

INBREDS & CANNIBALS & SAVAGES, OH MY!:

A GENRE ANALYSIS OF APPALACHIAN

ATROCITIES

By

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Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of the representation of the Appalachian region in horror films. It examines the representations of the region in films such as *The Hills Have Eyes*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Jug Face*, and the representations of the inhabitants of Appalachia in films such *We Are What We Are*. The analysis is conducted through a rhetorical analysis of the genre's most core elements, such as the substance of the movie, the situational and styleistic, and the sensory aspects of the movies.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the media, depictions of both the region and the inhabitants of Appalachia are rife with isolated, terrifying forests that are filled with uncivilized, bloodthirsty monsters. Appalachia is a vast expanse of wilderness in which no *actual* human could ever successfully survive, so the region's inhabitants must be more substantial, faster, mutated versions of humans to live there. Mutated human-like creatures have a hatred and a vengeance towards their typical, civilized counterparts who wind up within their territory by accident or folly. Depictions like these are pervasive across media types, but the stereotypes are perhaps most insidious in the horror genre. Associations with isolation, primitive behavior, and ignorance have fed into and fueled the negative stereotypes around the region, such as the "hillbilly" identity and perceptions that the Appalachians live in perpetual, abstract poverty, and require saving.

In this thesis, I interrogate the representations of the Appalachian region and the people who live there in horror films and, consequently, the rhetorical implications of those depictions. By examining the generic elements of the movie, I propose the introduction of a new horror subgenre, which I call "Appalachian Atrocity" or "Appalachian horror," which negatively shapes perceptions of Appalachia. These perceptions are based on historical stereotypes and have become codified in horror film lore for circulation in other areas of popular culture and even political decision-making. Across all of the content chapters, I demonstrate how the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre takes seemingly innocuous things or events and twists them into a darker, more violent version of them when presented through an Appalachian lens. The films thus operate as types of "uncanny valleys" into "normal" society where things like family values and loyalty, religious ritual, and even daylight, are morphed into monstrous caricatures.

When describing Appalachian Atrocity or horror depictions of Appalachia and its inhabitants, I argue that it is not necessarily a physical place that defines the subgenre but the similarities between certain characters and movies that draw upon recognizable Appalachian lingual or cultural qualities. For example, the central families in *The Hills Have Eyes*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *We Are What We Are* are all comparable not in where exactly they live, but in that all three families have recognizable traits of Appalachian culture that combine with horror tropes about the region's inhabitants such as cannibalism and hostility towards outsiders. Each family also has either explicit or implicit tones of incest and sexual violence that have come to be associated with the region's inhabitants. Therefore, the artifacts that I will be examining in this thesis will not, and really cannot, be limited to films that explicitly take place in the Appalachian mountain region.

Throughout this thesis, I not only home in on what those Appalachian stereotypes are, but I also identify pieces of media that use Appalachian culture as a vehicle to characterize evil, immorality, and the villains of society, regardless of where the physical setting is. It is because the Appalachian culture and stereotypes are used so frequently in media that takes place outside of the Appalachians that I would be remiss not to dissect those artifacts as well, which draw upon Appalachian stereotypes despite the differently-named or implied regions.

This introduction first reviews historical and cultural literature regarding the Appalachian region before addressing literature about horror media and my proposed subgenre of Appalachian Atrocity. Using these works of literature as foundational sources from where Appalachian stereotypes emerge, I apply genre criticism to a series of horror films to locate common traits, features, and representations of Appalachia as a place and Appalachia as an identity. I build on the work of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1978) to

analyze the subgenre through the lens of their “three s’s” of genre: substance, situation, and style. Drawing on the work of Brian Ott and Greg Dickinson (2019), I propose a new, fourth element to the traditional elements of genre criticism: the senses. The addition of somatic and sensory elements is apt for horror films, as the genre uses “shocking visuals and disturbing sounds” to invite “visceral” experiences in audience members (Bloomfield, 2021, p. 341). As a defining feature of the genre, I propose this separate category to trace similarities in the evocation of the senses across Appalachian Atrocity films beyond their substantive presence.

Appalachian Identity

Searching for a definition of what exactly constitutes Appalachia or who exactly is Appalachian is more complex than drawing a border around a region on a map. There have been government attempts at drawing borders around the region to define better the economic and social issues of the area (Hayes, 2018; Synder, 2014), but geographically, it is practically impossible to accurately map out every person or county that considers themselves to reside in the Appalachian region or be Appalachian. Instead, Appalachians can be defined more by shared cultural and lingual values than geographical boundaries (Hayes, 2018). Appalachia is thus not only a physical place but also an identity that transcends physical boundaries and is constructed in media and politics through a slew of negative stereotypes.

Appalachian Stereotypes

The broader identity of the people of the Appalachian region has long been defined by a myriad of negative stereotypes that range from appearance to education and relationships. Hayes (2018) explains that representations of the Appalachian identity originated from a “rhetorical ecosystem” in which circulating rhetorics are shaped by and shape its consumers. The rhetorical

ecosystem that has influenced the Appalachian identity is unique in that the region has historically been seen as a place that is uneducated and more uncivilized than the rest of the United States (Richards, 2019). Violence is seen as natural for Appalachian folk to engage in; it is “normal for their culture” (Richards, 2019). Appalachians are stereotyped as dirty, poor, and violent; therefore, benevolent, white, Christian northerners are responsible for coming down and kindly educating the poor mountain folk. These stereotypes are depicted as familiar tropes across media and have led to several organizations and campaigns whose sole goal is to change the fabric of Appalachian culture (Hayes, 2018; Snyder, 2014).

Hayes (2018) explains the differences between the rhetorical and linguistic traditions of the first European colonizers in Appalachia, who were majority Scots-Irish and came with an entirely different and, therefore, incorrect way of speaking, thinking, and doing things when compared to the Greco-Roman rhetorical traditions of the rest of the young United States. Instead of being descended from a rhetorical culture that valued complex rules and having a “winner” in a debate and accredited speakers by might and education, the Scots-Irish culture had a rhetorical tradition that was much more centered on community engagement and humility (Hayes, 2018). To be considered credible in traditional Celtic cultures, a speaker and leader had to have deep identification with the community; they had to be well-respected enough to be listened to but also act with kindness and humility, which is significantly less common in other rhetorical traditions. They did not need to have any sort of formal training in rhetoric or argumentation, nor did it appear their credibility was dependent on their education at all. To make decisions, the community came together and reflected back on past incidents and what the community’s response was in the past, and would make a decision based on careful reflection and consideration (Hayes, 2018).

Appalachian Communities

Elements of this rhetorical tradition heavily shaped traditional Appalachian communities, with the communities being seen as more close-knit and emphasizing the importance of community and family (Massey, 2007). This focus on community and family values has become distorted by stereotypes surrounding incest have been tied to Appalachian communities. Additionally, stereotypes emerge regarding work ethic and gender roles; instead of the Appalachian man being hard-working doing backbreaking physical labor, he is a lazy, uneducated, drunken slob. Instead of the Appalachian woman being a loving mother who stays home with the children, cooks, cleans, and gardens, she is ugly and desexualized, exhausted by her husband, and miserable with her circumstances (Massey, 2007). The Appalachian family is not a family; they are a “clan.” No matter the similarities between Appalachian culture and non-Appalachian culture, these values are never performed quite right. Whatever the performance of the family or relationships they are doing will always be wrong; it will always be uncanny because, based on their position in society, they are simply not people who can have a truly “civilized” family and life.

In a personal reflection of their Appalachian upbringing, Hayes (2018) expresses her frustration with the American Court system and their lack of cultural understanding after her cousin loses a custody case to her ex-husband because of a judge, both of whom were outsiders to the Appalachian culture. They did not care that the child in the situation had an extensive maternal familial support system outside of her mother, nor did they care that what they considered to be “living in poverty” was just the standard way many Appalachian families live in multigenerational properties with a dependence more on the land and community than on physical money (Hayes, 2018). All that mattered to the man who wanted custody and the judge

was that the little girl would not grow up in a traditional American household if she stayed with the mother's family in Appalachia.

Simply, Appalachian and "American" cultures are pitted against each other; Appalachian culture is wrong, or at least atypical or undesirable, and living off the land when there are splendid suburbs and cities is wrong; therefore, children must be removed from that environment and placed in a "normal" home, and if that cannot be done, the way the Appalachians think, speak, and act must be eradicated. Community colleges around Appalachia, staffed by primarily regional outsiders even went so far as to create a "Banned Words Project," where educators targeted common parts of Appalachian speech, such as the use of "y'all," and banned students from using them in writing or speech, encouraging them to use only "proper" English even amongst their peers and family members (Hayes, 2018), instead of linguistic differences being, at minimum, treated neutrally, any diffraction from what is traditionally accepted as "proper" English was treated as wrong and connotes the stupidity and poverty of the speaker.

Undoubtedly, the Appalachian young adults they were tasked with educating would be much better off in all aspects of life once they were educated and finally knew how to talk correctly. In changing language education, these schools were erasing important cultural components of the Appalachian region. Not unlike the boarding schools of the US and Canada that sought to erase Native American culture or US schools in the Philippines to "civilize" Filipinos (Picard, 2014; Pico, 2021), Appalachian schools also worked to eliminate unique features of Appalachian people to assimilate them into "normal" US American culture.

The Appalachian people and region have long been an inside-outsider within broader American culture. While they operate within US borders, they are also relegated to society's educational and economic fringes, translating into a negative image of the region. Todd Synder

(2014) discusses the cornerstone identity of Appalachian men – the Hillbilly. The Hillbilly is the definition of an “Appalachian Man,” and the two are undeniably linked in their heritage and traits. Heavily influenced by the rural area and the coal industry, the hillbilly has had their existence defined almost entirely by someone else, and an identity that Snyder (2014) says “exists someplace between myth and reality” (p. 13). The hillbilly is a hardworking man who loves and wants to provide for his family and community but is also a violent patriarch. He is independent; he could exist outside the bounds of the law and government and live off the land if need be. He is skilled in industry and manual labor; he has to work in Appalachia and would go the extra mile to help a neighbor (Synder, 2014).

At the same time, the Appalachian man is a gross, uneducated brute living under the thumb of his work, unfriendly to outsiders, and likely violent if provoked too hard. He works in coal mines, an industry blamed for environmental impacts due to its by-products; while he depends on the industry economically, he suffers directly from its toxicity. Coal companies decided that the people, and especially the men of Appalachia, were on such lower social strata than non-Appalachians that they were allowed to work and die in coal mines (Synder, 2014) and then live in poverty, caused by the coal companies, in order for non-Appalachians to have access to the luxurious lifestyle coal afforded them to have. Appalachia is consistently posited as one of the most impoverished places in America. It is seemingly due to this poverty that the area and its people have historically been seen as expendable resources for both the government and the coal companies who have dominated the region’s economy for decades (Synder, 2014).

The Appalachian man cannot interact normally with those outside his community and is imminently distrustful, if not hostile, towards any outsiders. Supposedly, he has no reason to be wary of outside influence; he simply does not understand that people are there to *help* him leave

his wretched lifestyle behind and evolve into a more civilized man. The sponsors and organizations who were often responsible for bringing more traditional schooling to the area had the expectation and ultimate goal that the Appalachian children would leave behind the lingual and educational habits of their communities, asserting that the reason for the abject poverty in the region was simply because the people did not know how to “talk” or act right (Donehower, 2007). If they did not accept these fundamental changes, they chose a life of poverty and were seen as willfully ignorant (Hayes, 2018).

This conflicting rhetoric has created a rhetorical ecosystem in which every way that the Appalachian community attempts to define themselves is labeled as uncivilized at worst and sweetly ignorant at best. Appalachian culture highly values family, living off and with the land, and community, yet instead, has been defined by outsiders as uncivilized, unlike other US Americans, and untrustworthy, who have created the dominant textual materials for the region and created an unbalanced rhetorical ecosystem. In both authentic educational materials and popular culture depictions of the region made by outsiders, the region is almost always in need of saving and hauling up by outside forces or as a violent, lawless land that outsiders should approach with fear or not at all, and that makes the people out to be walking monsters, at worst, or uneducated simpletons, at best.

For example, in the 1960s, a small Kentucky town was the subject of a documentary about the Appalachian region and the people living there, centering mainly around the area's poverty and depicting the residents disparagingly. One resident was so unhappy with how his town, his people, and himself were portrayed in the documentary that he murdered the man spearheading the project. During his trial and the subsequent media circus, it was decided that the violence was so typical for this man's culture, Appalachia, that he had no way of knowing

how wrong murdering a filmmaker from the city was (Richards, 2019). The culture that he was raised in was so different, so primitive when compared to standard American culture, that he can simply not be held to those same moral standards because he will never be able to reach nor understand them. The punishment for not abiding by those moral standards is the poverty the region lives in, for indeed, only cursed people would live and act the way a stereotypical Appalachian does.

For decades, those who like to change the region have claimed that the Appalachians suffer from *agnosis*; they actively choose to be ignorant because they want to be (Donehower, 2007; Hayes, 2018). Appalachian children may begin to learn and grow and are imminently inundated with the idea that something about them is wrong; often, it starts with how they speak. They are not speaking standard US American English and are chastised for using words and phrases that have been staples of the region for generations. Once children learn that talking like an Appalachian is wrong, they know that being Appalachian is wrong, and to be successful, to get out of Appalachia, as they surely must want to do, they must renounce their language differences and every other aspect of their culture that would not fit into more urban living. They do everything in their power to distance themselves from their Appalachian identity. So, it becomes impossible to be Appalachian and successful because to be successful, the “uncivilized” parts of them must be renounced and suppressed. Therefore, the only way to remain an Appalachian and continue to be accepted by your home and your community is to reject education and the notion that your culture is wrong or bad.

Appalachian Identity Kits

Hayes (2018) conceptualized the process by which Appalachian people must stitch together different facets of their identity as “identity kits.” The immaterial “kits” are filled with

circulating rhetorics and stereotypes, experiences and interactions, social and cultural cues, education about acceptable traits, and, by default, the things that fall outside the realm of proper identity. For example, a young man in Appalachia might gather from his father and his grandfather that a “good Appalachian Man” is someone who works hard and provides for their family while also being told by his teacher that the ways Appalachian men have been providing for their families for decades now, coal mining, is harmful, and the people who participate in it are bad (Sydner, 2014). So, he already has two potentially conflicting aspects of his identity and must work through the process of deciding which pieces of what he is being told resonate with him and which pieces he will begin to adapt into his identity. The various rhetorical sources piece together these identity kits and are heavily tied to where the kits originate. Similarly, a young woman in Appalachia might be set up to choose between an inherently Appalachian identity where she is barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen, running a large household of various family relationships, growing and canning food to get her family through the long winter, and leaving her town behind for a life of work outside of the home, and outside the Appalachian region.

For example, Synder (2014) left Appalachia to become a teacher at a small college in upstate New York. In his analysis of Appalachia, he reflected on the question from students as to whether or not he still *really* counted as an Appalachian. In this reflection, he was forced to confront the various conflicting parts of his identity kit, the parts where Appalachian communities were ambivalent towards formal education at best, and the part of him that still valued his grandfather’s stories and the traditions he had grown up with, and the current part of him that was now teaching at a place where his students likely had historically viewed people “like him” as uneducated, bigoted hicks (Snyder, 2018).

A similar tension is seen in James Chase Sanchez's (2018) book *Salt of the Earth*. Sanchez's and Snyder's experiences are marked by removal from an originating homeland that creates mixed feelings, oppositional identities, and tensions between one's past and present. Sanchez grew up mixed in Grand Saline, Texas, a notorious sundown town impacted by racially motivated murders and had zero black people living there. After a minister self-immolates in the 2010s to bring awareness to the racist past and present of the town, Sanchez comes back to help with a documentary about the subject and finds that many of the town's white people are unwilling to discuss or even acknowledge the violent, racist history of Grand Saline. Sanchez is then forced to confront how he and other townsfolk participated in white supremacy, his identity in upholding that institution as a man of color, and how he was both an insider and an outsider in Grand Saline based on his racial background.

Much like Snyder and other Appalachians who have left their homes, Sanchez (2018) experienced a duality of identity, one constructed through the self and perceptions of others. Those who have decided to leave, or self-made outsiders, are expected to answer for all of the region, to defend their culture and home while also renouncing it because they have left. These tensions symbolize the Appalachian identity, where there is no clear way to succeed or assimilate while still being Appalachian. Framed as outsiders culturally, educationally, and socially, stereotypes of the region can permeate political thought and popular culture as common villains or outsider figures. To explore how features of the Appalachian identity emerge in media and their potential effects, I now turn to the literature on media theories and the horror genre.

Media Representations

Media representations shape how people view and talk about Appalachian and people who live there, both from outsiders and insiders. The cultural identity of the region's people is filtered through media portrayals where Appalachians are not quite as US American, white, or civilized as media producers of mainstream culture. Stuart Hall (1992) posits that cultural identity is not just about being or becoming; it is intertwined with both stages and is constantly being influenced, and cultural identity belongs to the past, the present, and the future (p. 70). Cultural identity is something that is constantly shifting. A piece of media that circulates quickly and widely has the potential to impact both insider and outsider knowledge of cultural identity imminently (Bradshaw, 2018), so when the most rapidly spreading pieces of media about a region and its people depict them as, at best, uneducated and living off the land and, at worst being inbred cannibals who hunt and kill for fun, the cultural identity will likely not be seen as a positive one.

