

BOOK REVIEWS

Le Sud au Cinéma: de The Birth of a Nation à Cold Mountain, edited by Marie Liénard-Yeterian and Taina Tuhkunen. Paris: Les Éditions de L'École Polytechnique, 2009. 249 p. ISBN 978-2-7302-1546-6.

In the introduction to her seminal book *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (2003), Tara McPherson writes that “we need a reconstruction of southern studies, a study of the South that can shake us free from those tired old clichés of southernness, . . . [that] can seek out livelier, less nostalgic Souths, challenging a monolithic portrait of the region.”¹ Her note is especially pertinent in relation to Hollywood’s image of the South, which is at the core of *Le Sud au Cinéma: de Birth of a Nation à Cold Mountain*, a collection of essays on the image of the South on screen, published partly in English and partly in French in 2009 by Les Éditions de L'École Polytechnique in Paris.²

Publishing the first book-length publication on the South in film in France,³ the authors and editors of *Le Sud au Cinéma* had a unique chance to make full use of their transatlantic perspective and introduce a new model of thinking about the South on screen, different from those adopted by the handful of American books on the subject published so far.

It needs to be said that *Le Sud au Cinéma* manages to do away, at least on the rhetorical level, with some obsolete yet obstinate stereotypes, most importantly that there is one monolithic South that gets represented by Hollywood, and that all Hollywood films replicate and perpetuate this uniform vision. The book’s editors, Marie Liénard-Yeterian and Taina Tuhkunen, as well as some of the contributors, explicitly stress the necessity to approach the South not as a compact whole, but rather as a series of Souths. Thus, the reader is presented not only with analyses of southern classics such as *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind*, but also with studies on independent regional filmmakers (in Anne Paupe’s “The South According to Southern Independent Filmmaker Victor Nuñez”) and more low-class examples of popular entertainment, for example hick or redneck horror movies (*Two Thousand Maniacs* and *Eaten Alive*, among others). It is exactly this approach, revealing deep and disturbing social implications under the

1. Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 10.

2. Quotations from the reviewed book parenthetically in the text under the names of the authors of essays.

3. And, presumably, in Europe as well, because the two notable exceptions written by European scholars were published in the USA: Melvyn Stokes’s *D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation: A History of “the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Times”* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), which is nevertheless focused on one film; and Helen Taylor’s *Circling Dixie: Contemporary Southern Culture Through a Transatlantic Lens* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), which has a wider scope than film only.

seemingly senseless (and hilariously unreal) murder sprees in southern gore production, that is most original and has the power to blow the dust off of southern studies.

At the same time, however, *Le Sud au Cinéma* suffers from many of the diseases of its predecessors and unfortunately perpetuates some of the ills it preaches against. To give an example of the first, many of the essays focus extensively and exclusively on the narrative structure of the films they analyze, without taking into consideration their specific production and reception history, their historical background or social resonance. This approach is perfectly illustrated by an essay on John Huston's *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1968), in which Gilles Menegaldo focuses upon the issue of transgression, spatial as well as social, perpetuated particularly by two male characters in the film, and looks for the film's "southernness."⁴ Tracing their development within the film, Menegaldo associates these characters with "certain features of southern culture and literature, particularly the issue of physical and social marginality, sexual repression related to religious education and the fear of the woman" (Menegaldo, 179, my translation).

These traits are furthermore connected more specifically to the branch of southern literature labeled Gothic, of which Carson McCullers, the author of the original novella on which Huston's film is based, is usually considered to be a major representative. Huston is said to take over some of the "Gothic" features of McCullers's novella, namely "an attentive exploration of a specific microcosmos in which the laws are constantly transgressed . . . [and] a convincing representation of a gallery of charming or depraved grotesques" (Menegaldo, 183, my translation). At the same time, however, the director downplays some of the defining features of crucial characters and makes them less grotesque and more opaque and enigmatic, replacing McCullers's profound narrative irony with an "aura of mystery" and transforming the film into "a metafilmic celebration of the star well beyond the character he/she embodies" (Menegaldo, 180, my translation).

While Huston's film is rarely studied in connection with the South, Menegaldo's cursory look over its surface unfortunately stops just before any profound revelation beyond the initial thesis about the transgressive nature of the film (and the novella), which is supposed to make both into southern works. He does not discuss McCullers's intriguingly ambivalent relation to the transgression of sexual and racial codes, epitomized in all her works, including *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, in which transgressions are ultimately punished and replaced by dull conformity; neither does he elaborate the "southernness" of transgression and Huston's re-use of the "Gothic" tradition nearly thirty years after the novella's publication. Thus, the essay does not

4. These two male characters are Major Penderton, "impotent, repressed homosexual, narcissistic, masochist, sadistic, fetishistic, kleptomaniac and paranoid," and Private Williams, described as "enigmatic" and "feline" (Menegaldo, 171, 173, my translation).

contribute in any way to a better understanding or deconstruction of southern clichés and popular perceptions of the region, but relies firmly on them.

