suggest that *Cockfighter's* somewhat sober and considered depiction of cockfighting automatically qualifies it as a regional, Southern film. It may be the clearest indication of how *Cockfighter* seems to view a sub-national culture from the inside out, but this is achieved in a number of other ways, too. Charles Willeford claims to have based the story's plot loosely on *The Odyssey*, and writes of his 'absurd delight' in drawing parallels between the two: 'Frank's struggles on the Southern Conference Cocking Schedule were on such a low level compared to Odysseus's adventures' (1975: 20). This overriding sense of limited scope, of grand ambitions on a reduced canvas, is felt throughout *Cockfighter*, and is the source of much of its black humour – especially during the film's climactic tournament, at which the plushness of a banquet is undercut by the fact that most diners have candidate numbers pinned to their suit jackets. There is a bitersweet tone to this compromised grandeur, something of a big-fish-in-a-small-pond dynamic which is traceable to *Cockfighter's* regionalism.

The event takes place on the grounds of a Georgian senator's mansion, and the senator (Oliver Coleman), we learn, has the right to bestow the 'Cockfighter of the Year' award on anyone he chooses, regardless of whether they win the tournament or not. 'There's only one rule', he says: 'conduct yourselves as ladies and gentlemen'. It is a telling line for the present discussion; not only does it invoke the famous Southern preoccupation with honour and civilized behaviour,



but does so (with no apparent irony) in the context of cockfighting, a sport which, in other contexts and cultures, might well stand as the very antithesis of those values. The result of the tournament becomes immaterial, as Frank manages to win revenge against Burke and also be named Cockfighter of the Year. Mary Elizabeth does arrive, late on, but is disgusted by what she sees, and tells Frank as much. His response is to rip the head off his prized bird, and force it into her hand – presumably mocking her squeamishness and her unfamiliarity with the animals with whom she supposedly sympathizes. And Mary Elizabeth’s response is, if anything, even stranger; after her initial revulsion, she calmly wraps the head in tissue and places it in her handbag, to spite Frank. As she storms off, Frank is genuinely moved, interpreting this whole exchange as proof of her love for him. The scene, with its mix of sacrifice, ceremony and obscure motivations, seems to call for an anthropological interpretation. Clifford Geertz’s reading of the Balinese cockfight (substituting ‘Southerner’ for ‘Balinese’) might once again shed light on *Cockfighter’s* scope:

*Attending cockfights and participating in them is, for the Balinese, a kind of sentimental education. What he learns there is what the culture’s ethos and his private sensibility (or, anyway, certain aspects of them) look like when spelled out externally in a collective text; that the two are near enough alike to be articulated in the symbolics of a single such text; and – the disquieting part – that the text in which this revelation is accomplished consists of a chicken hacking another mindlessly to bits. (1973: 449)*

It is also a moment in which ecocriticism and critical regionalism, posited in this chapter as mutually sustaining approaches, might appear to reach something of an impasse: brutal exploitation of an animal is followed by its gratuitous decapitation, all carried out for the purposes of satisfying one man’s ego – and yet the film’s regional scope appears to normalize this behaviour, or at least refrain from condemning it. However, this apparent impasse is rather a vivid example of ecocriticism’s interest beyond issues such as conservation and animal ethics. As in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, where the film’s environmental urgency had less to do with an environmentalist agenda than a dexterous balancing of the local, the material and the affective, *Cockfighter* here provides a moment where nature matters, but not simply as a focus for admiration, sympathy, concern or awe. It is instead woven into the drama of a narrative whose peculiar, regional scope

---



**Figure 4.3** A sentimental education: *Cockfighter* (New World Pictures)

requires us to think of nature not as in the abstract, but rather as something which is only visible and meaningful in particular manifestations.

Two New Hollywood films and two dead animals; *Massacre* opens with a dead armadillo, *Cockfighter* closes with a dead chicken. Each one signals the film's regional grounding, but each is depicted with enough material detail to ensure that it is not reduced or limited to a signifying role. Both animals are indicators *and* victims of their geographical location, occupying the kind of ambiguous and challenging position which requires, and repays, a critically regionalist approach.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the idea of regionalism as ecocritical interpretation, and New Hollywood cinema as a body of work especially suited to such interpretation. In choosing to argue this connection through detailed discussion of two films, there is a risk of losing sight of regionalism's wider relevance across New Hollywood. The chapter will, therefore, conclude with some observations on another film, *The Last Detail*. Turning to a film in which the natural world appears to have very little prominence, I also hope to emphasize the complexity and dexterity of regionalism as an approach, as well as its inherent aliveness to environmentality. *The Last Detail* begins at a naval base in Norfolk, Virginia, where two officers – Buddusky (Jack Nicholson) and Mulhall (Otis Young) – are assigned the job of escorting a young sailor, Meadows (Randy Quaid), to naval prison in New Hampshire. The film follows this mission, including the sailors'