Media representations of Appalachia have created a “pseudo environment” for the people to exist in and respond to (Lippmann, 1922). Walter Lippmann (1922) explains that not all environments and situations people believe they are encountering reflect the reality of the domain. However, this does not stop those pseudo-environments from influencing people to act and respond to the environment as though it is real because, in their minds, it is the reality. Perceptions of Appalachia may affect people's understanding of the region and its inhabitants and shape political and cultural responses to it. For example, in her analysis of *The Forest*, Emma Frances Bloomfield (2018) argues that the film's representations of Japanese people, Japanese culture, and the heritage site of the Aokigahara Forest “may negatively affect a person's conception of Japan and misconstrue important elements of its culture and heritage” (p. 164).

These negative media portrayals and stereotypes are not dissimilar to how the slums of Calcutta, India, are presented in the movie *City of Joy*, which follows a white male doctor who goes in to improve the lives of the residents of the slums, acting as their white savior. From the chaotic introductory scenes of India (not even the slums where most of the plot takes place) to the incompetency or hostility of the Indian characters, it is clear that the residents of the country and their values are not meant to be respected by either Max, the main character, or the audience (Shome, 1996). His “Americanness” is even noted as being something that makes him better and “more disciplined” than the Indian characters around him, just by virtue of his being a white American man. Max is depicted in contrast to the dirty, impoverished people around him, and it is evident in the movie that they *need* Max; only he, an outsider with a much more advanced culture, can provide the support that will genuinely help the residents of the slum (Shome, 1996). In many cases, such as in *City of Joy*, “otherness” and the cultural other must always be depicted as more primitive and savage than the standard of whiteness displayed as aspirational.

In terms of more specifically-Appalachian stereotypes, the *Dukes of Hazzard* main characters self-identify as Appalachian, sharing linguistic characteristics with the region, but this is only pointed out in the movie version when a group of Black men call the Dukes “hillbillies” because they are raising the Confederate Flag, and doing blackface. It is only ever referenced when the characters are doing objectively unsavory things, much like in the TV show *Justified*, which follows a town of hillbillies in Kentucky, doing unsavory and illegal activities and running from law enforcement bodies. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, Dr. Hannibal Lecter taunts Clarice Starling about her Appalachian roots, which are used to suggest she may not be bright or competent, as there is a sharp distinction between her country drawl and Lecter’s British accent. In 2013, MTV aired a reality show called *Buckwild* that depicted the young people of Appalachia

as unmotivated, unintelligent, and only concerned with drugs, alcohol, and sex. The region's inhabitants are almost universally depicted as unintelligent, violent savages, regardless of genre or medium. There are many more depictions of Appalachia that can create "obdurate" stereotypes that "interfere with the full recognition of [the stereotyped population's] humanity" (Lippmann, 1922, pp. 61, 56)

Horror and Appalachian Atrocity

Like all media, the horror genre is a depiction and commentary on the world around it. Horror, however, uniquely reflects society's fears, anxieties, traumas, and larger issues. Instead of trying to strictly define what a horror movie is, horror movies can be grouped by some common elements, such as the film having an underlying sense of dread or the inclusion of visuals that are meant to be shocking and disturbing for an audience (Bloomfield, 2021; Toti, 2010).

Horror films operate primarily through creating a divide between the self and the "other," which sets up the obstacle characters must overcome to return to their "normal" way of life after confronting "otherness" (Bloomfield, 2018; see also Marak, 2015; Wee, 2014). Casey Ryan Kelly (2017) describes the rhetorical notion of "thanatopolitics, or how a society organizes which lives are considered sacred and which are considered disposable. Thanatopolitics marks the line where precarity is rationalized in the name of life; in short, for "us" to live, "they" must be allowed to die" (Kelly, 2017, p. 238).

Many subgenres of horror films stem from the major plot points, who or what is identified as the "monster" or "Other," and their stylistic tone. In his analysis of *It Follows*, Casey Ryan Kelly (2017) proposes the subgenre of "ambient horror" to detail how the film transforms a specific named monster into the diffuse dread of "environmental, infrastructural,

and material stratification of society in a time of precarity” (p. 3). Other horror genres, such as eco-horror and body horror, depict humans in a tenuous relationship with the natural world and involve experimentation with the human form, respectively.

As a subgenre of horror, Appalachian Atrocity films draw on stereotypes of Appalachian places and people as the antagonists and have been a genre staple since at least the 1950s (Toti, 2010). Standard films in this genre include *The Hills Have Eyes*, the *Wrong Turn* franchise, *Two Thousand Maniacs*, *We Are What We Are*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *Jug Face*.

Locating a film in the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre is primarily based on coded imagery, language, and characters associated with rural life and hillbilly culture. For example, the main antagonists of *The Hills Have Eyes* franchise are mutants who have been made that way due to radioactive testing. However, communally, they undeniably exhibit traits of what views would recognize as a stereotypical hillbilly, such as the accents and language they use despite being set in a Western desert. Due to the variability of these representations, I undertake an analysis of Appalachian presentation in horror films to flesh out the Appalachia Atrocity subgenre. My interest in the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre extends from the association of hillbilly culture and the region of Appalachia and how and why that particular group of people has been depicted as monstrous “Others” against the current, civilized, and urbanized world protagonists tend to come from. In these films, the protagonists are authorized to seek “vengeance” on the monsters for violating norms and taboos associated with modern life.

This analysis includes the recognition of generic components such as common themes, patterns of representation, stylistic choices, and strategies for audience engagement. For example, Appalachian communities are frequently depicted as participating in taboo acts such as incest, cannibalism, and ritual sacrifice. Sigmund Freud (1913) considered incest one of the two

“universal taboos” that practically no culture condoned engaging in. Yet, incest is commonly depicted as a cultural norm in horror films that centers around Appalachian characters. In the movie *Jug Face*, for example, a young, pregnant girl is singled out by her community’s deity for sacrifice, not because the baby’s father is her brother but because she had sex outside of her vows once she was betrothed to another man. The villains in this genre of movie are often shown as being inbred and having a variety of genetic deformities that come with it, such as the Peacock Family in the *X-Files* episode *Home*, whose generations of inbreeding in the name of “keeping the bloodline pure” resulted in generations of genetic defects. Despite their use in contemporary media to elicit shock and disgust in audiences, such practices were not always considered abnormal. For example, the Habsburg royal family was infamous for their inbreeding in order to retain the dynasty’s control over European monarchies, resulting in a prominent genetic deformity called the Habsburg chin. In *Appalachian Atrocity*, these “outdated” taboos no longer practiced in civilized society are made monstrous and horrifying in the present.

Appalachia has long been a place shrouded in mystery, a place to be feared and respected and the population that has settled there has also come to be shrouded in that same mystery and slight fear. *Topoi* is a term that dates back to Aristotle and can be boiled down to both general and particular places in which recurring rhetorical situations and patterns arise. The places are not limited to physical space; rather, the places can be a metaphor or a real physical place (Young & Eckstein, 2020). Appalachia displays characteristics of both; the physical space exists as well as a mystical or metaphorical place that has at least in part contributed to negative stereotypes that are attributed to the population, such as a taste for human flesh. In Appalachia, more so than in other regions in the United States, the population is at least partially dependent on the land for multiple different types of food, if not their entire diets, forcing them to be more self-sufficient

and have rougher than the average American when it comes to how they acquire their food (Young & Eckstein, p. 60, 2020). Rural or “savage” living has long been associated with a willingness to participate in cannibalism, and supposed participation in such acts has been the driving force of colonialism and forced conversion (Whitehead, 2000). Thus, it should come as no surprise that a group of people living rurally, and therefore savagely, have been seen as potentially dangerous cannibals.

Cannibalism, the act of one human eating another, is one of humanity’s oldest taboos. Even thinking about the act forces modern humans to be introspective about the food we eat and why and the ritual or survival forces that must be present to commit such an act in the first place (Travis-Henikoff & Turner, 2008). The butchering and consuming of humans, for humans, and by humans, is an act that is so unthinkable that, historically, the few cultures that did engage in ritualistic cannibalism, such as some pre-Colonial Mesoamerican and Papua New Guinean cultures, were viewed as inherently savage and not human (Travis-Henikoff & Turner, 2008). No human could integrate such violence into their culture, no matter the reason, so those cultures needed to be changed and eradicated through colonialism and forced conversion to Christianity.

While assimilation is not necessarily racially motivated in Appalachian Atrocity, significant undertones of race still permeate the genre. In the horror genre, the characters who are Appalachian are typically the antagonists of the story who participate in taboo acts and are violent and a direct threat to the lives of the protagonists, who are either from different social strata and, therefore, more worthy of living than the average Appalachian; or they are Appalachians actively working to leave and or harm their community. A moral standard that comes with the protagonists’ whiteness posits the antagonists as twisted versions of average American citizens living in poverty and thus “less than” the protagonist counterparts.

Throughout the horror genre, main characters are predominantly white, and any characters of color are scarce and, if present, are likely killed off in the first 20 minutes of the movie.

Although not depicting the Appalachian villains as nonwhite, the films portray whiteness as having certain qualities that the antagonists do not have. In other words, horror movies code their villains as rural and Appalachian to let audiences know that the “right way to be white” is to be educated, to live in the city, and to leave behind any semblance of the primitive, savage community the Appalachian people are depicted as living in. The horror genre works to reaffirm and rework what acceptable whiteness looks like by wholeheartedly depicting what it should not look like. As Raka Shome (1996) argued, “In the case of studying whiteness, this becomes important because the mainstream media then presents a site where we can see whiteness being continually (re)constructed and (re)worked to conform to dominant stereotypes held by the masses about ‘race’” (p. 504).

In Appalachian horror, the antagonists do not get to be “white” or saved; they can only be eliminated and destroyed due to their immense violation of “normal,” “proper,” and “appropriate” society. The structures and institutions that uphold white supremacy and systemic marginalization cannot function if *every* white person has access to the same power and wealth outside of primary white privilege, so there also needs to be other whites who are less white. In his dissertation, Nick Toti (2010) elaborates on how poor whites have historically been targets of demonization in both real life and the media based on a long-held belief that poverty resulted from a curse from God. The Puritan Work Ethic is an ingrained U.S. American social norm that hard work is rewarded with financial success. In contrast, the poor whites of Appalachia surely had to have done something to incur the wrath of God and be cursed into poverty. An entire class of people has been moralized in that because they are poor whites, they are inherently evil and

more prone to violence. The rhetoric about the region paints its inhabitants as violent, with violence being a central tenet of their culture (Richards, 2019).

In the U.S. In American cinema, at least, one of the most common types of movie “monsters” is often just “poor white trash” presented in different ways (Toti, 2010). This poor white trash monster is unquestionably disgusting, violent, and all things that a good white person should not be. In place of any other important characteristics, according to the media, the worst white person is not one that exists; they are not bigoted, nor do they wish violence on any particular group. The worst white person is a white person who does not comply with institutional standards and instead relies on other outlets of function, such as the family in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* choosing not to leave their land after their primary source of income, their slaughterhouse, was closed. Media representations of Appalachian communities can thus work to reinforce or even introduce the moralization of class and the inherent bad qualities of poor whites through a Puritan work ethic that demonizes poverty and frames Appalachians as outsiders to the progress and efficiency of urban life.

It comes as no shock then that this idea has migrated into the horror genre, with villains in the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre almost exclusively originating from a community rampant with rural poverty and who have been deeply impacted by growing up in such a way. Although the antagonists in these horror movies are almost exclusively white, because of their poverty, they are the villains to contrast the good, wealthy whites that the poor white trash is typically hunting down and murdering brutally. This contrast also serves to help the viewer identify much more with the wealthy whites than the poor whites, no matter the economic background they come from. Audiences are encouraged heavily to disidentify with characters from impoverished backgrounds *because* coming from an impoverished background equates to engaging in violence.

Audiences are thus invited to identify with the protagonists who end up in brutal situations at the hands of Appalachian-coded characters who must be destroyed at all costs, even though their crimes typically boil down to some version of existing on the fringes of society and being poor.

Similarly, in films such as *The Forest*, the audience is encouraged to root for and sympathize with Natalie Dormer's character based on her being a white woman from a Western country despite her knowingly going into a dangerous forest after numerous warnings from locals (Bloomfield, 2018). Despite the protagonist continually ignoring warnings and disregarding Japanese culture, the audience is still encouraged to identify with her because Japanese culture is presented as "Other" and, therefore, inherently wrong when compared to Dormer's American background (Bloomfield, 2018, p. 166).

In movies such as the *Wrong Turn* franchise, this separation of evil hillbillies and sympathetic suburbanites is clear: the group of poor white trash hunts and kills attractive coeds, TV stars, and young lovers in a variety of increasingly brutal ways and at no point is the audience ever encouraged to identify with the clan, even when the protagonists do silly things, such as Doug in the 2006 remake of *The Hills Have Eyes* who, when stumbling upon the car graveyard of all the vehicles belonging to the victims of the mutants, is surprised by the fact there is a junkyard all the way out in the desert and concerns himself with finding toys for his infant daughter while the rest of his family is in imminent danger back at their RV. No matter how foolish any protagonist is, they are not set up as an "other" and, therefore, much easier to root for and identify with.

Fantasies of confronting the "other" have long popped up as tropes in media in several different ways; women who are a part of an "other," for example, are often depicted as sexual objects to be conquered (hooks, 1992). Men who are a part of the "other" are traditionally set up

as enemies for whoever represents the status quo to defeat and conquer, often violently. Aside from a general dislike of outsiders, there is typically no explanation or motivation given as to why the antagonists are as violent as they are or why they participate in practices such as cannibalism; they are simply poor, uncivilized outsiders, so they are evil and not like “us,” so they attack what is unknown to them. Therefore, the response of violence from the protagonist is seen as justified, as they are simply doing what they should be and fighting back against a culture that is more primitive than their own. The motivation for the violence has to be a retaliation against a culture that is other and violating the social norms that the protagonist is meant to be holding up.

Artifacts

For this genre analysis, I have selected four primary films to analyze, which I have identified as exemplars of the Appalachian horror genre to help me formulate its key features: *The Hills Have Eyes*, *Jug Face*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *We Are What We Are*. Two of the primary films, *The Hills Have Eyes* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, occur distinctly outside of the Appalachian region, so much so that both the desert in *The Hills Have Eyes* and rural Texas in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* are crucial to the plots of the movies. Despite neither film taking place anywhere near the Appalachian geographic region, the criminal clans of both movies are coded with distinctly Appalachian and hillbilly characteristics.

We Are What We Are and *Jug Face* are set in what appears to be the Appalachian region and depict various aspects of Appalachian culture intermixed with major taboos and are at least somewhat normalized within the communities being depicted. *Jug Face* begins with an incestuous relationship between protagonist Ada and her brother Jessaby, which plays

imminently into negative Appalachian stereotypes. The community revolves around a religion dedicated to a “pit” in the woods that does things like determine marriages and who the next sacrificial offering will be, suggesting the community isolates itself from the outside world because of orders from the pit, setting up the entire community to be uneducated and impoverished, as well as trapped in their community because the pit will not let them leave.

We Are What Are, depicts a feast called “Lamb’s Day,” referring to the young woman the main villains kill and eat ritualistically once a year, even though the family has seemingly assimilated normally. In short, the Appalachian characters from the region are depicted as not only being violent and impoverished, but they also appear incredibly behind relative to the society outside of them. A twisted version of close family is also presented in both movies, with some demented aspects, such as incest and cannibalism, implied in part to be caused by how rurally, and thus separated from suburban and urban society, the characters live.

Method

This thesis examines how the Appalachian people and region are depicted in horror films through genre criticism. Genre criticism seeks to analyze a rhetorical artifact through the standard features repeated throughout multiple artifacts, potentially across various mediums. For artifacts to be considered of the same genre or for a genre to be distinctly defined as such, scholars Campbell and Jamieson (1978) lay parameters that there are similar substantive, situational, and stylistic qualities in artifacts that make them a part of the same “genre.”

Substantively, horror movies that employ Appalachian-coded characters give their villains similar traits, many drawing on the characteristics I have previously described in the literature review. They will be uneducated, probably with a rural or vaguely southern accent, no

matter what part of the country (or world) the movie is set. They will engage in some form of taboo that their civilized counterparts could never imagine partaking in, such as practicing incest and hunting humans for food and ritual; engaging in these taboos and breaking cultural norms in the most extreme way possible set up these rural characters to be so different from the protagonists that the audience cannot and should not identify with and route for them. The most common types of villains in this genre are also often physically mutated in some way, from radiation, incest, or a variety of other methods that mark their physical differences and inferiority compared to the non-Appalachian coded characters. In the thesis, I track substantive markers of Appalachian identity based on the literature and analyze the protagonists as foils to this identity.

In films, the stylistic tone can be conveyed through the visual choices made throughout the film, such as camera angles, the speed of what is going on in the frame, and the sounds being heard. For example, in *City of Joy*, the slums of Calcutta, India, are initially presented in a way that is intended to overwhelm the viewer with the chaos and poverty of the city. Shome (1996) describes how “there are several overhead and long-distance shots that convey an extremely chaotic and disordered view of the city: we see beggars and lepers with distorted faces screaming for food; a loud band, welcoming the arrival of a local minister, whose uplifting music crashes against the screaming and shrieking of people around; anxious passers-by colliding with each other in the crowded station; and children who seem to be lost in the crowds” (p. 506). This is a common way that films depict cultures that they are making to be the “other,” by presenting them as disorganized and extremely chaotic on camera, regardless of the reality of those cultures. Additionally, horror movies are meant to be shot and produced in a style that induces dread in the viewer. Not necessarily including blood and guts, horror films do evoke a sense of dread, such as in *mother!* Jennifer Lawrence’s character’s sense of foreboding dread and panic as her house is

taken over and her reality shatters is shared by the audience (Bloomfield, 2021). The never-ending dread and compression that both mother and the audience feel help establish *mother!* and other movies as being distinctly in the horror genre rather than a thriller or a drama.

