

Access and excess in The Texas Chain Saw Massacre

Article

Published Version

Open Access

Donaldson, L. F. (2010) Access and excess in The Texas Chain Saw Massacre. *Movie: a journal of film criticism* (1). ISSN 2047-1661 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/36209/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Published version at: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/film/movie/pastissues/>

Publisher: Universities of Warwick, Reading, and Oxford.

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

Access and Excess in
The Texas Chain Saw Massacre



The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (Tobe Hooper, 1974) is a key text of the 1970s post-studio period, and a film which poses a significant contrast to studio era Hollywood in its narrative and form. Although the film is now more than 35 years old, it offers a considerable and unresolved challenge to a detailed critical approach. Through close analysis of moments from the film, and comparison with the conclusion of Vincente Minnelli's *Home from the Hill* (1960), this article will explore *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre's* intricate form and approach to performance, examining its unorthodox presentation of narrative information and filmic space.

This article seeks specifically to open a critical dialogue with the discussion opening *Movie 20* (marking the journal's reappearance in the 70s) considering the question of whether post-studio cinema would repay the kind of detailed attention which had been a feature of the journal's approach to films of the studio era. Most particularly, I will consider a comment made by V.F. Perkins concerning what he identified as 'the death of mise-en-scène'. The 'Return of *Movie*' discussion was explicitly devised to respond to recent changes in American films, as well as the function of contemporary criticism: it notes a range of industrial, technological and cultural factors contributing to changes in film form, as well as contemporaneous shifts in film criticism and theory. I will be focusing on the formal complexities the changes raise, and the methodological challenges they pose.

Questions of contemporary significance

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre follows a group of young people on a day trip through Texas to visit the Hardesty family's farmhouse. They become the victims of a family of ex-slaughterhouse workers, until only one of the group – Sally Hardesty – remains, escaping after a night of torment by means of a passing truck. The narrative is minimal and lacks any traditional sense of closure – Sally merely escapes, her attackers are not caught or destroyed. The narrative rhythm typical of horror – structured around build-ups of tension, followed by momentary shock and then release –

is disrupted as the film shifts between minimal action and sudden or extended scenes of the victims' distress. Alongside these narrative challenges, the logic of many formal decisions is tricky to grasp, even appearing irrational in places. The film is characterised by a mixture of extremes – intense close-ups and remote long shots; violent killing and uneventful conversation – and breaks in continuity editing without obvious justification. Likewise, the treatment of performance challenges expectations of access to expressivity, and consequently to the usual manner in which we form understanding of characters, their motivations or inner life. Shifting between extremes of closeness and distance in our spatial and cognitive access, the film fragments our view of the performers, unsettling the process by which we are accustomed to engaging with characters. In one crucial scene, for instance, Sally's trauma is represented through a series of extreme close-ups of her eyeball. This article will explore whether such excessive disjunctions in our access to a performance mean that there is no performance to engage with or discuss.

Rather than being dismissed as just another exploitation film, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is critically admired. Robin Wood, who discussed the film in several articles, comments on the cinematic intelligence of the mise-en-scène, stating that it is 'a film for which [his] respect increases in every viewing' (1979: 11). Several other writers have since concurred with this perspective, including Rick Worland who refers to the film's 'shrewd and deliberate visual style' (2007: 208).

Nevertheless, despite such critical acknowledgements of the significance of the film's form, accounts of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* tend to develop arguments about its psychoanalytic significance or generic or political implications without grounding their arguments in stylistic detail. The closest reading available is an article by Tony Williams, in *Movie 25*, the chief concern of which is to link the film to aspects of 19th century American literary tradition. Williams discusses some of the film's visual details – the use of inserted shots of the sun which he suggests relate to one of

the character's astrological interests and act as punctuation of the film's events, as well as certain parallels drawn between the family and their victims – but there is no indication in his account of the challenge the formal treatment presents.

My focus will remain on the critical question concerning the collapse in traditions of visual style, pursuing this by examining the staging of performance for the camera, a critical encounter which may reveal perspectives that have broader application. Tom Ryan's comment, made in 1975, that '[t]he question of style, the expressive use of the details of mise-en-scène, is as important now as it ever was, yet we have scarcely scratched the surface of the issue for recent cinema', still rings true today (1975: 26). Indeed, it is possible to argue that the traditions of mise-en-scène criticism have never been successfully applied to the films of this era.