diversions along the way, to its conclusion. (It was shot not only on location, but also in sequence (Dawson 2009: 141).) What interests me here is not so much that the ground covered in *The Last Detail* constitutes a specific region, but rather that a frame of roughly regional scale – encompassing the urban, suburban and rural, but lying beneath the national – is a fitting one in which to view the film.

In terms of the film's overall structure or design, it is interesting to note that no single situation acts as a status quo which is disrupted, and there is no significant place in relation to which the characters define themselves; instead, locations such as the naval base (where the film begins) seem more like nodes in a life of constant movement. It is not that the officers are adventurers or wandering men in any romantic sense – the film is careful to mock such a suggestion – but rather that movement between different places, relatively local, is an inevitable necessity, their most comfortable mode. This tempered rootlessness, I would suggest, is a sensibility which governs *The Last Detail*, countering the spiritual and revelatory aspects so often at play in films of movement (the 'descent' into the city, the regenerative power of the country), and dampening the contrast between different spaces. Another way to describe this would be to say that, while the officers are never at home in *The Last Detail*, they are never quite outsiders, either. A trip from Norfolk up to Portsmouth is a journey of sorts, but not to uncharted territory – Buddusky even claims it qualifies as a trip to his 'old stomping grounds'. There is no centre in *The Last Detail*, neither in the form of a domestic sanctuary nor a governing geographical crux, and while this no doubt goes some way towards explaining the film's somewhat bleak fatalism, it also means that there is no periphery either; for all the travelling that goes on, nowhere is really foreign. In this regard, *The Last Detail* stands as a fascinating and revealing counterpoint to *Apocalypse Now*. Both films are structured around an internal military mission to bring a deviant comrade to justice, but they could hardly be more different in their plotting of that mission; Willard (Martin Sheen), in *Apocalypse Now*, travels into environments which seem to embody the very idea of otherness, while Buddusky and Mulhall retread ground with which they are reasonably familiar.

The main characters in *The Last Detail* are neither aliens in, nor natives of, the cities in which they spend time, and linked to this is the fact that they are developed with only an oblique sense of geographical determinacy. Put more simply, region plays its part in the identity of the sailors, but not in any overwhelming or reductive sense. Mulhall, we learn early on, is from Louisiana, and the fact that he is a black man from the South gives us some insight into why he might be more

---

hesitant than Buddusky to risk upsetting his superiors and putting his hard-won career prospects in jeopardy. Likewise, Buddusky's fast talking and his impatient yearning for instant gratification might be interpreted as signs of an urban sensibility, but he would hardly blend seamlessly into Los Angeles or San Francisco in the way he seems to in New York and Boston. Neither character is anything like an embodiment or stereotype of his geographical roots (unlike, say, the fish-out-of-water Joe Buck (Jon Voight) in *Midnight Cowboy*), but each is developed in such a way that their horizons and perspectives seem neither cosmopolitan nor intensely localized. In films such as *All I Desire* (Douglas Sirk, 1953) and *Shadow of a Doubt* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1943), the chasm separating small-town cultures and exotic, worldly-wise visitors is the crux of the drama; such stories are premised on a cultural geography of extremes (and, in the case of Hitchcock's film, those extremes are channelled through the actions of the characters). *The Last Detail* offers no such binaries, but rather a group of characters hovering between the parochial and the worldly.

In contrast to the above analyses of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *Cockfighter*, the discussion here of *The Last Detail* is veering some way away from the conventional concerns of ecocriticism. If all three films seem to operate according to a regional frame, in which ecological, narrative and thematic elements become almost inseparable, *The Last Detail* draws on the natural world in the most oblique or remote way. There are no lingering close-ups of animals or setting suns, and there is no obvious conflict or communion between the human and the non-human. Instead, the film's (critical) regionalism seems to be based on the governing uncertainty about centres and peripheries, and the implications of this for the film's characters. As a final reminder about the ecocritical foundation of this interpretation, a reiteration of the deeply embedded links between regional narratives and material environments, we can turn to a scene towards the end of the film, in which the three sailors while away their last few hours before Meadows is due at the prison by attempting to have a barbecue.