While situational and stylistic features are often separate in genre criticism, I combine them in this analysis to show how situations characters find themselves in are stylistically similar. Instead of considering how a horror film responds to societal situations, I am interested in the situations, narrative and physical, that are portrayed in the films. In Appalachian Atrocity films, there are stylistic patterns such as using camera angles to make the wilderness appear vast and untouched, and settlements appear to be primarily spread out and desolate, with the inhabitants all typically having a grimy, if not wholly mutated look.

The community's inhabitants in *Jug Face* and *We Are What We Are* wear outdated clothing of a different period, indicating that communities lack modern influence due to their ruralness. In contrast, the families in *The Hills Have Eyes*, and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* are shut off from contemporary society and cannot access clothes aside from what they take from their victims and are, again, depicted as being inherently dirty physically on film and tainted culturally. In the following chapters, I dive deeper into stylistic similarities and differences in the cinematography of the films, mainly how the spatial and physical identities of "Appalachia" are portrayed visually to viewers.

The horror genre often revolves around similar scenarios and situations across various settings, periods, and characters. Within portrayals of Appalachian-coded places and characters within the horror genre, the situation of outsiders from the city or suburbs being attacked by and having to overcome people who live in the wilderness or die at their hands is a recurrent situation in the Appalachian Atrocity genre such as in *The Hills Have Eyes*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*,

and the *Wrong Turn* franchise. Furthermore, when set in Appalachia, the place, the setting, and the problem are almost always centered around urbanites or suburbanites who want to get away from the stress of the city and view the Appalachian mountains as a simpler, more primitive, and quiet place to go. Alternatively, the characters are on a journey through that landscape and, due to misfortune, get swallowed by it. The vastness and denseness of the forest, as well as the remoteness, is emphasized through both visuals and things that often happen to a character because they are in a new, rural environment, such as their cell phones not having the service they depended on to help them or running out of gas in an area that locals know is dangerous. The place of Appalachia in and of itself becomes a recurrent character that causes recurrent situations throughout the genre. In the thesis, I will attend to the situations that the protagonists find themselves in as emblematic of the Appalachian Atrocity genre.

Due to the nature of horror films as being highly aesthetic and affective forms of media, I am adding a fourth “s” to my application of genre criticism: somatic-sensory features. Vivid scenes that spark “visceral organ senses” (Hawhee, 2015, p. 3) in audiences invite a critic’s attention to patterns of somatic engagement. For example, in his genre analysis of the movie “It Follows,” Casey Ryan Kelley (2017) describes some of the film’s sensory features:

It Follows (2014) opens on a quiet dusk in a pristine upper-middle-class Detroit suburb. A woman in high heels flees her home in a panic to a score of intense percussion. A stationary 360-degree shot captures the woman traversing the street and circling back to her house. Visibly terrorized, she continually glances back as if to observe something in pursuit but only visible to her. She reemerges from the house and absconds in her parents’ car, destination indeterminate. The next morning her bludgeoned, disarticulated body appears on a remote beach with no clue as to her killer’s identity. (p. 234)

In this description, Kelly is attending to the film's lighting, cinematography, and time of day, which are stylistic features, but also fear-inducing sounds and music and gruesome, stomach-churning images of the monster's first victim. The senses of sound and the visceral bodily reactions of seeing gore are among the somatic features that impact or interact with a viewers' senses in horror films.

I argue that the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre incorporates sights, sounds, and invitations to imagining tastes and smells to present the Appalachian identity as violent and reprehensible. While particularly apt for horror and Appalachian Atrocity, I propose that this fourth feature could be applied to film and to genre criticism as a whole. The way a piece of media impacts its audiences' senses is a rhetorical choice that has important implications for how viewers see both a piece of media and the identities represented. Brian Ott (2010) argues that as rhetorical critics, we should engage with cinema as a "fully embodied experience" as films create new environments and sensory experiences for its audiences (p. 40). Instead of only focusing on symbolic elements, rhetorical critics should attend to how "cinema appeals directly to the senses, how it sways viewers somatically" and function on a "corporeal level" (Ott, 2020, p. 41). Consequently, I offer that soma should be considered a natural part of genre criticism when it comes to rhetorically analyzing films and film genres. Even beyond film, scholars such as Carole Blair (2001) and Greg Dickinson (1997) have argued for the importance of "being there" through bodily presence and experiences when interacting with rhetorical artifacts.

Conclusion

Appalachia, the region, and the Appalachian people have been stereotyped as primitive and savage compared to the rest of America, primarily due to their rural living and reliance on

the land for all their resources. In nonfiction media, Appalachians are seen as uneducated hillbillies who need intervention in order to live better, as they are so uncivil that they cannot even recognize murder as being wrong. These stereotypes are exacerbated by what I am calling the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre of horror, which often depicts Appalachian-coded characters as having violence, incest, and cannibalism interwoven into the fabric of their culture. These depictions add to the societal notions that Appalachian people are somewhat “feral” and are dangerous and want to hunt outsiders. I will analyze these stereotypes by looking at the genre, and especially the substantive features of the genre, the situational features of the Appalachian Atrocity genre, and finally, the situational features that reoccur in the subgenre.

The way that a group of people is depicted in fictional media has a large amount of influence on the way that a group of people is seen and portrayed in nonfictional media. The field of communication has long been concerned with the rhetoric surrounding how marginalized communities are depicted in media and confronting and examining how those depictions might be damaging or what they reveal about society overall, as evidenced by our field having entire journals devoted to media and culture-related studies. Furthermore, the horror genre and horror films have long been a reflection of the fears and anxieties of society (Zarka, 2020). Aside from revealing central societal fears, horror movies can also provide insight into how the culture thinks the perceived threats and anxiety should be handled; can or should they be met with rational thought, and compassion? Or do threats always necessitate violence as a response to violence and threats? Through performing a genre criticism and analyzing key films in the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre, I begin to connect the negative portrayal of the region and its inhabitants to real, sustained harm to the region and its population.

Chapter 2: Substantive Themes

A group of young people traveling on an adventure only to break down in a small, eerie town; a family protects itself against those who seek to harm the family; and a young girl risks everything to break with tradition – these are a few familiar tropes in Appalachian Atrocity films. These themes are substantive features of the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre that distort traditional family structures, creating an uncanny valley from where the subgenre crafts its horrific moments. In this chapter, I analyze substantive themes related to familiar dynamics, gender, and difference to show how Appalachian Atrocity inverts “normal” expectations of nuclear families by taking their behaviors to extremes. In this sense, somewhat positive or simply antiquated hierarchies, such as patriarchal and Christian structures, become monstrous reflections of contemporary culture.

In what follows, I analyze substantive themes around the family units in Appalachian horror films: first, their fierce loyalty to each other through a family structure, and second, their reliance on a sense of religious ritual that justifies their behaviors. Then, I analyze key scenes regarding gender roles and sexual violence that locate women’s positions within the subgenre. These substantive themes are similar to tropes within the larger horror genre but have important differences related to the expression of the family and how they are coded as Appalachians.

Family Units

Things that look and act human but that are not quite human by our own definition have always filled people with a sense of unease; beings that fall into this so-called “uncanny valley” set off alarm bells in people’s minds. In the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre, developing a sense of the uncanny works to “other” Appalachian-coded characters as only semi-human. The

antagonists in the films within the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre look and act human enough, but the way they dress, the way that they act, the way that they talk, and the religious rituals they partake in are not quite what “normal” people would be doing. One of the ways the uncanniness is portrayed is through the substantive theme of the family unit. The main antagonists in the films I analyze consist of a tight-knit family unit. While the dynamics within the family unit itself may be rocky, each family in the genre has a sense that it is that family unit against the world who must protect themselves and their way of life from outsiders at all costs. While strong family bonds are praised parts of society, the closeness of the Appalachian-coded families extends these relationships into extreme dependence, neurosis, and abnormality.

The original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and many of its subsequent sequels¹ emphasize the strong yet horrific family ties that exist within the Sawyer clan. After a group of youths, Kirk, Pam, and siblings Franklin and Sally, who were traveling to Franklin and Sally’s familial property next to the Sawyer’s property, all of them are killed save Sally. Sally has been captured and knocked out by the Sawyers. Instead of just being killed, she awakens tied up at the dinner table in order to join the Sawyer family for a meal. Sally is greeted by a twisted version of what would be a typical family sitting down for dinner. However, the scene of a family at dinner is distorted due to her being restrained and forced to dine with the maniac who just murdered her friend and brother and the maniac’s family.

¹ There are three separate *Texas Chainsaw* Timelines and nine movies to date, but for the sake of clarity, I will be focusing only on storylines and scenes that are relevant to the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre specifically, I will also refer to the central family as the Sawyer clan. Many if not all of Leatherface and his family members go unnamed throughout the franchise, and this is what they are referred to in *Texas Chainsaw 3D*, which was also the first time the wider family is given a name and backstory thus I will be using Sawyer to refer to the family throughout the franchise, not just in *Texas Chainsaw 3D*.

Additionally, the prepared meal is made up of her friends and brother, who were recently killed by Leatherface. Seeing her predicament, Sally begs for help from a woman at the table she soon realizes is the shockingly well-kept and preserved body of Leatherface's grandmother, a sharp juxtaposition to the way the bodies of her companions were brutally mutilated and butchered. This scene presents a twisted caricature of the typical American nuclear family, where the tight-knit Sawyer family is a cannibalistic, homicidal, and insular group that still sits down to nightly supper gathered around a dining room table.

It is clear from the very first movie that the Sawyer family is strongly bonded; they are fiercely loyal to each other and their historical lands and businesses. This theme is present throughout later films as well. In *Texas Chainsaw 3D*, Leatherface is given a backstory in which he is a heavily mentally disabled boy, Jed, who acts out violently, which can be redirected at that time to pigs at the slaughterhouse, but when the slaughterhouse gets shut down, the violence is taken out on innocent passersby, like Sally and her friends. The Sawyer clan, despite Leatherface's, well, Leatherface-ness, still loves and values him as a part of their family. The movie begins with the majority of the family sacrificing themselves in a police altercation when they will not give Jed up to the authorities after the events of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. It is later revealed that a wealthy family member has been keeping Jed away from the rest of the world by locking him away but still giving him access to things that bring him happiness, like women's clothing and makeup.

Despite the brutality that the family engages in toward outsiders, it is evident that they value each other as family members, no matter their ability or temperament. And while the way they treat a disabled family member is not acceptable by any normal societal means, he is still approached with much more care and compassion, given his tendency for violence. In

Leatherface, a movie dedicated to Jed's origin story, he is taken from his family by the state, and his family never stops fighting to get him back, with his mother Verna going so far as to try and break into the room she believes he is in to try and see her boy. The Sawyer family is deeply, fiercely, and unquestionably loyal to each other. Every member would be willing to kill and die for any other member. This type of loyalty is typically something that would be celebrated, but the Sawyer clan is continually depicted as violent, poor, uneducated, and thus monstrous throughout the franchise despite embodying many characteristics of a wholesome American family. What may otherwise be considered positive traits are transformed into sources of horror because of the atrocious acts of violence the family either commits or is complicit in committing.

This is not dissimilar to the way that Appalachian characters and real people are depicted outside of the horror genre, as well as how non-Appalachians are discouraged from identifying with traits that have been assigned to Appalachians. Based on media representations, the Appalachian people are dangerous, and no regular, good person should identify with "Appalachian" qualities. Instead, Massey (2007), Appalachians must be tamed and brought into conformity with traditional society. Their culture in and of itself is not good enough to raise children in, or for people to grow and thrive in, and therefore anyone who willingly stays in the region must be studied or insidious in some way.

The main character of *Texas Chainsaw 3D*, Heather, ends up being a long-lost Sawyer, inheriting the house and becoming responsible for the care and keeping of her cousin, Leatherface. As soon as she begins to identify with the Sawyer part of herself, Heather is shown to be descending into a more violent and less similar person to the friends she traveled to the house with, who are presented as normal, urban friends. Any association with the Sawyer family, and by extension, the way they are Appalachian-coded, leads to inherent evilness and violence.

Despite not being raised in the Sawyer family, once she begins to learn of her ancestry, she seems to let the dormant but always already present monster inside of her come to the surface. Heather recognizes her place within the family and is immediately willing to step up for her family and take over Jed's care. Jed and Heather eventually team up at the old slaughterhouse the Sawyers used to work at to exact vengeance on the man who burned their home and family to the ground, the last two Sawyers to exist.

At the film's beginning, Heather is given a letter from Verna's lawyer, which she did not read, but in one of the concluding scenes, Heather opens it and finally reads it. Her real name is Edith Rose Sawyer, and her cousin Jed, while violent, just needs to be taken care of and kept away from strangers. This is why Verna has installed an entire basement cavern underneath the home, to keep Jed and the public safe and comfortable. In exchange for taking care of him and the property, Jed will always protect her. Edith smiles at the letter as the camera zooms out to reveal her in the Sawyer family home, as she has dedicated herself to staying and caring for the house and for Jed. The Sawyer identity, even if hidden for many years, comes with an almost unstoppable love for other family members, no matter the circumstances. Keeping the Sawyer clan together and away from outsiders ends up being the primary motivation for violence both for Leatherface and for other members of the family to keep them together. Heather's transformation portrays the transition from a non-Appalachian protagonist to a Sawyer family antagonist with the simple revelation of her origins. Her loyalty to her friends is now loyalty to the Sawyers, and that comes with their violence toward outsiders.

Heather has become a part of the twisted, uncanny family that she so feared before, and she is happy to be a part of it. The degree to which the Sawyer clan is loyal to each other based simply on blood is extreme and likely unfathomable for most, despite family loyalty and taking

care of relatives who need it is a core value to most family units. This twisted loyalty is just one of the ways the Sawyers are portrayed as a parallel, uncanny valley family in comparison to say, Sally and Franklin from the first film. Franklin is wheelchair-bound and may have some type of diminished mental capacity. If he was born a Sawyer, he would have been well taken care of and treated with kindness and consideration. Sally, the only family he has left, instead drags him around to situations that leave Franklin feeling uncomfortable at the very best and extremely upset and left out at worst. He also dies as a result of not being able to physically escape Leatherface after being forgotten about by his sister. But the Sawyers are still presented as the most awful, twisted caricature of what a family could be.

In *Jug Face*, familial and communal loyalty are paramount features of the Pit People, even the concept of “jug faces,” where random people are selected as sacrifices via visions from the Pit. The Pit’s ritual depends on someone being loyal enough to their family and to the community that they will offer themselves up as a sacrifice to keep the rest of the people they love safe. We are presented with the consequences of Ada’s “disloyalty” when she tosses her jug face into the woods, which is other people in the community dying randomly and brutally. When Ada finally decides that she will be the sacrificial jug face, she is confronted by both members of her immediate family and members of the community who lost family members screaming at her, accusing her of selfishness, and at this point, relishing in her death because it means things will finally return to normal. While Ada is individually unhappy, the community around her is dependent on every member of the community feeling like they are strongly enough connected to everyone else that they would die for them.

In *We Are What We Are*, the audience is told via flashbacks that their Lamb’s Day ritual has been going on, pretty much the same, for about 300 years. Generations of Parkers have, at

least semi-willingly, participated in the kidnapping, murder, and devouring of a young girl every single year. They are eventually found out in part because hundreds of years' worth of possessions from the girls they have captured and killed are washed up by a storm. For 300 years, everyone in the family has decided to stay quiet and help cover up this dark secret, speaking to a powerful familial bond that goes beyond what is considered normal. Even when the protagonists, Iris and Rose, begin to come of age, they do not let each other do things alone. Iris is expected to murder, butcher, and prepare the meal for Lamb's Day after their mother dies, but Rose does not let her do it alone. She goes down into the holding cell with Iris when she murders the girl. In the cellar, and likely because they have each other to depend on, instead of deciding to be another generation of Parkers who keep this secret, they decide they will break the cycle with Iris proclaiming that she will *never* do that again. The bond that they have as sisters powers them to first attempt to poison their father's meal before trying to escape. The two sisters' family bond gives them the strength to break away from the rest of their family history and escape their father's grasp.

Ritualistic Cannibalism

Within the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre, the films will also typically include some kind of strong sense of religion or ritual within the community that is Appalachian-coded and drives their violent behaviors. While these religions often have roots in what is recognizable as a mainstream religion, such as Christianity, there are also elements added to the religion that make it a more violent, darker variation. In this sense, it is an uncanny version of more common faith traditions and rituals that are simultaneously familiar yet strange. Even if a community is not distinctly religious, many have rituals surrounding mealtime or the capture and consumption of

trespassers that are reminiscent of religious rituals, such as the Catholic Communion, where the Eucharist, or the body of Christ, is eaten. Lucilla Pan (2022) argues that although cannibalism is nearly universally considered “unethical and perverse,” it is also somewhat normalized in Christian religious custom. Consuming the host, or the body of Christ, is, of course, a different kind of cannibalistic ritual than what the antagonists in Appalachian Atrocity films but is one that has roots in Scots-Irish discrimination.

In early modern Europe, Allison Coudert (2012) argued that the figure of the cannibal “represents the primitive ‘other,’ a savage member of a regressive society, who stood in stark opposition to the progressive enterprise society of the Europeans” (p. 521), thereby distinguishing members of society from one another. As much of the United States was colonized by European Protestants, groups of Scots-Irish peoples immigrated to the Appalachian region, and with them, they brought many more Catholic immigrants who practiced some version of folk Catholicism. These Catholic immigrants would originally be assigned many of the stereotypes that would grow to be associated with the Appalachian region: they were dirty, they were poor and uneducated; they had way too many kids and way too big of families; they could be isolated from the rest of their community, and they engaged in cannibalistic rituals during mass.