The death of mise-en-scène

During the discussion that opens *Movie's* 20th issue, the problems for style based criticism constituted by these new kinds of film are dramatically characterised by V.F. Perkins in the following observation:

[m]aybe one could risk a bolder statement by summing up the change in the movies since the mid 'sixties in terms of the death of mise-en-scène. By that I mean that in my experience of American films of the last five years, the stylistic strategies tend to be either blatantly point-making or to be totally arbitrary choices of what you put where, or what you cross-cut fast or what lens you use. (1975: 6)

The references to 'point-making' and arbitrariness indicate a view that sees the meaningfulness of the relationship between camera, performer and environment, undermined through bombastic or cursory treatment: directors have either become too emphatic in asserting significance, or the mise-en-scène manifests a lack of thought in the arrangement of its elements. The idea that a film's strategies are 'point-making' further implies that its meaningfulness is one dimensional; in the case of arbitrariness they carry even less significance. In attempting to respond to the challenge presented by the films of the late 60s and early 70s, Perkins' comments have a great deal of significance, posing questions about the expressive qualities of style, the celebration of coherence and the collapse of the traditional stability of film space.

The achievement of a coherence, or a harmonious and / or significant relationship between form and content, is of central importance to the *Movie* critics, for whom style is a constitutive part of the whole rather than an external element used to make a point, or to be considered secondary to narrative and theme. (At the same time, we should recognise that different writers have different views on the subject, the conceptual differences becoming a matter for debate in the discussion; the idea of the death of mise-en-scène, indeed, is roundly debated.)¹ Perkins' writing, more generally, values the 'balance of action and image that skill can achieve', achievement of an expressive correlation between what is shown and the way of showing it (1972, 1978: 78). In this later period of American filmmaking the synthesis of action and image, and the complex articulation of content through formal means, is proving much harder to identify. As Perkins goes on to comment in the discussion, '[n]owadays I find the strategy of style ... less and less penetrable compared to the kind of camera placement in

Letter from an Unknown Woman or *On Dangerous Ground*' (1975: 6).

Perkins, whose resistance to the stylistic strategies found in these films is quite apparent from the discussion of *Movie 20*, went on to write most revealingly about studio films and has remained the *Movie* critic least likely to engage with 1970s Hollywood. *Movie* foregrounded its attempts to engage with the changes to Hollywood through a regular section dedicated to 'American Cinema in the 70s', which featured extended articles on contemporary releases, running from issue 21 (1975) to 27/28 (1980/81).² Issue 27/28 was entirely devoted to the subject of American cinema in the 70s, with articles on particular films as well as those giving more of an overview. In one of these articles, Robin Wood, perhaps the *Movie* critic who has written most about films of the post-studio period, argues that certain of these films display either deliberate or unintentional incoherence, the latter being an important pattern in 70s cinema. Of the former he observes 'fragmentation – the consciously motivated incoherence – becomes a structuring principle, resulting in works that reveal themselves as perfectly coherent once one has mastered their rules' (1980/81: 24). Of the latter he argues that incoherence is the 'proof that the issues and conflicts they dramatise can no longer even appear to be resolvable within the system, within the dominant ideology' (1980/81: 42). In the article, then, Wood draws on the interest in coherence at the heart of *Movie's* interpretative methods, but also on emerging debates around ideology. Wood's arguments offer a revised relationship to the apparent inscrutability of post-studio material in his reconsideration of apparent incoherence, that could prove valuable to a detailed approach to films of the period.



Distance

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre's powerful challenge to traditional relationships between camera and performer is evident from its opening: seemingly straightforward exchanges are made complex, even troubling, by the stylistic strategies adopted. The film's initial images of an excavated corpse are disconcerting for the spatial and aural confusion they establish – the black screen sporadically revealing fragments of a decaying body lit up by a camera's flash and accompanied by the clunk of its shutter and a metallic clang of a spade hitting earth – and grotesque in the detail of the decaying flesh they present. Seven minutes into the film we watch the group of young people break up their day trip with a stop at the cemetery to check that the spate of grave-robbing reported on the radio, and visualised in the film's pre-credit images, has not affected the Hardestys' granddaddy. After making enquiries with a group of locals, Sally (Marilyn Burns) is led off to speak with the sheriff while the

rest of the group remains with the van.