A slow panning shot glides leftwards across the snowy, deserted park, to finally rest on the three sailors, each sitting on a separate bench. Buddusky, in the foreground, thinks aloud about Meadows's experiences and poses a rhetorical question, which the film leaves hanging: 'He's come a long way, hasn't he?' It would be unwise to ignore the deliberate invocation of a spiritual journey here, but its poignancy is surely based on the fact that the comment has a degree of literal significance, too. Likewise, the bitterly cold conditions, in a scene of profound

sadness and pessimism, might at first appear to be a simple case of pathetic fallacy. But it is important to recognize that coldness has featured throughout the sailors' journey; it has ushered them into bars and diners, kept them in waiting rooms, obliged them to find a hotel. In other words, it has been a governing factor from start to finish: an important contributor to their camaraderie as well as their impatience. For it *still* to feature at the end is a reminder that they, and we, have not really travelled that far – even if it has been a life-changing experience for Meadows, the odyssey has been a relatively localized one, contained within and determined by certain non-negotiable conditions. Here, what Thomas Elsaesser describes as 'the cancellation of the melodramatic impulse' is achieved in a distinctly regional manner ([1975] 2004: 292).

In her 1974 Cannes Film Festival report for *Sight and Sound*, Penelope Houston suggested that *The Last Detail* 'knows exactly where it's at [...], preserving its sense of balance, scale and detail' (1974: 143). In a piece a few years later (quoted above), Roger Greenspun used a noticeably similar description in reference to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, arguing that 'it almost always understands what it's looking at' (1977: 16). These reviews seem to be responding to quite allusive qualities of scale and scope that this chapter has interpreted ecocritically. The environmental sensibility of New Hollywood is a quality which is traceable not only to its films' presentation of spaces and places and materials, but also to the geographical range of its dramas. George Kouvaros's study of the films of John Cassavetes is called *Where Does it Happen?* (2004),



**Figure 4.4** 'He's come a long way': *The Last Detail* (Acrobat / Columbia Pictures)

---

a question Kouvaros wants to bring to the director's oeuvre in the belief that it raises important and overlooked issues about his unique approach to form, performance and fiction. Such a question can also alert us to the ways in which New Hollywood films seem to award their environments an unusual degree of prominence and complexity.

In the following and final chapter, attention turns to the issue of a film's presence in the pro-filmic world. Cinema of this period not only developed narratives which operate on a relatively reduced scale, but also asserted the medium's reliance on, and submission to, real-world conditions. In many ways, this will be a continuation of important ideas raised in this chapter, and in particular the sense one gets, watching New Hollywood films, of their action emerging in a given environment. But whereas I have so far emphasized the hermeneutic shift involved in watching Hollywood cinema as 'scaled down', I will go on to explore the means by which texts themselves assert the significance of location shooting, a production practice which is often acknowledged as crucial to the period, but whose conceptual complexity requires further study.

## Notes

1. Lev's conclusion is optimistic about the continuing and growing interest in the question of regions in American cinema, but his call for 'a more articulated theoretical framework' (1986: 64) seems to have been largely unfulfilled.
2. In the 2003 remake, directed by Marcus Nispel, the regional setting is communicated quite differently, as the van's speakers blast out Lynyrd Skynyrd's pop-Confederate anthem 'Sweet Home Alabama'.
3. It did, unsurprisingly, have its effect on filming conditions too. According to Edwin Neal, who played the hitchhiker, 'the thing that helped us a great deal was the 115 degree Texas weather. By the time your clothes hadn't been washed in six weeks it got easier and easier and easier, as we took on the environmental aspects of the family, to *become* the family' (quoted in Jaworzyn 2004: 53, emphasis in the original).
4. We glimpse this in the novel, through one of Frank's droll asides and a rather desperate attempt to legitimize cockfighting in the eyes of his partner: 'I had told Mary Elizabeth once that George Washington and Alexander Hamilton had both been cockfighters during the colonial period, but she had been unimpressed' (Willeford [1962] 2005: 114).