The key theological difference between Protestants and Catholics is that the Catholic Church believes in “transubstantiation.” Transubstantiation refers to the moment when the bread and wine of the host transform into Christ’s body. During a Catholic mass, when a priest holds up bread and wine and, quoting Christ at the Last Supper, says, “This is my body, take of it and eat,” then “This is my blood, take of it and drink,” Catholics believe that the bread and wine physically transform into the literal body and blood of Jesus Christ for them to eat and drink.

Protestants believe the bread and wine are symbols of Jesus’s body and blood but do not actually transform into them. In the cruel stereotypes of Scots-Irish Catholics, not only were they poor, dirty, uneducated, and had too many kids, but they were also cannibals or were fooled by their faith into believing they were eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ. This was a claim that was used throughout history to justify anti-Catholic, which typically meant anti-Scots-Irish rhetoric and policies.



Figure 1: The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, 1974. Sally’s dinner view.

The presence of Catholic-esque rituals and references, in particular, consuming the body of Christ, is present in Appalachian Atrocity films through cannibalism. Pan (2022) notes that communion “is a communal meal centering around a life and death experience” (p. 870), which is not unlike the fates that befall many characters in Appalachian Atrocity films. However, while Jesus’s sacrifice of his body is one of “divine love, mercy, and forgiveness,” the sacrificial bodies

in Appalachian Atrocity films are taken by force (Coudert, 2012, p. 522). For example, the Texas Chainsaw franchise widely uses imagery reminiscent of the first communion, the Last Supper. In one of the most iconic sequences from the original film, Sally awakens, tied to a chair, and participates in a meal made up of her murdered friends, put together by her captors, and it very much feels for Sally that this is her final meal. She is a witness to the perverted version of the religious ritual, which highlights the oddity of the original ritual itself and the strangeness and not-quite-normal uncanniness of the Sawyer clan. By relating the act to communion, cannibalism becomes “morally permissible,” at least to those participating in the ritual, as part of the tradition that keeps the family unit together (Pan, 2022, p. 870).

Similarly, *We Are What We Are* depicts a family steeped in centuries-old traditions that demand bloodshed and violence. Their tradition, Lamb’s Day, is technically rooted in Christian scripture, with the justification for the ritual being that Christ gave his body as a sacrifice for people to eat, so they should be able to honor the sacrifice someone else gave so that the Parker family could live. The origins and steps of Lamb’s Day are explained in flashback scenes and diary entries from “Alyce Parker,” the first Parker to engage in the ritual. The ritual centers around kidnapping, butchering, serving, and then eating a young girl. The brunt of the work is assigned to the oldest woman in the Parker family at the time, as the tradition is rooted in the eldest sister hundreds of years ago needing to capture and kill a girl to keep her family alive. The family engages in fasting for days before the meal and treats the whole event with a religious reverence. They wear their “Sunday best,” say a prayer, and read from the Bible before the meal, directly evoking components of the Catholic Mass and Communion rituals. However, these rituals are not exact replicas of a mass or the Last Supper as we commonly know them. Instead,

as Rainer Guldin (2008) argues, references to cannibalism serve as a “perverse parody of the Christian sacrament of communion and the power structures” they represent (p. 109).

Filmmakers in the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre have used Catholic imagery and parallels to act as an uncanny mirror of actual beliefs, but in violent and gruesome ways. This is once again meant to suggest that the real-life people who inhabit the land might be brutish and willing to engage in cannibalism, further “othering” them from mainstream society.

Women’s Agency and Gender Roles

Women's agency, or lack thereof, is central to many films within the genre. Women are the glue that holds Appalachian families together; they are responsible for all of the most crucial moving parts of their families and communities. The films in the Appalachian Atrocity genre depict women who are responsible for the care and keeping of their home, their children, and their land; they arrange marriages and make sure there is community connectedness. Despite rampant sexism and an undervaluing of women’s work, the importance of what women add to the community can be seen in the genre in just how difficult it is for women to escape from whatever oppressive family force they were born into, as well as how many of these familial traditions depend on women’s complacency and lack of agency. Women play an integral part in a religious ritual that cannot be performed if they gain agency and leave their family; marriages can’t happen if a woman doesn’t stay in the community, more children cannot be produced if there are no women to keep producing them, and the men cannot commit their acts of violence without the support of the women in their community. Thus, every attempt at women to gain agency to separate themselves from the community they have been born into results in bad things happening, either to the woman trying to break away or to someone she values.

In the *Texas Chainsaw* franchise, the family unit is largely woven together through the caretaking of the female family members. Alternatively, male family members, often Leatherface's father and/or brother(s), interact with Jed in a way that is cruel, demeaning, and abusive no matter what he does or how hard he tries to appease them. Jed comes from a family where everyone is, to some degree, monstrous. Jed is, for some reason, yet to be fully explored within the franchise, maybe due to his size or perceived mental defect, perhaps due to that role in the family simply needing to be fulfilled; Jed is the most violent and monstrous when they are all grown up. *Leatherface* depicts Jed's older brothers bullying him before he was ten years old because he could not chainsaw a random neighbor to death before luring two young teenagers to their barn and crushing them to death. Seemingly, the whole family is tainted by violence, but Jed is unique in his future ferocity and inability to control himself around outsiders.

Beginnings centers on Jed's father, a World War 2 veteran. Jed's father in this movie seems to hold the military, and joining the military is the standard for what proves manhood. These are traditional gender roles of women as caretakers and men as violent soldiers that the draft-dodging young men the audience meets at the beginning of the film violate. One of the protagonists is carrying a draft card, and based on where the group is traveling, he is clearly avoiding military service. When Jed's father discovers this draft card on them when they are captured, and he learns they are avoiding military service, he is infuriated and begins torturing him, first by suffocation, then by beating him as he attempts to do pushups.

Jed's father also makes disparaging comments about how Jed and his brother are failures for not living up to the men their father wanted them to be, as Jed could not even enlist if he wanted to due to his mental and physical conditions. Jed will never be a "man" in the way his fathers and brothers are, and, in their eyes, he is also failing to do the masculine tasks they assign

to him while relishing in things like women's makeup and hair. While Leatherface makes masks out of a lot of people's skins, men included, in *Beginnings*, he relishes in being able to adorn a skin mask that is attached to a wig of black, curly hair and is fitted with makeup that we presume Jed did himself and to his liking.



Figure 2: Texas Chainsaw: Beginnings. Jed's first mask.

Jed enjoys putting on someone else's skin and getting to be someone else, but he seems to enjoy getting to be a woman the most. This is possibly rooted in both his failure to perform the masculine gender roles his family expects of him and also a source of comfort if his female family members have primarily been the ones who show him kindness. The female family members we see interact with Leatherface are gentler and more understanding of his motivation

for violence, or they are encouraging him in the case of his mother. In *Leatherface*, after bringing a kind, naive nurse, Elizabeth, with him during the asylum escape, Jed and she find their way back to the Sawyer family farm. When Elizabeth is less than enthused with the murderous traditions and tells Jed that “it could be just [us], we could run away,” it causes his mother, Verna, to despise her. Elizabeth’s life ends as she is chased through the fields by Jed’s chainsaw. Verna shouts, “this is why we don’t trust outsiders,” and “No girl will ever love you like your family,” before Jed decapitates Elizabeth with his new favorite toy, a chainsaw.

In *Texas Chainsaw 3D*, Heather begins the story with agency; she is a student full of life, with a robust group of friends and a boyfriend before she embraces her Sawyer (Appalachian) identity. As the story progresses, Heather seemingly becomes more and more like a Sawyer, she becomes increasingly violent and begins to understand the motivations of her cousin Jed, ending the movie by losing the agency she came with and becoming Jed’s caretaker. She survives, and she is thriving, but only once does she leave behind the world she knew and the identity she had. In order for her to thrive in this universe, she needed to give up her agency.

In “We Are What We Are,” the Parker family engages in a yearly cannibalistic ritual because when the family first immigrated to America, some 300 years before the start of the story.



Figure 3: We Are What We Are, 2013. First Lamb's Day

After failing to provide food for his family and hunger quickly setting in, a Parker man, referred to only as Father in the diary entries and voiceovers, has lost his mind and his ability to provide for his family. This forced his young daughter, Alyce, to step up and support the family by capturing and butchering a young girl, a tradition the family calls “Lamb’s Day.” It can be assumed that for that 300-year span where the Parkers have been celebrating Lamb’s Day, it has been the oldest capable woman in the family’s responsibility to both kill and prepare the meat from the body for their feast, which in the film ends up falling to 17-year-old Iris after the death of her mother. The Parker women we meet in the film, Iris, her sister Rose, and their mother, all appear to be less than enthused about participating, and both Iris and Rose are vocal in how, after they kill their first “lamb,” they never want to do it again. They have been forced into this position, seemingly like every other Parker woman before them, and while they initially perform this duty, once the act is over, both sisters are horrified enough that they decide they will be the ones to break the cycle and end the ritual.

Their father, on the other hand, and to our knowledge, all of the Parker men for the last 300 years, seems to relish in this tradition; he looks forward to it, and he sees it as a crucial part of their family culture. As his young son, Rory, expresses hunger during their fast before the feasts, he repeatedly tells him how important it is to fast and how crucial this ritual is for their family. Even after their mother passes away, their father insists that the ritual will continue as planned, emphasizing the importance of the ritual as a way to honor the family's traditions. Although aside from the initial capture and confinement of the girl, he is not involved in any of the gruesome parts of their family holiday, it always falls to a woman to be the one to take the sacrifice's life and do the meal preparation work.

Women's work in the kitchen has long been undervalued and under-appreciated, especially in Appalachian culture. The expectation is that women will be the ones to cook, clean, and take care of the house, the children, the property, and homeschooling. *We Are What We Are* is a gruesome representation of what that role can boil down to in a culture that has developed a dependence on something like hunting animals as a steady food supply. The women are the ones who are often tasked with doing the dirty work once the hunt is over, if an animal is to be eaten, a woman will be the one skinning it, butchering it, preparing it, storing it, and serving it, many of which are unpleasant, messy, gory, activities. The Appalachian women ensure that the food is edible, and they are the ones dealing with the majority of the blood and guts; they are the ones putting in hours of labor to make sure a successful hunt can actually feed their family. They are realistically the ones who provide food for their families and the ones doing the dirtiest work. However, the stereotypical Appalachian man is still viewed as either an all-knowing, all-providing patriarch or a hillbilly who will just throw a squirrel on the fire and toss it to his family once it's done roasting, neither of which is reflective of the cultural reality (Synder).

Jug Face follows a young woman, Ada, who comes from a backwoods religious community, where sacrifices to the mysterious pit they hail as a god are dictated by clay “Jug Faces,” which the chosen community member makes in a trance.



Figure 4: Jug Face, 2013. Ada finds her jug.

Ada concurrently discovers that she is pregnant with her brother, Jessaby’s baby, meant to be married to a different man from their community, Bud, and that she is supposed to be the next Jug Face. All of these events are things that are happening to Ada, not things she has any say in; her parents have arranged her “joining,” her brother takes her whenever and wherever he wants her. The women are expected to serve the men of the community meekly. Even when getting married, or “joined” as they describe unions in the movie, instead of asking a young woman directly, it is a communal tradition to ask the woman’s parents if it is acceptable to be joined, and the parents give a response, which is then passed on to the woman if it becomes relevant to her. Ada is simply told that she will be joined and will then be expected to serve him without

complaint or question. Ada's mother even tells her that "this is just the way things are" when she is upset about her upcoming union.

Throughout the movie, the audience joins Ada in a struggle for her and her baby's freedom. However, every attempt at leaving the community or going against tradition is met with some horrible punishment. When her family discovers her relationship with Jessaby, Ada is beaten so badly that she loses her baby. When Ada finds that Dawai, the potter entranced to craft the faces, has made one with her face, she chucks it into the woods hoping to change her fate. This action results in the Pit wreaking havoc and taking the lives of those closest to Ada. She sees visions before they are killed. First, her best friend and future sister-in-law is mauled as they are doing laundry together by the river. Then, the man she is betrothed to is sacrificed when his face becomes a jug face. Her brother is killed when her father brings him to the Pit for healing, but he is instead torn to literal pieces. Finally, her father is also taken by the pit.

Ada is punished by having everything and everyone she holds dear ripped away from her one by one. Even when Dawai attempts to help Ada escape their community, they are returned, and Dawai is ready to sacrifice himself for Ada. Eventually, she reveals herself as the jug face and is killed and surrendered to the pit. Not only does Ada not have a semblance of agency to begin with, but also, every time she tries to gain some, something horrible happens to her or to someone she loves. She is punished horrifically for attempting to have her own identity and break away from the traditions of the culture. The message is clear: going against tradition and going against the community only brings on bad things.

Consequently, the terrible things happening to Ada are a result of her actions to defy her family. Her desire for agency, for change, and to be somewhat independent is the reason why her family and why her community is falling apart. The community portrays Ada as solely

responsible for the deaths of her friends, her betrothed, her brother, and her baby because she went against the god of the pit. Women desiring agency can only end in disaster, in a breaking down of the most fundamental parts of the community. When they step out of line, it is okay to do whatever is necessary for the good of the community, and that involves, at least in this genre, hurting and punishing the woman who dares step outside of tradition. *We Are What We Are* takes a slightly more optimistic view of women's agency as the story ends with a triumphant Iris and Rose killing and ripping their father to pieces with their mouths before driving away to start a new life somewhere, presumably. This is, of course, after their father has killed Iris's lover, believing that she was going to run away and start a new life with him. As he further devolves, though, the father goes on a killing spree, murdering anyone who threatens to expose their Lamb's Day ritual.

The only way that the girls are able to gain agency is through participating in gruesome violence. Despite both of them professing after the murder of their "lamb" that they "never wanted to do that again," the only way that they can have a chance at freedom and normal life is through succumbing to violence. They tear pieces off of their father and consume some of him raw as a way of almost reabsorbing their agency. Throughout the movie, their father forces them into the role of murderers, butchers, and mothers to their younger brother. In a literal and figurative sense, he is eating away at their freedom and agency throughout the film, culminating in him consuming what they fear to be their last bits of innocence and freedom after they cook the girl for Lamb's Day and present him with the meal. They realize that their father has taken everything from them. He has taken their innocence by turning them into murderers, along with taking away whatever hope of a future either of them had. Their father has eaten away at who the girls could have been, and the girls cannot get that back by simply leaving, as if their father

would let that happen. In a moment where both of them break, they decide that they are not just going to kill their father. They are going to end the 300-year Parker ritual through an inverse of how it began. Lamb's Day began because a father was unable to provide, and Lamb's Day ended when a father became the final meal. Iris and Rose's actions are an example of how Appalachian women who seek a break in tradition begat more violence and tragedy in the community.

Sexual Violence

For the women of the Appalachian Atrocity Genre, violence, and especially sexual violence, is a routine part of their lives. *Jug Face* opens with Ada and her brother having sex, engaging in the Appalachian stereotype of incest, and while it is established this relationship has been going on for quite some time, at no point is it expressed that the relationship is consensual or that Ada truly had a choice in the matter. When she finds out she is going to be married, her mother simply tells her, "You're to be joined with Bodie." There is no discussion, there is no asking Ada, and these interactions certainly imply that when she is joined with Bodie her consent will not matter when he wants to have sex.

The Hills Have Eyes depicts sexual violence being done primarily towards outsiders, as both the first movie and the sequel have extended cuts of sexual violence where the mutant attackers are brutalizing young women who they are trying to capture, not ones who are already a part of their community, and more importantly, not ones who are deformed. It is confirmed in the 2008 sequel movie that outsider women are captured, assaulted, and forcibly impregnated in order for the deformed mutants to widen their genetic pool, and this is a practice that the Hill People have been engaging in for at least a decade or two if the movie is to be believed. This type of sexual violence is not only ingrained in their culture, but it is also essential for keeping

their population stable. The movie also heavily implies that once these women give birth, if they survive the birthing process, they are killed and disposed of even if they could have more children. Once again, incredibly crucial aspects of the community are the burden of the women to bear, whether they want to or not, that not only go unappreciated but when that “duty” is fulfilled, they are killed and disposed of as if they are not human. This is because women are often not treated as humans in the Appalachian Atrocity genre; they are treated more like property than anything else.

Throughout the genre, women are consistently treated more like objects than like people. *The Hills Have Eyes* sequel directly portrays this to audiences through the forced breeding and then the killing of the unwilling mothers, but it is present in some iterations in the overwhelming majority of Appalachian Atrocity horror films. For example, *We Are What We Are* demonstrates a type of twisted patriarchal ownership, where the father has complete control over his daughters and they obey him, but after their mother dies, the father expresses emotional incest and sexual undertones for his eldest daughter in their interactions, along with the constant repetition of Iris taking over her mother’s duties now that she is the eldest Parker. His hand lingers too long on her shoulder, he looks at her with hungry eyes after her mother passes away and imminently begins forcing Iris into her mother’s role in every other aspect. Her father goes so far as to murder the boy she likes while they are having sex to prove his complete domination and ownership of her.

In *Jug Face*, the backwoods community exchange women as property once they are married, and there seems to be some type of payment attached to the marriage pact. The women are not asked if they would like to marry or who they would like to be married to; instead, it seems like the men convene with the Pit and allow “the Pit” to make those decisions for them. Similar to incest practiced in historical royal society, dowries and payments for wives was once a

common practice. However, Appalachian Atrocity films show these now-uncivilized and archaic practices happening in modern times. In one scene, Ada's mother can be heard telling her daughter, "That's just how things are" when Ada is expressing discomfort over the idea of being married to Bodie, a man she is not attracted to. When treating women like objects and property is so normalized, and the patriarchal violence so strong, it should come as no surprise that sexual exploitation follows.