Once Marilyn Burns departs, the film cuts to Paul Partain (who plays Franklin Hardesty, Sally's wheelchair bound brother), who remains in the van, watching a few older men who are sitting in the grass in front of him. As Partain stares off-screen the film cuts to a close-up of one of the men (John Henry Faulk), his face upside down in the frame as he lies back in the grass, recounting a garbled monologue about the things that he sees happen 'hereabouts'. While Faulk is speaking, the film cuts to Burns and Jerry Green (the man leading her to the Sheriff). Rather than cutting close in to their progress across the cemetery, however, the camera is placed far back and by means of a telephoto lens follows their movement in the distance past headstones and other people, as Faulk's speech continues on the soundtrack. The film cuts back to Faulk, and then back to Partain who wheels backwards into the van, still staring down at the old man below him, before returning to Faulk who finally ceases to speak. At this point the film cuts back to Burns and Green who are still making their way across the cemetery. This cut is accompanied by Burns speaking Sally's words as she reassures Franklin that their granddaddy's grave had not been disturbed.



There are two striking elements to consider in this very brief scene. Firstly, the camera's severe distance from Burns and Green, the lack of physical access accentuated by further obstacles interposed between it and them. When there is a close-up, of Faulk, impeded access is sustained due to the framing of his face upside down. Secondly, during the two shots of Burns and Green, the soundtrack features Faulk speaking off-screen in the first instance and, in the second, Burns' voice, but from a later conversation. Sally's enquiry is the salient action of the scene but both shots are characterised by epistemic and narrative disruption.

The whole sequence is presented in a stylistically intricate manner, and it is not at all immediately clear why these decisions have been made. Yet, every aspect of the sequence's design seems to be directly challenging the way in which we are invited to see performance. The strategies obscure our access to performer and character. At the same time the relationship between camera and performer is foregrounded through technological means and by the fact of the obfuscation.

The double remove renders us blocked from anything we would usually recognise as signalling any degree of character interiority, such as details of facial expression and gesture in conjunction with tone of voice. The frame is devoid of any clues to Sally's inner life, only the displaced dialogue hints at what she is experiencing; but not in conjunction with the experience depicted visually. The problem facing the viewer in relation to these restrictions is that our orientation to, and engagement with, a performance is typi-

cally centred on attention to what the performer is doing, and how we are invited to see them, the nature of this access allowing us to make more or less complex judgements on what their movements and vocal inflections might mean, or how they affect us.

In response to the extreme limits imposed on performance, it is difficult to suggest these are performances in the traditional and accepted sense. In the studio era, at its best, the nuanced detail of performance offers an intricate mutuality of contrivance and naturalness. Performers are staged for the camera in very particular ways in order to seem natural or lifelike, even those who challenged earlier acting styles by following the Method's search for 'inner truth'. Performances were made primarily for a single camera, and a performer would know where they were in the frame while filming. The contrast between such a relationship and the distance imposed between Marilyn Burns and the camera in the cemetery is startling in its difference.

One dimension of this challenge to the old order, then, is the erosion of the sense of a performance being constructed for a camera's frame. An approach which involves filming in real locations, making use of radio mikes, long lenses and perhaps more than one camera, to place the performer at great distance from the crew, enabling them to interact with a larger, wider world, means that the film can give a strong sense of the integrity of the event, with the camera(s) an observer to an ongoing action. Nonetheless, such strategies pull in contradictory directions, shifting between a greater degree of naturalism – the independent performer captured in order to be more lifelike – as well as the other way – the lack of privileged access to the visual elements of the performance creating a revealing stylisation, which draws our attention to the conventions being refused. Consequently the relationship between realism and artifice is dismantled and foregrounded, rather than carefully balanced as it was in the studio-era.

Sally's walk through the cemetery seems to reveal and simultaneously reject the inherent artifice of narrative film. The camera almost has to seek Burns and Green out; the only clue to their narrative importance over other bodies is the pan with their movement. The extremity of the moment draws attention to what we expect – access to performance, and coherence of space and time – and thus underlines its absence. The frustration of these expectations could be seen as refusal of the traditional orchestration of elements, a disturbance which, although it might initially suggest arbitrariness, deliberately assaults the traditional certainties of time and space.