## Works Cited

---

- Abbey, A. 1975. *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.
- Appadurai, A. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Austin, M. 1932. 'Regionalism in American Fiction', *The English Journal* 21(2): 97–107.
- Baym, N. 2004. 'Region and Environment in American Literature', *New England Quarterly* 77(2): 300–307.
- Berry, W. [1977] 1996. *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, 3rd edn. San Francisco, Cal.: Sierra Club Books.
- Bowden, M.J. 2001. 'The New England Yankee Homeland', in R. Nostrand and L. Estaville (eds), *Homelands: A Geography of Culture and Place across America*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, pp. 1–23.
- Bradshaw, M.J. 1988. *Regions and Regionalism in the United States*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Cavell, S. [1971] 1979. *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 2nd edn. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Dawson, N. 2009. *Being Hal Ashby: Life of a Hollywood Rebel*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Elsaesser, T. [1975] 2004. 'The Pathos of Failure: Notes on the Unmotivated Hero', in T. Elsaesser, A. Howarth and N. King (eds), *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood in the 1970s*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 279–292.
- Farber, M. [1971] 1998. *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies*, 2nd edn. Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press.
- Flamini, R. 1975. *Scarlett, Rhett, and a Cast of Thousands: The Filming of Gone with the Wind*. London: Macmillan.
- Foote, S. 2001. 'The Cultural Work of American Regionalism', in C.L. Crow (ed.), *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 25–41.
- Garreau, J. 1981. *The Nine Nations of North America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Geertz, C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gray, B. 2004. *Roger Corman: Blood-Sucking Vampires, Flesh-Eating Cockroaches, and Driller Killers*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press.
- Greenspun, R. 1977. 'Carrie and Sally and Leatherface among the Film Buffs', *Film Comment* 13(1): 14–17.
- Heise, U.K. 2008. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Houston, P. 1974. 'Cannes '74', *Sight and Sound* 43(3): 142–144.
- Ivakhiv, A. 2013. *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature*. Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier Press.
-

- Jackson, C. 2008. 'Blood for Oil: Crude Metonymies and Tobe Hooper's *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*', *Gothic Studies* 10(1): 48–60.
- Jameson, F. 1992. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Jaworzyn, S. 2004. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre Companion*. London: Titan.
- Kouvaros, G. 2004. *Where Does it Happen? John Cassavetes and Cinema at the Breaking Point*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lev, P. 1986. 'Regional Cinema and the Films of Texas', *Journal of Film and Video* 38(1): 60–65.
- Morton, T. 2010. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Naipaul, V.S. 2003. *A Turn in the South*. London: Picador.
- Nostrand, R. and L. Estaville (eds). 2001. *Homelands: A Geography of Culture and Place across America*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- O'Connor, F. 1969. *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Perkins, V.F. 2005. 'Where Is the World? The Horizon of Events in Movie Fiction', in J. Gibbs and D. Pye (eds), *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 16–42.
- Powell, D.R. 2007. *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Quart, L. and A. Auster (eds). 1991. *American Film and Society since 1945*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger.
- Shiel, M. 2001. 'Cinema and the City in History and Theory', in M. Shiel and T. Fitzmacurie (eds), *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*. Malden, Mass.: Wiley–Blackwell, pp. 1–19.
- Soles, C. 2013. 'Sympathy for the Devil: The Cannibalistic Hillbilly in 1970s Rural Slasher Films', in S. Rust, S. Monani and S. Cubitt (eds), *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge, pp. 233–250.
- Spears, R. 2008. 'Regional Filmmaking: The James Agee Project', in W. French (ed.), *The South and Film*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, pp. 223–225.
- Stephens, C. 2000. 'Moebius Dragstrip', *Film Comment*, 32(2), pp. 53–65.
- Stevens, B. 2003. *Monte Hellman: His Life and Films*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company.
- Thomas, D. 2001. *Reading Hollywood: Spaces and Meanings in American Film*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Turner, F.J. [1921] 2008. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. London: Penguin.
- Walters, J. 2008. *Alternative Worlds in Hollywood: Resonance between Realms*. Bristol: Intellect.
- Webber, A. and E. Wilson (eds). 2008. *Cities in Transition: The Moving Image and the Modern Metropolis*. London: Wallflower Press.



- Wells, W. 1973. *Tycoons and Locusts: A Regional Look at Hollywood Fiction of the 1930s*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Willeford, C. 1975. 'From *Cockfighter* to *Born to Kill*', *Film Quarterly* 29(1): 20–24.
- Willeford, C. [1962] 2005. *Cockfighter*. Blackmask Online.
- Wood, R. 2003. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan – and beyond*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Worland, R. 2007. *The Horror Film: An Introduction*. London: Blackwell.
- Wyatt-Brown, B. 1982. *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zelinsky, W. 1992. *The Cultural Geography of the United States*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.