Conclusion

Substantive themes in Appalachian Atrocity films center the characters, their interactions, and behaviors. Family units and their relationships are prominent themes in the films, in addition to the low agency of women and the presence of sexual violence. These families are to be feared because of their fierce loyalty to one another that operates on a violent level to all outsiders. Their religious rituals are uncanny distortions of mainstream Christianity and encourage cannibalism, inviting feelings of disgust. Throughout the subgenre, women's autonomy and breaking from tradition is treated as a bad thing, or at least something that cannot happen without a large amount of violence. Sexual violence happening to women is commonplace, as is strict gendered expectations and stereotypes within the communities being depicted. This also reflects what the filmmakers believe, at least on some level, about the communities they are portraying. They tell the broader public that this is how Appalachian communities think and behave. Then they further exacerbate that image by the situations they put their non-Appalachian characters in as well as the consistent style choices that are made within the subgenre.

Chapter 3: Situational and Stylistic Features

Traditionally, situational and stylistic aspects of the genre are separate, which has made sense for many applications of genre criticism because an artifact's style and situation tend to be two different facets. For example, in analyzing the genre of a speech, the situational features refer to the circumstances and setting that a speaker encounters in giving the speech, and the stylistic features refer to the manner of delivery and word choice to respond to the situation. However, in film, situational and stylistic features are often entangled because the film's narrative constructs situations for its characters using stylistic norms. Instead of the film itself responding to a situation, I view *Appalachian Atrocity*'s situational features as internal narrative components.

For example, the desolate town that the final girl and her crew roll into is not a simple aesthetic choice; the isolation and hopelessness of the town are a crucial part of the horrific situation she inevitably finds herself in. Even the amount of gore and horror within the *Appalachian Atrocity* genre is made possible in part by the situations characters often find themselves in and the tools that come along with those situations. It is much easier to create multiple bloodbaths in a movie where the villain uses a chainsaw instead of the knife or machete of traditional slashers, reflected in the quantity of gore within the *Appalachian Atrocity* subgenre. Thus, in the *Appalachian Atrocity* genre, the stylistic and the situational choices often complement each other or are crucial to understanding the other in the movie. For this chapter's analysis, I focus on the situations and scenarios in which characters in the film find themselves and how those situations are portrayed through camera angles, colors, and cinematography to make up *Appalachian Atrocity*'s situational and stylistic features.

Appalachian Society

Appalachian Atrocity movies are often set in places that are isolated from urban society: the desert, the forest, and a tiny town that only contains a gas station and nothing else are all vastly different from the suburban or urban life that the protagonists are often leading. But more than that, the setting and the landscape are used as an additional feature of the horror, the woods, or the town, almost becoming a character themselves. Casey Ryan Kelly (2017) proposed ambient horror as a subgenre of horror films that emphasizes the horror that surrounds and seeps into the story from the setting of the story or the background against which the story is set. The use of settings to highlight the desolate, isolated situations the protagonists will soon face. Some of the most harrowing shots from *The Hills Have Eyes* franchise, for example, are the wide, sometimes even aerial shots that showcase the vastness of the desert.



Figure 5: The Hills Have Eyes, 1977. The Carters are watched.

The encampment is barely visible against the desert background. The mountains are almost swallowing them up, and in the case of *Hills Have Eyes 2*, which is set within

underground tunnels and mines within the region, the mountains do swallow them up. The landscape almost becomes an accomplice to the villains because they know the terrain so well.

The *Texas Chainsaw series* frequently uses shots of either the house that the Sawyers live in or an old slaughterhouse that they used to work in to emphasize their differences from the protagonists. This tracks with the jobs that the Appalachians have historically had to do, ones that are dangerous and dirty. There is a long history of coal mining within the Appalachian region, and a huge portion of the economy of the region was built around the mining industry. Cave-ins, explosions, terminal diseases caused by the coal dust, and long hours away from one's family were all just expected. They were expected to be done by Appalachian locals without complaint and with gratitude for a job more than anything, even though coal mining was, and still can be, one of the most dangerous jobs someone could take with little compensation. Although these jobs were quite literally vital for the function of the nation, Appalachians were still looked down upon for providing that resource and individually blamed for environmental problems that arose as a result. It should be no surprise then that the only “real” job an Appalachian-coded family has is working at a slaughterhouse, a place that is gross, grimy, and smelly, that will employ pretty much anyone despite providing a vital resource. Ada’s community in *Jug Face* seemingly gets by on making moonshine and selling it to stores near the small town adjacent to the community, another stereotypically Appalachian way of making money.

Typically, a small house in the middle of the field or an old, abandoned building would be creepy but may not immediately make danger alarms go off in one’s head. There is, instead, a more unsettling, uncanny feeling about these spaces as not quite right and slightly too strange. The way these moments position the buildings are portrayed emphasizes how “off the beaten

path” and abnormal these families are who chose to occupy these spaces; they are isolated, they are run down, there is nowhere to run, and no one to hear cries for help. In multiple *Texas Chainsaw* movies, the old slaughterhouse where the Sawyer family used to work at is a common place for a massive, violent confrontation where Leatherface has a massive advantage. Slaughterhouses, in particular, communicate a sense of helplessness and peculiarity; the city folk trespassing into the Sawyer’s land, and likely the audience members, are unfamiliar with these types of places.



Figure 6: Texas Chainsaw 3D, 2013. Heather is dragged through the slaughterhouse

In *Texas Chainsaw 3D*, Heather and Jed eventually team up in the slaughterhouse to kill Mayor Burt, who burned down the Sawyer house at the beginning of the movie, and his son, Deputy Carl. In this epic culmination, Heather embraces her Sawyer heritage and seems at home in the slaughterhouse. They end up working together, with Heather being the reason Jed gets his chainsaw back, which allows him to saw off the mayor’s hands and push him into the meat grinder. The setting of the old slaughterhouse is quintessential to the plot and the character’s arcs. Heather and Jed, the last two Sawyers, avenge their family by killing the man who annihilated it in the first place in their old slaughterhouse that has since been abandoned. Heather is embracing

her identity fully, and Jed is embracing her as a Sawyer. But without the setting or the history of the slaughterhouse, both *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 3D* and the rest of the franchise would lose a crucial element of their story. Part of the reason why the Sawyers are so bitter is because they feel like they have been robbed of their traditional jobs, and Jed's proficiency in killing in many of the movies is because of the family's history of killing animals in the slaughterhouse.

In one of the most poignant conversations from the original 1974 film, Franklin, Sally's wheelchair-using brother, explains different methods of butchering animals, from slitting their throats, which used to happen in the slaughterhouse, to a newer, "more humane" method of knocking out over the head before killing them. It is suggested that this new method, along with a changing economy, was the reason why the slaughterhouse and the Sawyers were out of business. The first death in the movie and of the franchise, Kirk, is killed in this "new" method of slaughter by Leatherface. He attempts to enter the home to ask a question and is greeted by Leatherface hammering his head repeatedly, causing Kirk to fall to the ground and seize. The second death that is suggested (as the actual death happens offscreen) is Pam, Kirk's girlfriend, who goes looking for him. Leatherface captures Pam and places her on a meat hook so she has a good view of him cutting up Kirk with the infamous chainsaw. The bloody bucket underneath Pam suggests that she is going to be strung up and drained of blood, much like the other method of slaughtering pigs. The slaughterhouse and setting and context that the Sawyers are in are the whole reason why they are the way that they are and why they kill the way that they kill. The slaughterhouse is thus a situational and stylistic feature of the Appalachian Atrocity films as a gruesome, isolated, and outdated setting that harms outsiders but in which the Sawyers feel at home.

It is not only the settings themselves but also how the landscapes are colored and portrayed that are unique to Appalachian Atrocity and serve to paint a picture of Appalachia. Both *We Are What We Are* and *Jug Face* are set in what would otherwise be portrayed as beautiful, lush forests and a tiny, close-knit mountain town. The vivid greens and browns of the forest are gorgeous, with flowing rivers and peaceful ponds. However, these natural features are turned dark and ominous within the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre. The woods become a dark place, both metaphorically and physically, as in both movies, the lighting in scenes that are set in the forest is unlit or poorly lit. The greens and browns become less pretty, muddy, washed out, and less appealing. A washed-out, muted forest inhabited by shadows is something that speaks to much more danger than a lush, green, well-lit forest does.

The characters' homes lack the traditional rural charm that houses in other, lighter genres of film would have. Instead, the Parkers' home is constantly dark, almost like it is only being lit by flame instead of artificial light, even though they have lamps and other electronic devices such as a toaster. There is a constant layer of dust and grime over everything. Despite the women in the family cleaning and doing all of their womanly chores, the house itself is made of wood that looks like it could be rotting away. And this type of home is pretty much the archetype of Appalachian homes within the subgenre. All of the families in the *Jug Face* community live in run-down trailer-sized homes filled with old furniture and peeling wallpaper.

In every iteration of *Texas Chainsaw*, the Sawyer house, no matter how nice the actual home is supposed to be, no matter how many people are actively living there, is always covered in dust and spiderwebs, even the furniture. The Sawyer home seems to be a place that is trapped in a time 50-60 years earlier; nothing within the home has changed since then, and seemingly none of the people have either, with the house serving as a representation of how far

disconnected from the modern town the Sawyer family is as well as how disconnected from reality the family is. While their house is rotting away, and the slaughterhouse has closed down, the family continues with business as usual. Leatherface seemingly routinely kills and butchers passersby the way he was taught to kill pigs, and then the family sits down for a nice supper together where they eat the person who has been killed cooked up in a pleasant meal at their antique dining table in their dusty, rotting home. Despite the world moving and growing around them, the Sawyer clan has remained the exact same and have simply adjusted their daily activities to accommodate the slaughterhouse being closed down. This sense of being “frozen in time” places the Sawyers in an alternative timeline where they have not been exposed to or refused to adopt modern luxuries and conveniences, further differentiating them from the protagonists, and presumably, audience members.

The aesthetics of the settings portray a particular antiquated, outdated, and thus oddly anachronistic style. The homes are consistently painted in unappealing neutral colors that fade into the muted environments or unconventional shades. The inside of Ada’s home in *Jug Face* is painted a vomit green color, while the home in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* has rooms that are painted a violent red shade. Both colors evoke connotations, the vomit green at the very least being visually unappealing while also hinting at a communal sickness, and the violent red shade in *Texas Chainsaw* is evocative of urban legends of literal “red rooms,” rooms painted bright red in which people are tortured and killed. Red, and the red shade painted on the walls, connotes violence. It tells the audience that horrific things happen in that room or in that house. The decorations in these homes are also vastly different than what people from a different lifestyle would use; skulls are hung up from the ceiling by a string, poorly taxidermized animal heads,

and morbid family heirlooms are staples in the homes of Appalachian characters. Monsters inhabit these homes, and they decorate like monsters.

The way that Appalachia and Appalachians are visually shown throughout the subgenre proposes a particular type of thanatopolitics. Kelly (2017) notes that thanatopolitics is “how a society organizes which lives are considered sacred and which are considered disposable. Thanatopolitics marks the line where precarity is rationalized in the name of life; in short, for ‘us’ to live, ‘they’ must be allowed to die” (p. 237). Part of the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre is to construct the antagonists as so unappealing, unsympathetic, and monstrous that the audience is rooting for the Appalachian-coded characters to either die or be defeated in some other way that kills the Appalachian part of them.

The Appalachian home and family provide a twisted mirror to the “us,” the protagonists of the movie and the audience watching the movie; they are *almost* like us. They live in homes that mimic ours but that are dirty and falling apart. They dress like us, but their clothes are old and faded and do not really add any identifiable personality. Their families are almost like us, but they are much more violent, the people are much unhappier, and their personal hygiene and general cleanliness are dubious. The subgenre frames the Appalachian-coded characters and culture in such a way that the audience is supposed to root for their destruction, for their lives and way of living to be destroyed, and the audience is also supposed to root for the people who are doing the destruction.

Even in movies like *Jug Face*, where the villains and the protagonists come from the same backwoods community, the outside world is okay with “them” or the broader community and its ritual, dying and sacrificing each other in the woods. When Ada and Dawai attempt to seek help from the general store with whom their community trades, the store owner stops his

daughter from calling for help or giving them money, telling her that what Ada's community is doing in the woods is their business and theirs alone. The owner calls Ada's father, who brings her back to the community. It is impossible to decipher if the store owner knows how the community sacrifices its members or if he has any idea of what Ada's fate will be. Still, he certainly knows that whatever goes on in those woods is not something that people like him should get involved with. Therefore, Ada, who is not a part of "people like him," is allowed to die, go back to her community, and be a human sacrifice, even though the owner could have helped her and Dawai escape.

Because of their isolation and physical and stylistic separation from modern society, they are "ungrievable lives" that are justifiable to sacrifice. Judith Butler (2015) identifies "ungrievable lives" as lives that cannot be mourned because, to "us," they are lives that were never really lived in the first place. It cannot count as life if, really, it did not live the way that traditional, modern society expected it to, with Butler using the AIDS crisis and War on Terror to demonstrate lives that have been at one point or still are considered "ungrievable" by people who would likely consider themselves functional, normal members of society. This idea applies throughout the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre both onscreen and to the audience. In Ada's onscreen world, she is not a grievable life by the people in the town; she is a necessary sacrifice that should participate willingly. Their priority is making sure the Pit community is still willing to sell them moonshine. Ada has not lived life by their standards; she is not in their community, and she is simply not a life worth mourning. Instead, her death will be celebrated as it signals the maintenance of the community.

Audiences are encouraged to view the Appalachian characters the same way, with Appalachian lives on screen not only being "ungrievable" but also pushing it to the point where

the deaths of these characters are celebrated, met with sighs of relief or cheers from the audience. In the *Texas Chainsaw* franchise, some of the most satisfying moments are when members of the Sawyer clan are maimed or killed. Based on the situation the protagonists find themselves in, it is satisfying to watch a young, bloody, captured person shoot Leatherface and dare to make an escape. After Verna's sons kill a teenage girl in *Leatherface*, the Sheriff gleefully takes Jed to be a ward of the state, rubbing it in Verna's face how she "ain't ever gonna see her boy ever again." In almost any other situation with any other characters, even if the family is violent, the audience would still likely be encouraged to empathize with Verna, to feel sad that a mother is being ripped away from her son and vice versa. However, similarly to how ungrievable people have not truly lived lives worth mourning, Verana has never really been a mother or even really been a person, so we do not feel that same wave of sympathy the way an audience would in another setting. The Sawyers, and characters like them throughout film, are set up to be so monstrous, othered, and non-human that we cannot empathize with them and instead feel glee when something objectively terrible happens to them.

Throughout the *Texas Chainsaw* franchise, despite the Sawyers appearing to live much like any other rural Texan, they are "othered" from their community. Leatherface reveals that the Sawyers' town looked down on them and thought of them as hillbillies. In *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 3D*, once certain townspeople, such as former Mayor Burt, realize that Heather is a Sawyer, their goal is to kill her solely because she is a Sawyer. The slaughterhouse confrontation happens because Burt and his son are using Heather as bait to lure Leatherface there, as they hope to kill both in one go. At the beginning of the movie, the Sawyer family home and almost the entire family are burned alive in the fire because of mob justice. Still, it is celebrated in local

newspapers because it was the Sawyer family. Despite all sides participating in violence, only the antagonists are coded as morally inferior and worthy of death.

Throughout the subgenre, there is a clear distinction between the Appalachian and non-Appalachian characters regarding who garners the audience's sympathies. In *We Are What We Are* and *Jug Face*, the characters we are rooting for as the audience are the characters breaking away from tradition and, thus, their Appalachian culture. Despite Ada's actions in *Jug Face* resulting in the deaths of her friends and family members, the audience is still rooting for her and Dawai to escape, even knowing that there will only be more communal death and destruction if they are to leave successfully. The subgenre's narrative arcs let the audience know that Appalachian culture, or at least elements of it, are worthy of destruction; we are rooting for the Parker daughters to kill their father, and we are rooting for the death of Ada's community if it means that she can escape and be safe; we are rooting for the trespassers to survive the Sawyer clan. The messaging throughout the subgenre is clear: Appalachian culture and people who hold to it are dangerous and should be eradicated by any means necessary.

Appalachian Appearances

The way characters are dressed in movies matters; it serves as a visual indicator of a character's identity and history. When it comes to dressing Appalachian-coded characters within the subgenre, there is seemingly a guide that all horror costuming directors use. The women are often wrapped in plain, modest dresses, frequently in a neutral color like khaki or cream, with their knees and shoulders covered, but not dresses that are so long that they touch the floor or ground because that is impractical to kill people in. High, buttoned-up collars are a must-dress and will look generally dated. Still, it will be impossible to place a date or decade on when the

dress could have possibly been made, implying that the dress could either be a hand-me-down or perhaps homemade with little to no concern for style, just wearability. These anachronistic and outdated clothes against more modern backdrops of the trespassers emphasize the uncanny and slightly off nature of the antagonists. If the dress is a non-neutral color, like blue, it will be washed out and faded, again hinting at the age and telling the audience that, if we know nothing else, these clothes are not new.

The community in *Jug Face* could be considered the blueprint for how the average Appalachian woman is dressed in the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre. Throughout the film, every woman who is part of the Pit community is dressed in modest, neutral, or washed-out dresses. It would be impossible to place the general time period if not because Ada interacts with people dressed in modern jeans and t-shirts the few times she visits the store where her community sells their moonshine.



Figure 7: Jug Face, 2013. Ada talks to an outsider in the store.

This is a trend that is present throughout the Appalachian Atrocity genre; this muted, plain style of dress can be seen on women of the Sawyer clan throughout the *Texas Chainsaw* franchise as well as on some of the female mutants throughout *The Hills Have Eyes*. When the Appalachian women of the genre dress up, the outdatedness of their clothing becomes even more prominent. *We Are What We Are* depicts the Parkers sitting down for their Lambs Day meals with daughters Iris and Rose wearing what can only be described as the turn of the 19th-century dresses, complete with ruffle collars and lace sleeves that have not been utilized in fashion for decades.