Many films of the post-studio period demonstrate a formal fragmentation of the interrelationship between artifice and illusionism. Visually this moment in the cemetery bears a resemblance to a scene from another key genre piece of the post-studio period, Peckinpah's 1971 rodeo movie, *Junior Bonner*. In this earlier film, a conversation between Junior Bonner (Steve McQueen) and rodeo owner Buck Roan (Ben Johnson) is filmed using a telephoto lens, the performers positioned behind obstacles in the street so that we are severely distanced from the conversation in hand. Like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, the relationship between camera and performer does not privilege access to expressivity, allowing both the characters to exist in a less constructed space, and the audience to become aware of the performer as filmed, drawing attention to the artificial distance between the two. Unlike *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, however, stylistic decisions in the sequence from *Junior Bonner* can be interpreted as coherent in the context of the action; as the scene concerns Junior's wish to fix a rodeo



Junior Bonner (Steve McQueen) and *Buck Roan* (Ben Johnson) talk rodeo deals

draw, and Buck's tentative job offer, the distance imposed suits the discreet nature of their conversation. Furthermore, the scene signals elements of performance to us, despite the distancing of indications of interiority. Not only does Steve McQueen's star status undoubtedly aid a sense of the expressive deliberation, but the scene also cuts closer to the performers at the climax of their interaction. Despite its challenge to formal and generic strategies, *Junior Bonner* thus demonstrates an expressive economy in the relationship between action and image that is much less appreciable in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. In the latter, the placement of the camera appears arbitrary, but the effect of this decision is less straightforward. The sequence is unsettling and disorientating, an assault on our expectations of the spatial and temporal relationship between performer and camera. In this context the lack of attention to gestures within the frame could be seen as a wilful unpicking of the traditionally accepted relationship between stylisation and transparency, the stylistic decisions achieving not a balance, but a forceful move against formal containment.



Points of continuity, a visceral departure: *Home from the Hill*

In contrast, *Home from the Hill*, and its final scenes in particular, enacts problems around containment. The film, which centres on powerful Texan landowner and notorious womaniser Wade Hunnicutt (Robert Mitchum), his wife Hannah (Eleanor Parker), and his two sons, one legitimate – Theron (George Hamilton) – and one illegitimate – Rafe (George Peppard), ends with a conversation between Rafe and Hannah in front of Wade's grave in which various narrative and thematic elements are efficiently resolved: Rafe's place in the Hunnicutt family is formally acknowledged by

Hannah, Wade's life is given order via his gravestone (the unity of the family displayed on it, despite previous estrangements) and Hannah is welcomed into the new family comprised of Rafe, Libby and her child (fathered by Theron). Rafe's new position as Hunnicutt patriarch promises a correction of the mistakes of the previous generation. Nevertheless, the ending, like so many of Hollywood's family melodramas, holds tensions stemming from such attempts at control. As Michael Walker summarises '[f]amily unity is reaffirmed; the generations are reconciled, but it is significant that this is only at the expense of Wade's death and Theron's exile' (2004: 34). In addition, there is the effect of this unity on its surviving members, recognised by Edward Gallafent, who suggests that the 'sense of definite acknowledgement goes along with the suggestion that Rafe (now Raphael) is now trapped by the relationships inscribed in the fixity of the [head stone]' (1990: 81). Gallafent's point is exemplified by the final shot of the film, in which the left half of the frame is completely filled with Wade's headstone and on the right side Rafe, dwarfed in compari-



son to the monument, pauses to look back upon it before walking away with Hannah.

The majority of the conversation between Rafe and Hannah is captured in the repetition of just three set-ups: a medium shot of George Peppard standing by a tree; a medium shot of Eleanor Parker with Wade's headstone behind her; and a medium long shot with Peppard on the right side of the frame, and Parker on the left. The way Peppard leans on the tree, one hand resting on the branches above him, communicates Rafe's easy integration with nature and the incongruity of this fundamental element of his nature, and class, with his current, modified, appearance in neat bour-

geois cardigan and slacks. This conflict is further embedded in another costume choice: the Stetson, which he now carries, has connotations of outdoor masculinity which are at odds with the sedentary implications of his clean and tidy appearance. In its arrangement of Peppard's body, the film subtly suggests that the containment imposed on Rafe is not total. The mise-en-scène coherently implies that the problems of the past still impinge on the present. Importantly, the tensions inherent in the conclusion that are most likely to rupture or return are aspects of masculinity and class. The film's achievement of a balance of the kind celebrated by Perkins is illustrated through the manner in which it delicately hints to the incompatibility of Rafe's new life with his former one.