Figure 8: We Are What We Are, 2013. The Parkers sit down for their feast.

These fashion choices are constantly juxtaposed with the “outsiders,” who show up in modern clothes. The outsiders’ clothes are not flashy nor would they normally be memorable at all if not in comparison to the way the villains are typically dressed. In *Texas Chainsaw*, the final girl, Sally, wears white bell bottom pants and a bright blue and white tank top, while her doomed friend is dressed in orange corduroy shorts and a brightly patterned, open-backed halter top. This

is completely different from any of the female Sawyer corpses we see dressed up in Leatherface's home, and in later films, we do not see any Sawyer women wearing pants until Heather in *Texas Chainsaw 3D*, where Heather does not even know she is a Sawyer and does not identify with that part of herself for much of the film.

Oftentimes, the Appalachian-coded characters will be dirty or grimy. Even if they are shown bathing or washing in the river, there is almost a film of dirt that they cannot scrub off of their skin. The assumption that the audience is supposed to make is that the culture and the community are simply dirty. Not necessarily in a disgusting way, but more so in a way that the Appalachian characters are living their lives outside and off the land. They never really have the opportunity to get clean because they are so dependent on the earth for food and resources. There are also many insinuations that the characters are unhygienic as well; the way we see food being prepared within the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre also communicates this uncleanness. Aside from the rusted, bloodied tools that are often used to obtain food in the first place, dirty freezers, and flies swarming around unidentifiable meats, all suggest that these characters do not have a grasp on hygiene. This general dirt and grime extend to the rest of the home, and many of the homes that Appalachian characters live in, while being outdated, are also cluttered, dirty, and falling apart despite being a family home. This is also a nod to how, no matter how good her performance of femininity and homemaking is, Appalachian women will never be able to have the neat, clean homes of their contemporaries.

Within the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre, the men wear apparel that is similar to the women's but less obviously dated. Faded flannels are a staple, as is wrecked denim, which has clearly been through hell but has held up. More often than not, the men of these communities will also have beards, which helps to paint them as unkempt and dirty when compared to the

clean-shaven, more well-dressed outsiders they will encounter. Beards also signal more rugged, outdoorsy men who do not need to be clean-shaven for their careers, military service, or professional settings. The men are always dressed masculinely, with traditional gender roles also being enforced through dress.

One exception is Jed in the *Texas Chainsaw* franchise, who enjoys wearing the skin of women he has killed, attaching wigs, and putting makeup on them before he wears them out. This variation marks Jed as failing to be a pillar of masculinity to his family. Instead, he is a burden, and his fixation on women's clothes and hair only serves to further divide him from the rest of the men in his family. Based on their fashion choices, Jed is treated as though he does not belong to any one category, he is not masculine enough for the men in his family but he is certainly not feminine enough for the women, so he is relegated to the role of killer, where Jed can wear whatever he pleases so long as he does his job. The presence of gender-bending and trans-adjacent identities has, unfortunately, been used in other horror films as well, such as *The Silence of the Lambs* to portray characters as monstrous and not quite right (Tharp, 1991).

As well as serving as a visual contrast to non-Appalachian-coded characters, the fashion of the Appalachian-coded characters helps to show their social and financial status. Based on their outdated and grimy garb, they are obviously living in poverty, and they do not have the means to access any mainstream type of store that would see more modern-looking clothes. They also do not have the ability to maintain cleanliness or are simply okay with squalor and filth. The outdated but impossible-to-date vibe that many of the dresses in the genre also serve to indicate potentially "old fashioned" (read traditional and conservative) views about the world, such as gender roles. The fashion choices indicate that the Appalachian characters live in the past in more ways than one.

Another stylistic choice that adds to this image of Appalachian characters living in the past, or at the very least living apart from modern society is the way that they speak and the accent they have. The Appalachian accent is not just a southern accent, as it developed specifically from the Scots-Irish colonizers and is referred to as a mountain accent or folk accent by linguists. Despite certain lingual overlaps with pure southern accents, the accents, and the cultures are completely separate. The drawl that the Appalachian characters use, no matter where the story is actually set, such as in Texas or New Mexico is slow, uses a lot of conjunctions, and generally sounds uneducated. For example, the Sawyer clan in the Texas Chainsaw franchise speaks in a way that is slightly slower sounding than the rest of the Texans we see them interact with. Even the language often used to describe characters is uniquely Appalachian. The “hillbilly” word and imagery originated in and about the Appalachian region and people, which makes the use of the word indicative that the person or people being described have Appalachian qualities. For example, the sheriff from *Leatherface* makes a snide remark to Verna Sawyer at one point calling the Sawyer family “nothin’ but hillbilly trash” after an altercation, despite them living in the same town and presumably sharing a culture. There is something about the way the Sawyer family talks, dresses, and acts, that makes them not southern nor Texan, but Hillbillies, Appalachians, even if that is not where the film locates them.

Appalachian Settings

One of the most explicit ways in which the situation and the style of the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre are intertwined is in the weather and the time of day being a catalyst for the events of the film. In many other horror movies, the style is dark, even stormy and bleak, where the lack of light increases the terror of the unknown and unseeable. However, Appalachian

Atrocity films often take place in the daytime where the horrors of the antagonists are in full view. In horror movies we often see a slasher stalking through the dark to hunt their victims or monsters who are confined to the night by some supernatural force. But the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and the *Hills Have Eyes*, in particular, completely subverted that by having some of the most pivotal scenes, the scenes where people are being hunted and killed, happening during the day and bleeding into the night instead of happening exclusively at night.

Nighttime signifies danger and characters being placed at night is often a signal that they are trespassing, they are in danger, and whatever dark place they are at is not someplace they are supposed to be. Daylight is supposed to be a safe time of day, but in the Appalachian Atrocity genre, especially in films where a “normal” family is being hunted, the daytime does not offer any respite, and the monsters do not go away when the sun comes up. Horrifyingly, the mutants in *Hills Have Eyes* and the clan in *Texas Chainsaw* work better in the daytime because they have the advantage of knowing the area. Even though the protagonists can also see around them, they are no better equipped to defend themselves.

The display of the patriarch of the “normal” family in the *Hills Have Eyes* by Papa Jupiter, where he strings him up and then lights him on fire, happens at night not because it has to, but because Papa Jupiter knows that the family will be the most scared and vulnerable after a day of exhaustion and stress from being stuck in the sun. The Hill People have watched this family argue with each other, split up, and throughout the day as they become more exhausted and more fed up with each other, a factor exacerbated by the heat of the day. So it makes sense that they would choose to strike at night, with a massive distraction like setting someone on fire. They have used the day to weaken the family and are now using night to finish them off. Part of what made *Texas Chainsaw* so horrifying when it made its debut despite its relative lack of gore

was the fact that the audience sees Pam and her boyfriend get killed in broad daylight after they went to knock on a door to ask a simple question in a region renowned for its hospitality.

This type of unintentional or harmless “trespassing” that results in much more than the trespassers bargained for is a situation that many characters of the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre have found themselves in. In many occult-themed horror movies, the commonly held belief is that in order for something otherworldly to have an influence on your life, you yourself must be the one to invite it in, either explicitly or unintentionally. In most possession horror movies, for example, the demon possesses an unwitting person who uses a Ouija board and thinks they are talking to a family member or friend who has passed on. Despite not meaning to intrude on a demon’s territory, having the Ouija board in the first place signifies trespassing into a realm that is not for humans. A similar principle can be applied to land constraints within the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre, where the villains are largely self-confined to one town, or area in the woods, or a particular house and generally cannot or do not commit violent acts outside of that domain. However, once someone enters their territory, either wittingly or unwittingly, and sometimes through the villains manipulating the situation, all bets are off, the border has been crossed and the protagonists have entered an unfamiliar, hostile world.

In the case of *The Hills Have Eyes*, the mutants seem to have a deal with the gas station attendant at the lone gas station in their area where the clerk will lure people to mutant territory, ambush their car, and the car will be forced to crash. The protagonists are too far away from any type of reliable help or societal services like AAA; they are in the mutants’ territory now and even though they do not know it yet, they are being hunted. In one pivotal scene, Doug, the young son-in-law desperately searching for some help, stumbles upon a crater filled with the vehicles of the mutant’s previous victims. This scene is when the severity of their situation

begins to set in, not only to Doug but also to the audience. These are experienced hunters, people who know the land better than anyone else and have already used it to their advantage. And more than that, this scene gives both the reader and Doug a profound sense of just how much they should not be there. This land is not land that his family is meant to go into, they have been forced to cross the border, though and are thrust into someone else's territory. Not only someone else's territory but a land that is entirely barren; there are no people or communities to help them, they do not even have any natural resources to help them with basic concerns like dehydration. They are in a desert. There is nothing and no one around them other than the Hill People. The Carters are entirely on their own and without even the most basic resources, they are trapped in a desolate, barren wasteland being hunted by people who know the environment and they are alone.



Figure 9: The Hills Have Eyes, 2006. Doug discovers the car graveyard.

In the original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Sally and her friends originally stop at a gas station that is waiting to have its tanks refilled. Despite being low on fuel and being warned that the Sawyers, who live next door to the house they are visiting, are not friendly towards strangers, the group forgoes waiting there to fill up. Instead, they find themselves frustrated at their fuel

situation when they reach the house, and Kirk, Pam's boyfriend, decides he is going to go try and barter for some gasoline. As soon as he crosses the property line onto the Sawyer's land, there is a shift in the film; there is more tension in the air, and although you do not know why yet, the audience has a deep-rooted sense that Kirk should not have come over and if he had stayed on his side of the property and he would be safe. Although Kirk is only there to inquire about getting gasoline, Leatherface and his family perceive him as a trespasser, as a threat, and as someone who needs to be killed for this encroachment. The seemingly innocent act of knocking on a door is met with murder and bodily desecration because Kirk crosses the boundary of the family's self-imposed isolation and loyalty to each other and the land.

Appalachian Tastes

A fixture of the Appalachian Atrocity genre is the element of cannibalism within the Appalachian communities. Whether cannibalism has a ritualistic element or is performed as an act of power over trespassing outsiders, the act of killing and eating another human being is commonplace. In *We Are What We Are*, cannibalism is a sacred ritual that is treated as a holiday; the Parker family carefully selects a young woman, kidnaps her, and then holds her in a specifically constructed cell. In the week leading up to the feast, the family members, even little Rory, who is around five years old, will fast, pray, and reflect. When Rory expresses how hungry he is and how much he just wishes he could eat a hamburger, his older sisters reassure him that the upcoming feast will be worth it. After the girl is butchered, she is prepared by Iris and Rose as a morbid meal. Lamb's Day is a feast, everyone is dressed in their Sunday best, candles are lit around the house, and along with the main course, there are traditional sides of bread and salad.



Figure 10: We Are What We Are, 2013. The main course.

The meal containing human meat looks unappetizing, even if you have no clue what is in it; however, the Parkers, and especially their father, treat the meal with a sense of reverence and excitement. It is the feast's main course; it is the sacrificial lamb that has allowed the Parker family to continue to exist for the last 300 years, and it used to be a real human girl, like Rose and Iris, with a family and hopes and dreams. The Appalachians literally eating the livelihoods of young people is a common thread intertwined with cannibalism.

Young victims, and especially the victims who are cannibalized, such as the group of young people in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, are struck down in what should be their prime in horrific, brutal ways before being consumed by a group of uneducated hicks. In *Jug Face*, the Pit is indiscriminate with whom it wants to take, taking the lives of young people and demanding Ada's life via one of the jugs despite her pregnancy. The Appalachian-coded characters and culture are all-consuming of the lives, hopes, dreams, and futures of any young people who dare try to cause any sort of change. And their futures are massacred brutally, like they are nothing

more than literal animals, and then eaten by people who would be below them in every other situation.

Conclusion

The choices that go into the styling, as well as the frequent situations within the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre, invite negative connotations about the way Appalachian identities are perceived both on screen and in real life. Whole movie franchises dedicated to the Appalachian identity killing any hope young people have at a future over and over again in the most violent ways possible mirrors the way the region has been talked about by outsiders for decades. While the religious ministries or coal mining companies that have so desperately tried to force the Appalachian region into their mold for what is right and proper in modern society may cover some of their more insidious beliefs under words such as uneducated, or unmannered, the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre does not bother hiding behind flowery language. Within the subgenre, Appalachians and Appalachia itself are always an oppressive, violent, all-consuming force that will not let anyone out of its grasp without draining life from them. This is often visually represented by the dull, muted colors, and violent situations associated with Appalachians in the subgenre that distinguishes them from “normal” society as represented by the appearance and behaviors of the protagonists.

Chapter 4: Somatic and Sensory Invitations

As a terrified but still pretty young woman sprints through the dimly lit woods, the camera is held incredibly close to her face and is shaking all around as she runs, dodges, ducks, and screams. You can hear the sticks cracking under her steps and branches whipping against her face. As she runs and pants, breathing heavily and her heart racing, the villain closes in ever closer and faster. Your chest might feel tighter. Inside a small, cramped room, a chainsaw revs to life, and you can hear the metal teeth make a connection with flesh, sawing through layers of skin, fat, muscle, tissue, and finally, the cracking of a bone as a limb is completely severed. A lone figure camouflaged against an expansive desert background that is barely visible stalks an unsuspecting family on a road trip from afar as ominous, haunting music plays in the background of the scene.

All of these scenes display somatic and sensual experiences in film and contribute to the overall experience of the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre. While horror movies of all subgenres are going to draw on similar film techniques to elicit fear and discomfort in their audiences, the way that the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre uses these film techniques and somatic inferences serves to reinforce attributes of the Appalachian characters. As the audience recoils in disgust, gasps in horror, and is drawn into the narrative through various senses, they associate those adverse, visceral reactions with the Appalachian-coded character and places. This is similar to the way horror audiences are encouraged to react and think about places that are presented as the bad place, the dark “other” in horror movies. The movie *The Forest*, for example takes place in and around Aokigahara forest, or the “suicide forest” and presents the entire country and culture as sources of fear (Bloomfield, 2018). Whether the audience wants to or not they become “co-tourists” with the main character, seeing and experiencing scary, haunted, Japanese culture

right alongside them (Bloomfield, 2018, p. 165). When we as the audience are viewing an unfamiliar place through the eyes of a character, we are in a sense becoming that character, and adapting their thoughts and feelings about a place or a people even if we do not intend to. Similarly, the audience is encouraged to identify and become the non-Appalachian characters in the movie that they are watching, and then Appalachian culture and people becomes the scary “other.” I am interested in these invitations to identify with characters through audiences’ bodily and sensory feelings and reactions.

Historically, the senses have not been considered as a part of traditional genre criticism. This makes sense with what types of artifacts previously studied under genre, such as written speeches or books sometimes have a different impact on someone’s senses than a more visual artifact would. However, the definition of rhetoric, and therefore what we consider artifacts, has vastly expanded since genre criticism’s original conception. For example, Blair (2001) noted that there are differences between seeing a speech live in a shared place and watching a reproduction for the writers of rhetorical criticism. In their 2019 essay, which aimed to redefine rhetoric to make room for materiality, Ott and Dickinson repeatedly emphasize the importance of how a rhetorical artifact interacts with someone’s physical senses to rhetoric and to rhetorical analysis. They note that critics should consider “affect, aesthetics, sensation, embodiment, and the built environment” as integral components to how rhetoric “moves and sways us” (Ott & Dickinson, 2019, pp. 47-48). While these scholars are often talking about physical and material co-presence, I follow the work of Ott in his analyses of films such as *V for Vendetta* and *Lost in Translation*, as embodied experiences to focus on how affect and sensation are invited through cinematic sights, sounds, and scores (Ott, 2010; Ott & Keeling, 2011).

In this chapter, I use Ott and Dickinson's (2019) expanded conception of rhetoric and their concern for the study of more embodied rhetorical experiences to examine audience invitations to bodily affect and experiences through the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre. Horror movies can be unique in the physical sensations they elicit from their audience, and Appalachian Atrocity films work in similar ways to invite certain understandings of Appalachia as a region and Appalachians as a community.

While early rhetoricians were working primarily with speeches and other written media, rhetoricians have expanded their analytical focus to nonclassical or "nontraditional [forms] like film, television, or the internet" (Blair, 2001, p. 273). As mentioned, horror movies provide a unique insight into these sensations because the aim of the genre is often to make people feel terror, disgust, and even nausea. For example, it is often a point of pride for directors when people vomit or faint during their horror movies, which will be used in the film's marketing, and the scenes they use to do that are deliberate, rhetorical invitations to visceral audience reactions.

Scenery and Isolation

The use of broad, long scenic shots is typically one of the first ways that the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre invites audiences to engage somatically with the film. In particular, these shots invite the audience to feel isolated, alone, and vulnerable.



Figure 11: Jug Face, 2012. A view of the forest tops from the ground



*Figure 12: The Hills Have Eyes Part 2, 1984. A bus full of youths drives into an endless
desert*



Figure 13: The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, 1974. A hitchhiker pleads for a ride on an empty stretch of road.

All of these shots are taken from early on in each of their respective movies and help to depict how small and how isolated the protagonists genuinely are, as well as to drive home the feeling of isolation and aloneness to the audience. In the scene from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, the main focus of the shot is the expansive sky and flat farmland. Thus, it is difficult to notice the small hitchhiker on the left of the screen waving his hands. This hitchhiker, a member of the Sawyer family, is almost unnoticeable at first, so the audience is likely much more concerned with the vast, empty space than the actual person, if they see him at all.