Continuities between the worlds of *Home from the Hill* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* are materially realised through the similarity of setting, as the former reaches its conclusion in a cemetery and the latter opens in one. Indeed, the topography of the cemeteries is so close they could be the same location. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is immediately concerned with family graves, vividly engaging with issues raised by the earlier film by enacting rupture specifically in relation to the body, directly exploding, in content and form, the kinds of suppression apparently executed in *Home from the Hill*. In its very first frame an anonymous body – by later brief implication potentially Sally's grandfather – is taken out of its containment (in this case a coffin) and the messiness of its decomposition is foregrounded in close-up. This opening sequence is then followed by the sight of two rotting corpses mounted on a headstone, their intertwining bodies seemingly fashioned to be create a grisly and ironic monument. In terms of the film's concern with physical excess it is significant that we bear witness to the texture and detail of this rupture, this unearthing / de-

struction / perversion of an icon of patriarchy. The impulse is thus embedded in the materiality of the film, both through the desecration of graves and the formal dislocation of the viewing experience.

That both films realise the break in containment physically, as an aspect of how performance is staged, is crucial; a principal point of comparison lies in this externalising of the internal. The indications of Rafe's lack of containment are felt entirely through his body: the details of gesture and costuming; the placement of Peppard's body in relation to Parker and the headstone. The difference between this film and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is that these tensions are implicit in the non-declamatory treatment of performance, where the later film insists on exposure, both thematically and through a visible and formally pronounced physical disturbance to the traditions of space and performance.

Further comparison between the two films can be made through the shared theme of the family, and their destructive trajectories. Sally is a member of the same generation as Theron and Libby's son, and clearly a member of a bourgeois family – as underlined by the local inhabitants' treatment of her in the cemetery. Immediately issues of class and gender within the family and the community assert their significance. Neither the Hunnicuts, the Hardestys, nor the ex-slaughterhouse family manage containment successfully. The Hunnicuts are only able to temporarily embody civilised values via Hannah; consider how easily these structures break down in the dinner to which Theron arrives late and Wade's tenants interrupt with news of the boar. The Hardestys are physically and mentally ripped apart on-screen, while the ex-slaughterhouse family demonstrate domestic rituals which parody family values by savagely distorting them. They sit down to a family dinner at which Sally is the main dish and their home is decorated with furniture and ornaments fashioned from animal and human bones. For all its lack of narrative causality, the patriarchal structures activated and ruptured in the opening of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* indicate a logic to the deaths which follow. The Hardestys' grandfather is later revealed to have been the owner of a slaughterhouse, and thus potentially the former employer of the family who attack the group. The differing relationships of these families to the slaughterhouse, seemingly the only local industry, gesture to the significance of wider socio-economic structures which so clearly determine their place in the post-industrial world of 1970s America. Indeed, it could be argued that the ex-slaughterhouse family is insane and murderous precisely because of the wider threat of an industrial and social change, of which the young, urban, middle class group are the beneficiaries. The implication of these structures pushes out even wider, stemming from ideological frameworks central to a great many works of American Literature.³ In his article, Gallafent points out the far-reaching significance of such themes as employed by the earlier film, but he could just as easily be discussing *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*:

[t]he matters to which the film addresses itself – the significance of the hunt, the nature and purpose of the family, the transmission of patriarchal power – are continually recycled in American culture because they raise some of the central tensions and contradictions of that culture. (1990: 65)

Melodramatic mode

Making connections between these two films through the significance of the body in revealing tensions necessarily suggests something important about their modes of repre-



sentation and the status of genre, undermining melodrama and horror as discrete traditions. Echoes between the two films penetrate certain other details of their design, for example the visual similarity of a blood red wall covered with animal trophies found in Wade Hunnicut's den and in *Leatherface's* workshop.⁴ That elements such as décor would bear such expressive weight is symptomatic of the kind of excessive structures supporting the films' worlds.

Melodrama, as Deborah Thomas notes, is a pervasive structure that characterises films in many genres, rather than existing as a distinct category. Her radical argument contends that all Hollywood films can be considered either comedic or melodramatic, and a different vocabulary is required to successfully negotiate our responses to these modes: 'many of the most central characteristics attributed to them appear to apply to films of many genres, making their generic identities dissolve in our grasp' (Thomas, 2000: 10).⁵ In a way that closely reflects Thomas' argument, Linda Williams emphasises the particulars of three genres' interconnectedness by suggesting that '[i]t would not be unreasonable, in fact, to consider [pornography, horror and melodrama] under the extended rubric of melodrama, considered as a filmic mode of stylistic and/or emotional excess that stands in contrast to more "dominant" modes of realistic, goal-oriented narrative' (1991: 4).

Williams' suggests a relationship between horror and melodrama through their specific interest in representations and experiences of physicality. She also registers that excess is as important to horror as it is to melodrama, through horror's concern with spectacle and extremes of expression in relationship to the body. Recognising these continuities is valuable in approaching the methodological challenges that *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* represents and could have much wider implications for performance analysis. Melodramatic acting is descended from overtly physical performance modes, like pantomime and acrobatics, and is 'predicated on the plastic figurability of emotion, its shaping as a visible and almost tactile entity ... the striking of dramatic poses' (Brooks, 1976, 1995: 47). Characterisation

is not built around psychology or interior depth but rather in relation to embodying types that represent an ethical or moral force, and employing modes of expression that exert a material affect on the audience's experience. For both performers and their audience, the internal is externalised. Through this critical lens, the lack of access to interiority in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre's* cemetery scene could in fact be an integral aspect of the performance mode.

Closeness

I will now look at the scene of Kirk's death, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre's* first fatal attack, employing a revised approach to the film and its challenges helped by new emphasis on the body. Following Kirk (William Vail) and Pam's (Terri McMinn) unsuccessful expedition to find a water hole, the two attempt to borrow gas at the neighbouring farm. Kirk knocks on the farmhouse's front door, leaving Pam sitting some way from the house on a swing. Hearing no answer he opens the door and calls into the hallway. As he opens the screen-door and steps into the hall, the film cuts to a long shot of William Vail, framed and silhouetted



in the open doorway. Vail then runs down the hall towards an opening at the other end, the film cutting to keep him in frame as he runs. When he reaches the other doorway Vail

trips and stumbles into the bulky figure of Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen) who appears there at the same time. The sound of a pig grunting and squealing accompanies Hansen's entrance, though it is unclear whether this noise is coming from inside the house, or from a non-diegetic source. The camera's movements become momentarily confused, but seem to show Vail's back in close-up as he lurches into Hansen, closely followed by a brief close-up of Vail over Hansen's shoulder. The film cuts to a view of Hansen's aproned legs, the camera rapidly zooming in and upwards to place him in a medium shot from a slightly lower angle, as he raises his sledgehammer. The film cuts again to a long shot from the other end of the hall, showing Hansen framed by the opening, the red trophy wall behind him, as he smashes Vail over the head with the hammer and watches him slump to the floor. The pig noises continue and intensify as Vail's body twitches on the floor. As Hansen leans over Vail the film cuts to what could be Leatherface's point of view (though this is unclear in the rapidity of the editing) of Kirk's bloody face and then to his torso and his twitching feet and legs. The camera returns to the long shot of the doorway as Hansen hits Vail again, before pulling him into the space behind the opening, and then sliding the metal screen across it.

The sequence offers very little in terms of performance: there is no dialogue and Kirk merely runs to his death which is served up perfunctorily by Leatherface. The closeness of the camera to the actors in many of the shots doesn't present the characters in a way that is conducive to understanding the detail of their expressions and gestures. It is also one of a number of instances in the film where the relationship between performer and camera is made problematic through numerous shifts in set-up and editing.

The decision to have Vail run down the hall is clearly not arbitrary – for the sudden quickness of movement after his lingering at the door is particular and peculiar, not least in the effect it has on the pacing of events – neither is it blatant – for the movement and the way in which we are in-

vited to see it makes it tricky to register what is happening. The sudden appearance of Leatherface from behind the screen happens with so little warning it is difficult to know exactly how to respond given such a restrictive view of the action. As in the cemetery sequence, we are distanced from the characters, cut off from any notion of interiority; motives are withheld, not readily discernable in the characters or their actions.