The way that shots are set up, and the way that they depict environments is deliberate, such as in the film *City of Joy* (1992) where one of the opening shots of an Indian train station is indented to, in the first moments of the movie, present India as a place of:

chaos and disorder as Hasari (the central Indian male character) and his family come into the Howrah train station, there are several overhead and long distance shots that convey an extremely chaotic and disordered view of the city: we see beggars and lepers with

distorted faces screaming for food; a loud band, welcoming the arrival of a local minister, whose uplifting music crashes against the screaming and shrieking of people around; anxious passers-by colliding with each other in the crowded station; and children who seem to be lost in the crowds. (Shome, 1996, p. 506)

Similarly, this innocuous shot of a Sawyer conveys messages about the Sawyer identity to the audience. The Sawyers are almost a part of land and environment, so they blend in with their surroundings. The hitchhiker is not the only example of this, as the Sawyer house and farm in every iteration of the universe seem to be in or near an otherwise normal and innocent town. The house should be safe to go into, just like the hitchhiker should be safe to pick up, but both instances end in varying levels of disaster for the protagonists. The establishing shot of the Sawyer clan, this hitchhiker, is as innocent to the audience as it is our group of protagonists at first, even though his family will eventually be the group's downfall.

Both the van travelers and the audience are so preoccupied with the space around them, with potential threats from the landscape, and things that could go wrong with the car that the hitchhiker seems to be the least of their concerns, with Sally and Franklin saying as much when they take pity on him and insist the group stops to pick him up. The wide shot of the environment, the barren Texas desert, and the groups earlier refusal to stop and fill up their gas tank would all suggest that the groups biggest problems would be environmental or mechanical. The hitchhiker, who seemed so inconspicuous in his introduction shot and could have been missed without a keen audience eye, ends up being not only a Sawyer but the first indication that people are going to be the group's biggest problem. After snapping a Polaroid of Franklin, the hitchhiker smiles dementedly, holds out his hand, and demands "Two dollars please, it's just two dollars" from Franklin, slashing both himself and Franklin with a knife before lighting the photo

on fire inside of the can before getting kicked out. This scene is shot at a much tighter, and claustrophobic angle that emphasizes how small the van is and how much of a threat this strange hitchhiker has very quickly become. It is a sharp juxtaposition from the wide shot that introduced him as a mere feature of the environment mere moments ago.



Figure 14: The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, 1974. The Hitchhiker's Photo

The scene from the second *Hills Have Eyes* movie shows a bus of unsuspecting young people driving further and further away from any chance at help and deeper into the territory of the Hill People. The camera is panned out in a way where the audience can very clearly see the expansive desert that very clearly does not have ties to civilization. Audiences are invited to feel that there will be nothing and no one to save this bus when they inevitably end up in trouble. Such long shots also emphasize how the Hill People are in their element, as they are supposedly camouflaged and already stalking this group. This is something that is supposed to fill the

audience with a sense of dread and unease. We know something is watching the Carter family before they do, but we do not yet know what or who exactly is on the prowl. The shots are not necessarily meant to invoke fear as much as they are intended to invoke discomfort. Technically, we have nothing to be afraid of in the audience, yet we have not seen the Hill People or anything that they do, so there is no fear. Still, the sense of being watched, the knowledge that something we have not seen yet is stalking the Carter's can invoke a more general fear or discomfort. These expansive, wide shots of scenery also hide insidious elements without being obvious. *The Hills Have Eyes* utilizes wide shots quite a bit, and while we know the Hill People are there as the audience, we never actually see them crawling around the rocks in these wide shots.

Similarly, in *Jug Face*, several expansive, wide shots of the forest where the community lives are frequently shot upwards, like someone lying on the ground looking up instead of being shot at eye level or from an aerial perspective. This helps reinforce the suffocating nature of the forest and the fact that Ada is trapped no matter how hard she tries to escape. In every shot that looks up, the tree coverage is dense, and the main focus is not the sky; the branches and leaves acting almost as prison bars to the sky are the focus. Despite their community out in nature, the forest shots we see in *Jug Face* are anything but freeing or inviting. Instead, the forest is shown to be dark and difficult to navigate, with lots of tall, large trees that are close together. The forest is creating a barrier between the Pit commune and the outside world more than anything else, and the shots are representative of this, especially in shots where Ada is driving to the general store outside her community, where there is a stark, sharp contrast between the heavy forest and the lighted wooded town.

Once Ada leaves the woods, the scenes become much more well-lit, with shots that depict a much more regular, inviting-looking forest. This is the only time the forest is cast in a

non-suffocating light; the rest of the time, when we are following the Pit community, the forest is shown to be much more dark and all-encompassing. As well as giving the audience a sense of pressing discomfort, these shots also suggest the parameters of the Pit's limits without explicitly telling the audience. This community, locked away in their dark corner of the woods, is alone influenced by this Pit. Once they leave the immediate dark, dense forest, it does not appear that the Pit has any power over the community members or anyone else in the outside world.



Figure 15: The Hills Have Eyes, 1974. The Carters are watched.

The Hills Have Eyes franchise features a clan of deformed Hill People who hunt and kill unsuspecting road-trippers or military members who stumble into their territory. Both the original and the remakes use wide shots of the desert to drive home not only the sense of isolation and hopelessness that the victims will undoubtedly soon be facing but also the power and prowess of the Hill People. In one particularly poignant shot from the original 1977 film, the camera pans to a wide shot of the desert and the road where the Carter family's van has broken down. The shot is viewed through what can only be binocular lenses as ominous, foreboding

music plays in the background. The Carters are clearly being watched and hunted by people with less than good intentions, and they are clearly at a considerable disadvantage. The use of shots such as this one, as well as the many wide shots that depict a vast desert where the untrained eye must search to see the van and family, demonstrates the hunters' skill as much as it does the lack of skills of the prey. While the family does not know they are being watched, and while the audience is hard-pressed to win the game of “iSpy suburbanites,” the Hill People excel at their craft.

The Appalachian Atrocity subgenre uses camerawork, different angles, and wide shots to juxtapose the Appalachian-coded characters with the non-Appalachian characters. The Appalachian characters are framed as hunters, the camera positions them as being connected to each other but isolated from the rest of the world. The Appalachian characters universally have a habitat that is isolated from “normal society,” and that is mysterious or hard to navigate for non-Appalachian characters. However, the Sawyers, the Hill People, or the Pit clan in *Jug Face*, roam easily around the forest or the desert. They are almost a different species from the suburban people that they encounter, either when they venture outside of their community or are lured into their enclave. Shots emphasize both the Appalachian characters as hunters and the outsiders as a type of “prey” by how the environment is framed and how the different groups are depicted moving around and interacting with their environments.

Sounds and Scares

Along with the camera work, Appalachian Atrocity films manipulate sound to amplify the horror of the Appalachian-coded characters and the scenery. The original *Hills Have Eyes* movie made use of sound by having the movie be mostly quiet; the family speaks at a soft

volume, and the music that plays is not loud or suffocating until there is a moment in which the noise adds an element of horror. Instead of using visceral, gory images, the *Hills Have Eyes* uses loud sounds, like dog barks, shrieks, or slams, to scare the audience. The first kill of the movie, in which a gas station attendant is bludgeoned with a tire iron and then impaled through an outhouse door, is deafening. As the attendant, who is also the father of Papa Jupiter, the Hill patriarch, softly explains to Big Bob through sobs how he abandoned his deformed baby in the hills decades ago, the window shatters loudly, sending shards of glass scattering everywhere. The commotion is disorienting, especially considering the loudest sound for the last few minutes has been the broken sobs of a father. There is an awful, daunting second of silence where everyone in the audience and on the screen knows everything is about to change.

Through the broken window, the patriarch of the Hill People reaches in and rips his father through the window, throws him on the desert ground with a thud, and hits the attendant on the head over and over again with a tire iron. Each time the iron connects with the man, we are inundated with the sounds of his bones cracking. His desperate, terrified screams begging and pleading for help, for him to stop, and finally, a horrible gurgling sound as he begins to either choke on his blood or his brain has taken the final, fatal hit. The final crack on the attendant's skull rings out, marking the end of both the scene and his life. From the quiet conversation to a brutal murder, the audience is inundated with the sounds of his skull cracking and his screams.

In the 2006 remake, the Hill People rig up Big Bob and then light him on fire hundreds of yards away from the protagonists' RV as a distraction so that they can break in under cover of night. Big Bob's death breaks up the eerie silence that has fallen over the camp. As the fire that has been lit around Bob sparkles and crackles, his screams ring out throughout the desert, which is still otherwise dark save for the light that Bob's burning body is producing. There are no

close-up shots of Bob as he is being burned. Instead, there is a wider shot that shows a lit-up Bob as his family screams and tries to run for him, demonstrating how far away Bob is from the RV and how far the Hill People are luring the most vital members of the family, like Doug and Bobby out. The purpose of the shot is to, once again, portray the Carter family as the prey and the Hill People as the hunters, and they are hawks watching from above as their prey scurries around, just waiting to be caught. The fire from Big Bob, who is a lone light in the seemingly endless stretch of desert, serves to drive home the fact that the Carters are alone, they are completely isolated from anyone who could help them, they are trapped, and the most significant source of light is the burning corpse of their father. This man was supposed to lead and protect them.

This scene is immediately juxtaposed by the loud shattering of windows and doors getting violently knocked in and wild camera movement following the Hill People who have broken into the RV. Doug's baby is crying, and Brenda, the youngest girl in the family, is screaming as Hill men begin to assault her; all the while, the camera is moving very quickly, panning from shot to shot and filling every second with movement, action, and loud noise. The hunters are finally attacking, which is what the movie has been building up to until now, and the camera movement reflects the quickness and viciousness of the attack by its quick, sharp movements, especially in contrast to the sweeping wide shots that had been so common until now. For both the Carters and the audience, there is no escape from the brutality of the Hill People, who have finally caught the prey they had been stalking.

The emphasis on sound over sight also occurs in *Jug Face*, where many of the kills happen via the Pit God and the audience sees them in bits and pieces through visions Ada has, which are more audio-based than anything else. When the Pit takes Jessaby, as he is leaning over

it, instead of watching the pit tear him apart, the audience hears him being torn to shreds. We hear his skin pulling away and his organs being ripped apart from each other. Instead of seeing it, we hear the wet squelch as his intestines are disemboweled, the plop as they fall into the Pit, and his screams combined with the sounds of claws or teeth ripping on skin. Afterward, the camera pans to a long string of intestines hanging around a branch in the pit as haunting, ominous music fades out. Sounds can be used to elicit emotions, namely fear, in horror movies. Oftentimes, the sharp, loud sounds that come along with even the cheapest of jump scares can cause a more physical reaction than onscreen gore. It is in the name “jump” scare because it is common for the audience to jump or jolt out of their seat once there is a loud sound or visual in the horror movie. The loud noise, the “jump,” deviates from our body's expectations. For example, the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* series uses loud sounds as jump scares through its titular weapon, a chainsaw. Frequently, protagonists and audience members will be surprised by the loud roar of a chainsaw revving to life, causing physical sensations such as our heart rates rising and jumping out of our seats. Even when something visually disturbing is happening on screen, biological reactions are heightened by the accompanying loud, moody music, the screams of the characters, and the sounds of torture.

Smells and Gore

For something to be studied rhetorically, it does not need to be a material physical thing. Light and the choices made around light are rhetorical, although you cannot physically hold a beam of light in your hand or weigh it on a scale (Ott & Dickinson, 2019). Thus, despite not being physical things that we can hold in our hands, the visceral physical reactions that come

from events such as something putrid smelling being shown on screen or the sound of body parts being disarticulated from one another may still have rhetorical merit.

Implied gore, spliced with a few impactful, gory scenes that invite visceral bodily reactions, is one of the staples of the Appalachian Atrocity genre. In the 1970s, the most prominent subgenre was “exploitation films,” where, much like the torture porn genre of the early aughts, the goal was to make a film that was as shocking and violent as possible. Films like *Snuff* (1976) even sought to imitate real snuff films, films where the subject matter concerns a natural person being murdered and filmed, and *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) was so graphic that the director was put on trial for murder until he could produce the actors from the movie. The '70s and into the '80s was a gory time for horror movies, and films like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and the original *Hills Have Eyes* subverted those expectations by implying gore instead of directly showing it.

Gore is a central fixture of many subgenres of horror; “torture porn” even refers to a whole subgenre dedicated to making the most violent, gory movies possible. For example, the *Saw* franchise has scenes where a detective’s ribcage is ripped out, people have to cut an entire pound of their own flesh off, and a woman falls into a pit of thousands of dirty hypodermic needles. Alternatively, in the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre films, gore is not as prevalent or *that* gory by modern horror movie standards. What is shared among the films is a focus on the instruments that are used, how people are tortured and killed, what often happens to bodies after a person is dead, and the implications of what happened to a person instead of simply showing it on camera, as well as saving the gore for big moments. This all creates a different sensory experience for the audience, one that deviates from traditional horror and was pioneered by *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Hills Have Eyes* (Zannatta, 2022). The gore that the audience

sees always serves a purpose, and the suggested gore off-screen allows the audience to fill in visual gaps based on audio and other sensory queues, leading to an altogether horrifying movie experience.

This is not to say that the subgenre lacks gratuitous violence and gore; the more modern *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* movies are especially well-known for their violent sequences. For example, in *Texas Chainsaw 3D*, the first kill the audience sees from Leatherface on-screen involves him entirely cutting a man in half with a chainsaw and watching as his lower body falls from his torso, his organs hanging and dripping out. In the same movie, we watch as a man is eaten alive by a meat grinder, and we hear and see most of his gruesome death. The meat grinder roars to life and begins shredding as the defunct mayor begins to scream and plead for help before he is unable to, the meat grinder ripping apart first his legs, sending blood splattering everywhere as his pleas for mercy devolve into unintelligible, crying screams. When the meat grinder eventually consumes his body, and only his upper torso is still visible, there is an almost satisfying pop as the pressure from the grinder becomes too much. His body essentially explodes into blood and guts bits that splatter on the grinder and on the onlookers with a wet noise. Leatherface has extended, uncomfortable scenes of violence where a teenage girl has a sheriff pressing down on an open wound, and Jed walks around with half of his face being blown off.

The *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* franchise has several scenes across the series that are set in either an actual slaughterhouse, what appears to be a makeshift slaughter shed or a slaughter basement. These places look like death, and it is impossible not to imagine the smell of death and decay as well. Kirk is knocked over the head with a hammer and bleeds a bit, but the absolute horror comes from the choked sounds Kirk makes as he attempts to breathe, the sound and sight of his feet seizing on the floor as the last shreds of life are taken from his body. The room is

carpeted in old bird feathers, presumably from birds that have been skinned inside the room, various hanging organic knick-knacks that have been made from actively decaying animal bodies, as well as human bones and small body parts in different stages of decomposition line the walls. A person does not need to have directly smelled a dead body or a decaying animal to know and to imagine how bad the room smells. The film also does not have to have an olfactory component to encourage the audience to cringe or cover their nose and mouth with disgust. The setting of the sweltering Texas summer, the claustrophobia, and the stuffiness of the room Pam falls into give the audience a good idea of the type of suffocating, nauseating smell that has encased this house.



Figure 16: The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, 1974. The Red Room.

When Pam is dragged to the room in which she is going to die and strung up on a meat hook, multiple hooks are hanging from the ceiling, and Kirk lies bludgeoned on an old, rusty table. The wall behind her is stained with old, dried blood. This all helps paint a sensory picture

that could leave even the strongest audience member sick to their stomach, and at the very least, helps to paint a picture of the type of environment these unsuspecting young people have found themselves in.

Although inherently violent, this scene is completely devoid of fresh blood; even when Pam is struggling with the meat hook, she does not bleed at all, nor can the audience see the entrance wound where she has been strung up. The wall is covered in old, dried blood, so it is evident that gory things happen in the room, and the audience can gather that the things that are going to happen to Kirk and Pam in this room are going to be violent and gory. The audience can even see the back of Leatherface beginning to disarticulate Kirk's body with his chainsaw. Still, the audience is forced to imagine what happens instead of being explicitly shown what happened, as with many films of the era.



Figure 17: The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. 1974. Pam is impaled on a meat hook.

In *Texas Chainsaw 3D*, Heather wakes up in a basement converted to a mini slaughterhouse. Her friends have been brutally killed, and their bodies are still leaking blood. There are various bones and skins on the walls, and although it does appear more sterile than in some other iterations, it is still a gross room. With different power tools and other sharp instruments hanging on the wall, the multiple freezers, various chemicals, and the table in the center of the room, Leatherface's lair in this iteration appears almost like a small morgue. There are multiple cues, though the autopsies Leatherface performs are below board. Assorted organs, bits of intestines, pieces of skin, and chunks of hair are haphazardly placed around the room, all in different stages of decomposition. Some of the tools are rusty, and many are stained with blood. Leatherface has set up a "workstation" for himself, complete with a vanity set, so he can create his beloved skin masks, a few of which he has left on the table when we see the first shots of the room. Not only is the room visually unappealing, but the mixture of the chemicals, decomposing body parts, and old blood also suggest a repugnant smell, death in all stages, the worst smells at a funeral home.

The Hills Have Eyes took a similar approach to the original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* with the gore being much more implied than shown explicitly. The first death does not take place until more than half an hour into the movie and despite the character being beaten with a tire iron and impaled through an outhouse, there is very little blood present in that kill or in any of the kills throughout the movie. However, the second *Hills Have Eyes* remake from 2009 has an incredibly gross scene where a battered and very bloody scientist is left to rot away from infection after being thrown in a very used lavatory. As a young National Guard member sits down to relieve himself, a bloody hand shoots up and grabs his thigh as he runs out, screaming.