Yet, the insights of melodramatic embodiment raised through attention to *Home from the Hill* allow performance and the strategies in filming it to be seen in a different manner. In the melodramatic mode, performance is not a means to psychological depth, but rather the method by which the performer directs events and the spectator experiences them. In these respects the body is our point of engagement, ensuring that we respond to the moment on a more physical or intuitive level: we don't understand why, but experience how. This expressive shift operates as a vivid challenge to the way we appreciate any given moment, insisting exclusively on its materiality. In this case the overwhelming shock of the moment as it concerns Vail's physicality is decisive in heralding the rest of the film as relentless experience.

In this revised critical approach, the interpretative emphasis in looking at Kirk's death is not on access, interiority or understanding the character, but on the striking contrast in the rapid changes between states of physicality. The film fully captures the determination and power of Vail's body as he runs down the hall, but closely follows this with a shot of him twitching helplessly on the floor. While we may have been distanced from him until this point in terms of epistemic access or a moral alignment, the swiftness of the switch from intruder to victim is deeply shocking. Vail's body performs the finality of Kirk's death most harrowingly, his twitching and kicking making the brutality of the act more emphatic. The body is the only point of engagement available to us, ensuring a physical response, an apprehension based almost simplistically on the dynamics of what is



Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen) lifts a hammer to strike Kirk

played out on-screen. Elements such as the lower angled shot of Leatherface raising his hammer position us with Kirk, not in the sense that we have greater access to him internally, but rather that we are forced into his experience of events as they happen. While this doesn't necessarily constitute a balance of action and image, there is a kind of experiential synthesis between what is shown and the way of showing it. The limited physical alignment that is created through his burst of movement is crucial, for there is an aspect of sensuous engagement with Kirk in this emphasis on a purely physical connection, one suggestively in correspondence with the neurophysiological discovery of the mirror neuron system.⁶ The revelation that the same neurons are fired whether one is doing or watching a particular activity unearths a link between the execution and perception of an action, which seems highly important to the overlapping of Kirk's physical experience and our own, and to the watching of films more generally.

Through such material associations we can implicitly understand the way Hansen's performance interacts with Vail's to engage with the film's wider themes of slaughter, its place as a skill and the impact of its mechanisation. Leatherface treats Kirk's body as non-human, a piece of meat, hitting it until it stops twitching and then hauling it by its limbs into the back room. Through their treatment by the family, the group of young people become animal-like, both in the way they are killed and in their attempts to escape.

Another parallel with *Home from the Hill* is possible here: when Wade is shot on the hunting trip that opens the film he reflects on his closeness to death, referring to his dead body as 'cold meat' which would have been placed with the rest of the hunting kills; *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* embodies this process in the killing of Kirk (and the others) and hunting of Sally by Leatherface.

Attention to the brief moment of Kirk's death gives an indication of the extent to which the stylistic strategies of the film place importance on aspects central to the melodramatic mode: 1. the emphasis on physicality and excess, as performed through gesture, 2. muteness, especially in the extended chase of Sally by Leatherface, so that emphasis is placed on physical expression and, above all, 3. the sense of materiality. Looking at the sequence in this light allows greater access to *feeling* what is happening, rather than concentrating on *knowing* everything, so that analysis is shifted more fully to questions of texture and experience. The extent of the meaningful interrelationship of excesses of expression and engagement exemplifies the importance of experience to an audience's understanding in both melodrama and horror.

Conclusion

Insights about the physical, through the melodramatic mode, have allowed this article to build a different approach to performance. Melodrama's concern with performance places engagement more in tune with sensation and experience, than understanding or empathy. This approach has enabled me to recognise that *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*'s fragmentation of, and distance from, performance is a structuring principle of the film's wilful assault on our expectations of engagement, and on an organic relationship between treatment and expression. In its deliberate explosion of the formal propriety of the studio era, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* can be considered to achieve coherence on its own terms, though in more uncomfortable manner than Robin Wood's conception of coherent incoherence suggests. The strategy of formal ruptures, fragmentation and inscrutability fundamentally unsettles our relationship to

performance in a way that maintains the film's interrogation of traditional certainties, vitally reaffirming incoherence and chaos in the watching experience. The startling manner in which it problematises expectations of time and space goes some way to explain the film's impact, both at the time of its release and now, and indicates that it still warrants a place in discussion of contemporary film form and film criticism.⁷ Significantly it is the formal assault which constitutes the sustained shock within the film, rather than violence or gore, as the sequence of Kirk's death indicates. While *Home from the Hill* may offer a more fulfilling interpretative experience as a result of its careful crafting of sustained effects, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* achieves a synthesis between its radical disruption of our viewing position and the sensuality of our engagement with its performances.

Lucy Fife Donaldson

I would like to thank John Gibbs for his encouragement, and thank both him and Edward Gallafent for their editorial guidance, from which this article has benefitted greatly.

© Lucy Fife Donaldson, 2010

[Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism](#), 1.

Lucy Fife Donaldson recently completed her PhD 'Engaging with Performance in Post-Studio Horror', undertaken in the Department of Film, Theatre & Television at the University of Reading. Her research focuses on the materiality of performance and its relationship to elements of film style.

Works Cited

- Brooks, P. (1976, 1995) *The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Cameron, I. & P. Mayersberg, V.F. Perkins, M. Shivas (1963) 'Movie Differences', *Movie*, 8, pp. 28-34.
- Cameron, I. & J. Hillier, V.F. Perkins, M. Walker, R. Wood (1975) 'The Return of Movie', *Movie*, 20, 1-25.
- Gallafent, E. (1990) 'The Adventures of Rafe Hunnicut: The Bourgeois Family in 'Home from the Hill' (1960)', *Movie*, 34/35, 65-81. [Reprinted in McElhaney, J. (2009) *Vincente Minnelli: The Art of Entertainment*. Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 185-204]
- Perkins, V.F. (1972, 1978) *Film as Film. Understanding and Judging Movies*. London: Penguin Books.
- Rizzolatti, G. & M. Fabbri-Destro, L. Cattaneo (2009) 'Mirror Neurons and Their Clinical Relevance', *Nature Clinical*

Practice Neurology, 5, 24-34.

Ryan, T. (1975) 'The Pursuit of Happiness', *Movie*, 21, 26-29.

Sharrett, C. (2007) 'Home from the Hill, Minnelli and the Crisis of Post-War Patriarchy', *Film International*, 29, 5, 5, 54-62.

Thomas, D. (2000) *Beyond Genre: Melodrama, Comedy and Romance in Hollywood Films*. Moffat: Cameron & Hollis.

Walker, M. (2004) 'Home From the Hill: Vincente Minnelli, 1959', *CineAction*, 63, 22-34.

Williams, L. (1991) 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess', *Film Quarterly*, 44, 4, 2-13.

Williams, T. (1977/78) 'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre', *Movie*, 25, 12-16.

Wood, R. (1979) 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film' in Lippe, R. & R. Wood (eds.) *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*. Toronto: Festival of Festivals.

_____ (1980/81) 'The Incoherent Text: Narrative in the '70s', *Movie*, 27/28, 24-42.

Worland, R. (2007) *The Horror Film: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

¹ See *Movie* 8, for a discussion which sets out to present the different attitudes of the editorial board (Ian Cameron, Paul Mayersburg, V.F. Perkins and Mark Shivas) and offers insight into their concern with coherence.

² Excluding issue 24 (1977) which was based entirely around the musical.

³ For example, the connections drawn between *Massacre* and James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking novels by Tony Williams (1977/78: 12-16).

⁴ The presence of this visual echo between the two films initially inspired their comparison; I have since discovered that it has also been recognised in passing by Christopher Sharrett who discusses its relationship to American savagery (2007: 61).

⁵ Such as those in the title of Thomas' introduction: 'Structures, Moods and Worlds' (Thomas, 2000: 9).

⁶ My thanks to John Gibbs, who first brought this phenomena to my attention. The mirror neuron was discovered by neurophysiologists Giacomo Rizzolatti, Giuseppe Di Pellegrino, Luciano Fadiga, Leonardo Fogassi and Vittorio Gallese at the University of Parma in the 1990s. An article by Rizzolatti, Maddalena Fabbri-Destro and Luigi Cateano usefully outlines the essence of the 'mirror mechanism' (Rizzolatti, Fabbri-Destro & Cateano, 2009: 24-34).

⁷ As at the conference 'Continuity and Innovation: Contemporary Film Form and Film Criticism', held at the University of Reading, 5-7th September 2008, for which the material in this article was originally conceived.