In this brief shot, we see him in the lavatory; the scientist is essentially buried in human fecal matter and other waste, with tiny, open cuts. Once the soldiers get him out, we can see more clearly that his entire body is covered in dozens, if not hundreds, of tiny, half-moon cuts. There is not one of them that is not visibly dirty, sepsis coursing this man's veins as he explains, in agony, what happened to him and his group of scientists. This scene is foul; it is not hard for audience members to imagine the initial smallness of a port-a-potty, as many people likely need to use a less-than-clean bathroom in a pinch. It is made extra foul by the fact that this scientist is dying by being set in a pool of human excrement and waiting for the infection to overtake him in the hot, dry, sunny New Mexico desert. The smell is almost incomprehensibly bad, and the mere thought of the situation is stomach-churning, but also with the vivid, rancid smell the hot waste, infection, and blood would produce adds a whole new level of sensory horror.

These scenes are gore-filled and stomach-churning, but the difference is that they are all scenes that are impactful to the film, memorable, and not just another violent kill in a series of deaths that try to one-up each other a la the *Final Destination* franchise. Instead, the implied violence interspersed with scenes of gratuitous violence where people are being cut with chainsaws, left to die in a port-a-potty, or torn to shreds by a spiritual force implies something more sinister and insidious than by just using as much gore as possible. They are not just going after people for the sake of going after them and making the bloodiest, most violent kills possible. The choices demonstrate how the villains might be much more calculating and much more than the protagonists may have thought initially or may have been originally portrayed to the audience. Using their dying father as a distraction so they can brutalize the families' women is diabolical, as is throwing someone in a meat grinder. Leatherface utilizes a chainsaw because that appears to be the easiest way to cut up a person you intend to use as food. When the people

perpetuating the violence are the Appalachian-coded characters, even though they are also often portrayed as dumb, uneducated, and unable to “talk right,” they are also being portrayed as calculating, organized sociopaths, which should be two completely juxtaposing images and identities. Still, because of the way gore is utilized within the genre, both implicitly and explicitly, those images of Appalachians within the subgenre and outside of it can co-exist.

Scenes of gratuitous violence leave the audience members with the same sinking feeling of hopelessness that the protagonists in the films are supposed to have, as they demonstrate that the main characters are not facing off against the uneducated hicks that the villains have been coded as. Instead, these scenes show the unrelenting violence and strength that these Appalachian-coded characters possess, and the way both the characters and the audience feel change. At the beginning of the original *Texas Chainsaw* and both iterations of the *Hills Have Eyes*, the characters find themselves in entirely unassuming situations: knocking on a stranger’s door for directions, an RV breaking down on a road trip, all normal conditions. And even when things begin to go awry, the characters we meet, and by proxy the audience, approach the villains with either unassuming nonchalance in the case of the teenagers in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and cockiness in the case of the Carters in *The Hills Have Eyes*. The big moments of gore, such as Big Bob getting lit on fire or Franklin getting chainsawed while he is confined to his wheelchair, all demonstrate to both the protagonists and the audience just how far out of their element the characters are and how unlike “regular” people the Appalachian-coded villains are. The attitude on both the screen and at home or in the theater very quickly shifts from one of cautious optimism to overwhelming hopelessness as everyone realizes how dire the situation is.

In *Jug Face*, once Ada throws her jug face into the forest and attempts to run from her fate, the Pit begins attacking other people in the community, mauling them to bits because Ada

will not sacrifice herself. These attacks are not shown from a third-person point of view, where the audience can see exactly what is happening. Instead, we enter Ada's mind as she receives a nauseating vision where she *is* the Pit, or at least sharing a vision with it. Ada is there as the people closest to her are getting mauled, and she and we can hear the ripping and snapping sounds and vaguely see pieces of skin flying up. However, the most gore that we see in the actual deaths is from the aftermath. The Pit or the river water will be red with blood, and a string of their intestines will be sewn through some branches. However, the audience never sees a character being disemboweled. Most of the gore happens off-screen, and we are left to imagine, based on the sounds and sights we get from Ada's broken vision, what happened to those people.

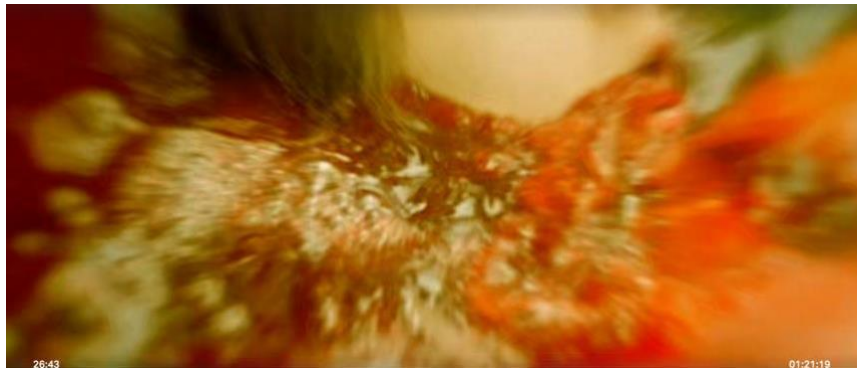


Figure 18: Jug Face, 2012. The first Pit kill.

Along with the gruesome audio, the broken vision is shown through fast, shaky camera angles that make it seem like the camera is attached to this evil force flying through the forest. These shots rely more on color and sound than fully depicting an image, with the first kill from the Pit, Ada's friend, setting up how all the kills in the movie are made. The camera rushes through the forest as Ada lies on the ground and her unsuspecting friends wash clothes in the stream. As the Pit entity reaches her, instead of music, the water begins to bubble and gurgle. Despite being a calm stream, it sounds like a rushing river as the attack happens. The screen starts to turn red as the woman's blood begins to enter the water, but we do not see her being attacked or hear her screams. Instead, we just hear the water getting louder and louder, and a clever camera angle that overlays the red water flowing over the woman's neck suggests her throat is slit. The specific shots only last for half a second, creating a confusing and nauseating swirl of visuals that leaves the viewer feeling as disoriented as Ada is after she wakes up and begins to realize what has happened.

Similarly, in *We Are What We Are*, aside from the final scene where Iris and Rose devour their father raw, the movie is relatively devoid of on-screen violence and gore. The scene where Father murders Rose's lover by stabbing him while he's on top of her is the most violent until the end and is acted out by an Appalachian-coded man. It is the only murder we also cannot frame sympathetically, as with both the Lamb's Day murder and their father's death; the movie seemingly wants the viewer to feel bad for Iris and Rose for being trapped in the ritualistic culture. They are not framed as violent killers but rather as victims in the whole situation, nor are there graphic scenes of murder they commit when they are killing an innocent girl. Most of the evidence we see of the Lamb's Day rituals past are simply objects that belonged to the forsaken girls and when their annual victim is murdered via a hammer to the skull. However, the audience

can hear the girl's hits and cries. As Rose cries and begs Iris to stop the dying girl from making the terrible noises and sobs she is making, the camera pans away, and we only hear the final thud of the hammer against the girl's head. The audience does not see the body being cut up and prepared for the meal, and once the Lamb's Day feast is served, it is impossible to tell that the meat on the platter is human meat. It is not presented in a gory or disgusting way; it is just meat. Once again, the audience is left to imagine what would probably be the goriest parts of the movie had they been shown on screen.

When gratuitous violence is shown, it is often the Appalachian-coded characters being killed in gruesome ways. For example, *The Hills Have Eyes* takes the most triumphant tone when it comes to suburbanites overcoming the Appalachian characters, and interestingly, the most gore in the original movie comes from the Hill People being attacked towards the end of the film by the protagonists and their dog. This is a trend that extends throughout both the sequel and the subsequent remakes. The Hill People will have one or two kills. Still, it is more their actions, such as assaulting Brenda or leaving the scientist to die of sepsis in a port-a-potty, that speak to their violence. In contrast, the triumphant Carters or military members are the ones who commit violence on screen. But the violence they commit is not meant to evoke the same types of emotions the violence from the Hill People is, as when the protagonists are executing it, the audience is meant to empathize with their reasoning and even root for them.



Figure 19: The Hills Have Eyes, 2006. Doug stands over a mutant he bludgeoned.

When Doug, a man who has lost his wife to the Hill People and whose baby daughter has been kidnapped by them, finally finds an encampment where the weakest or most disabled of the mutants are living, the audience is rooting for Doug to smash some mutant heads in, even if that mutant head is a child, or completely bed bound. The music that plays as Doug finishes killing one of the mutants is filled with tension but it is not the horror tension that suggests that Doug is still in trouble; instead, there is an element of triumph of Doug being able to let out a breath he has been holding since the beginning of the movie out rather than having to suck in another breath to hold. The “Aftermath” piece starts with peaceful guitar strums before building to a squeaky crescendo as the camera pans to show what Doug has done to the mutants. The music reverberates out loudly, but it does not have the same lower, more menacing keys and tones present in pieces meant to induce fear or dread within the audience. Once again, the violence that is centered on hurting the Appalachian characters is violence that is acceptable.

The violence that is centered on hurting the Appalachian characters is violence that is acceptable. These characters are acceptable losses, they are ungrievable lives. When Doug's wife is brutally murdered by the Hill People, the audience is encouraged to feel all of the pain and anger right alongside him, which makes his actions of indiscriminately murdering the Hill People for revenge palatable and even welcomed by the audience, who experiences a sense of triumph along with Doug. In pretty much any other scenario, Doug would be a brutal spree killer who would be seen as even more diabolical for murdering women and children with physical and mental handicaps that make them unable to fight back. But because they are Hill People, because their lives are ungrievable to both Doug and the audience and their brutal deaths are celebrated.

Conclusion

The Appalachian Atrocity subgenre uses a combination of gross sights and stomach-churning sounds, as well as the suggestion of off-screen horrors to give its audience a sensory experience when they are absorbing themselves in the movie. Gore, violence, and scenes whose goal is overall make the audience feel "visceral organ senses" (Hawhee, 2015, p. 3) when they watch are commonplace across the horror genre, but not all horror movies or subgenres encourage their viewers to associate those bodily experiences with heavily stereotyped characters. The Appalachian Atrocity subgenre is unique in that it makes the choice to frame the violence that is being committed by Appalachian-coded characters as the violence that should make the audience feel uncomfortable, and horrified, but the violence that is committed towards the Appalachian-coded characters almost makes the audience feel good, satisfied, and that they are separate from and better than the antagonists. This paints Appalachians as violent and a

people who should, at least on film, be eradicated like the monsters and nonhumans that they are.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In early 2021, a TikTok went viral showcasing a woman staying at a cabin in rural Tennessee, recording what sounded like human screams but could be attributed to any number of wild animals that inhabited the region. She suggested that the park officials she told about the screams she heard had acted suspicious and weirdly dismissive of her report. This video led to a phenomenon of people claiming that small groups of feral people roamed the Appalachian and Smoky Mountain region, hunting hikers for food and supplies, potentially kidnapping women and children, and murdering hikers for fun. Worse, the Parks Service was in on it and was somehow unable to contain this threat, so the government just let the feral people do what they wanted to do.

One user claimed to be working on a documentary with “hundreds” of eyewitness reports about these feral people. Everyone had a cousin who had a friend who was a park ranger and told them a story about it that was true, or had been on a camping trip in the Appalachian mountains when they heard a weird noise and felt like they were being followed. Missing person cases from decades ago were thawed out. Anything that happened to take place in the region feral people supposedly inhabited was pretty much automatically attributed to these fictitious groups of wild people. There is of course, no evidence such groups like these exist or have existed, but for the phenomenon to spread as quickly and as widely as it did, there had to be some basis for it in people’s minds, and the stereotypes of Appalachian people in history and media likely contributed to these fears.

There might very well have been a person in the woods foraging for food that was not adorned in Patagonia hiking gear, people whose families have been living off the land for generations might choose to live in isolation and what any passing hiker would consider

impoverished, even though they are perfectly content, people who work on or in the land and do not have good infrastructure likely do not have access to enough running water to clean themselves every day thoroughly. No one of these aspects, however, makes a person or a culture inherently violent or cannibalistic, which is what the TikTok video was suggesting. This notion had to come from somewhere, and the similarities between “feral people” and the families that are typically portrayed in the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre are glaring.

The Appalachian Atrocity subgenre can influence the way that outsiders view the Appalachian region and the people who inhabit it. Upon viewing the original TikTok, audiences did not react by saying, “this cannot possibly be true,” but instead thanks to the seeds planted by the Appalachian Atrocity genre, the initial reaction based on what they knew about Appalachia assumed that there was probably a degree of truth to the feral people notion, even if they believed some aspects to be far-fetched.

The TikTok video gained hundreds of thousands of views in a matter of hours, as well as many stitches and additions from other creators, dispersing more “information” about the feral people. It would not be until weeks later that videos calling out how “feral people” were really just repackaged Appalachian stereotypes started circulating on people’s “For Your Page,” and even when they did, they got significantly fewer views. Horror movies that depict both the Appalachian region and the people from there as violent cannibals have been around for decades and have had the opportunity to make a lasting impression on audiences, one that runs so deep that they assume there must be some sort of wide truth to it. Meanwhile, any movies or documentaries that frame Appalachian culture or people in a positive light are few and far between, most often produced locally and not shown on a large scale.

This thesis has demonstrated how the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre of horror films has used a twisted, uncanny version of the Appalachian identity to further perpetuate harmful stereotypes and ideas about the region and its inhabitants. This has been demonstrated through the use of genre criticism, drawing from the work of Campbell and Jamieson to work with their “three s’s” of genre criticism: substance, situation, and style. Each aspect was analyzed using four movie franchises that I believe to be the best representations of the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre: *The Hills Have Eyes*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Jug Face*, and *We Are What We Are*. In addition to the traditional genre criticism work pioneered by Campbell and Jamieson, I proposed and used a new fourth “s,” the somatic or the sensory elements.

Drawing on both the recent redefining of rhetoric essay by Ott and Dickinson (2019), as well as material rhetoric scholars such as Hawhee (2015) and Blair (2001), I demonstrated how crucial it is to take into consideration the unique sensory experience that happens when someone watches a horror movie. Although the sensory elements have not typically been a part of genre criticism, within the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre, the sensations that audience members get from the violence on screen or sonic jump scares and the suggestions of smells all have an impact on the way that Appalachian identities are portrayed and perceived. I identified the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre as being an independent subgenre based on the situations that characters find themselves in that are unique to the subgenre, as well as consistent thematic and styling choices that make Appalachian-coded places and characters stand out against their non-Appalachian counterparts.

The thesis provided a basic layout for both the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre and how to expand genre criticism to take material and sensory elements into consideration of an artifact or text. This work has, ideally, laid the groundwork so that if future scholars wish to further analyze

the subgenre, they have a starting point. The Appalachian Atrocity subgenre is rife with rhetorical choices to explore.

Strong family units, strange religious rituals, and gender roles are not the only stereotypes exacerbated by the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre. They are also marked as “other” through disability and evoke racial tropes that highlight the differences between the protagonists and the Appalachians. The antagonists oftentimes have monstrous physical deformities due to inbreeding and lack of regular hygiene practices or, in the case of *the Hills Have Eyes*, mutations from government experiments. All of the mutants in *The Hills Have Eyes* have some type of obvious physical or mental deformity, from hydrocephalus to extra arms to distorted faces, all from the nuclear testing the government did decades ago. These biological markers serve as an easy way to differentiate between the mutants and the “normal, civilized” travelers that they are hunting and eating. They also make what is happening to these normal, unsuspecting road-trippers all the more horrifying. Part of the horror in the repeated sexual assaults and kidnapping of women is supposed to come from the fact that the mutants look and behave the way that they do. The “normal” women are not just being assaulted; they are being attacked and violated by deformed half-humans. The use of deformity and disability in the films invites further critique to see how these ableist tropes work to further “otherize” Appalachian villains.

The villainous Appalachian family is always white, as they exist to showcase the “poor, white trash” stereotypes of Appalachian communities. In *Texas Chainsaw 3D*, Heather initially travels to the Sawyer home she is inheriting with a diverse group. Her boyfriend and best friend are both people of color, and it seems like she has grown up in a major city, meaning she has been exposed to many more different types of people than exist in the tiny town of Newt, Texas. Following general horror tropes, her Black boyfriend is one of the first kills, but more than that,

as Heather grows into her Sawyer identity, her circle becomes increasingly less diverse. Within the Appalachian Atrocity genre, there is a notable lack of non-white characters despite Afro-Lacchian culture being an integral part of the region.

In both *We Are What We Are* and *Jug Face*, there are no non-white characters on screen, let alone non-white speaking characters, and in *The Hills Have Eyes*, there are no non-white characters until the second installment of the franchise, and they are exclusively part of the protagonist's military group. Black people and other people of color exist and have existed in Appalachia for as long as Europeans have colonized it, so their absence is notable and invites a consideration of the antagonists. Through race, mainly the focus on White characters, the subgenre paints the region and people as having backward views on everything, including race, such as participating in segregation and being highly hostile to non-white people.

These brief overviews of other common scenarios and features of the Appalachian Atrocity subgenre could each be explored fully in its own paper, using genre criticism or perhaps feminist or racial rhetorical criticism as well as disability and cultural studies. The way that identities are presented to the general public on screen matters, and it matters especially when there is an entire horror subgenre dedicated to depicting the Appalachian identity as monstrous. The Appalachian Atrocity subgenre has been a contributing factor to circulating Appalachian stereotypes by using the region, the culture, and the people as props in their horror movies.

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Curriculum Vitae

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Research Experience

The American Friendship Project, University of Nevada Las Vegas 2022-2023
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- Social Media and Public Outreach Research Assistant
- Organized data in a concise and easy to understand format
- Launched The American Friendship Project's social media and website
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Teaching Experience

University of Nevada Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV Aug 2022 to May 2024
Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of Communication Studies

- Taught COM 101, an undergraduate course averaging 75 students per semester, covering the following topics: The basics of public speaking, rhetoric, and speech construction
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Conference Presentations

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