Although I consider criticizing a work for what it does not contain as a failure on the part of the critic, in this case it serves me to highlight a specific approach which is characteristic of many academic forays into the issue of the South on screen, and which is only slowly being reconsidered and replaced. This approach has much to do with the way “southern film” has been defined mainly in relation to the region’s literary production. From this perspective, the most “southern” films are adaptations of southern literary works, which allows the critic to concentrate on the close reading and comparison of literary and film texts and to locate recurring tropes, narrative patterns, and especially various character types and their changing visual representations, taking the films’ reflection of the region’s reality at face value, and leaving it unchallenged. Comparing novels with their film versions offers yet another “guilty pleasure,” fortunately avoided by Menegaldo—to disclose and dissect the ways in which Hollywood has continually misunderstood southern culture, labelling it as Gothic, Other, or Trash, and exploiting only its sensational and/or most stereotypical aspects. While this is often true, few of the scholars go beyond a simple statement to uncover and explore Hollywood’s reasons for doing so.

Le Sud au Cinéma’s focus upon the literature/film dyad is evident not only from the table of contents (more than half of the studies deal with film adaptations of literary works on the South), but it is stressed in the very introduction which takes literature as a gateway to and a guarantee of “proper” southern mythology: “Perhaps because the industry knew it was dealing with a national myth, the most important filmic representations of the South have been adaptations of literary works” (Liénard-Yeterian, 7). This approach, unfortunately, gives ungrounded primacy to literature in the shaping of the popular image of the South, although, as Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee write in their introduction to *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, the U.S. South’s visual legacy is as strong as its fabled oral tradition, or even stronger than it.⁵ By this, I do not want to claim that literary adaptations do not play a crucial role in southern visual imagery; my intention is only to point out an abiding tendency in southern studies which, in my view, perpetuates a frozen image of the South, locked in the “moonlight and magnolia” mode of reflection and perception. *Le Sud au*

5. Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee, “Introduction: The Southern Imaginary,” in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, ed. Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 1. Here Barker and McKee paraphrase Katherine Henninger’s *Ordering the Facade*, where she tries to subvert the easy generalization about the South being an oral culture and asks the reader to picture a southern woman: “If not a personal memory of your grandmother, chances are that what springs to mind is an image based on a photograph.” Comp. Katherine Henninger, “Introduction: Visual Legacies of the South,” in *Ordering the Facade: Photography and Contemporary Southern Women’s Writing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1.

Cinéma invites this sort of criticism by its back cover blurb, which maintains that “the south on screen recounts the loss of idylls and dreams associated with the Antebellum South” (my translation), thus drawing a very specific and stereotypical image.

Southern films have presented a perpetual source of fascination for southern scholars. In this respect, *Le Sud au Cinéma* is part and parcel of a tradition marked by Jack Temple Kirby’s groundbreaking 1978 book *Media-Made Dixie: The South in the American Imagination*; *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth* (1981) by Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr., a special edition of the *Southern Quarterly* of the same year; *The South and Film*, edited by Warren French; and Tara McPherson’s *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*, to name only the most recurrent and obvious sources. As the subtitles of the books indicate, the South represented on the screen is as much imagined/imaginary as real, if not more so. Thus, the films represent southern ways less than they create them for national consumption. As Allison Graham notes in her reflection on the ways in which the civil rights struggle was approached by film and TV, *Framing the South* (2001), “far too often, the movies are cited by academicians in many fields as mere ‘reflections’ of social trends rather than as active participants in the political arena.”⁶ Hollywood “southerns” thus shape the national consciousness by a selection of southern history indistinguishable from the version of it that is mythicized on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line.

The importance of film in the forming of the popular idea of the South cannot be overrated and it is discussed in nearly all publications on the subject. Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr., put it bluntly in the final pages of his book: “The survival of the South in the popular imagination owes more to the cinema than any other force.”⁷ A reviewer of his book took up this idea and elaborated it into a more provocative declaration: “*Gone with the Wind* did more to shape the popular conception of the South than all the writers of the Southern Renaissance combined.”⁸

These statements bring to mind an ongoing question—what actually is southern film? Is it a genre, an issue of politics or poetics, a matter of distinct geography? Can we even talk about something like “southern film”? Though every book gives a slightly different answer, depending on the focus of the author or editors, the question is raised anew in all of them, disclosing the indefinite and changeable position of the South within its studies. While Kirby was tentative in using the term “southern” to cover the whole body of film production, and coined three genres instead, Neo-Confederate, Gothic

6. Allison Graham, *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 15.

7. Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr., *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 191.

8. Cam Walker, review of *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth*, by Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr., *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 91, no. 2 (April 1983): 238.

and Neo-abolitionist, his effort was not elaborated.⁹ Warren French briefly compares the “southern,” meaning nostalgic films about the Old South, with the Western and concludes that the popularity of films like *Gone with the Wind* and *Birth of a Nation* did not spark a new film genre because of the high production costs and “touchy political questions,” especially social and racial, that these films opened up among their audiences and critics.¹⁰ According to French, despite these obstacles, there were always efforts to establish series of similar films—like the decadent South, the southern Gothic, or hillbilly movies, with Hal Needham’s *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977) leading the way. It is in the last group or genre that French sees the future of the South on screen, with the “good old boys’ versus the law” narrative formula.¹¹ Campbell reaches a similar conclusion—the Old South themes and settings in film gradually disappeared after World War II, replaced by the increasing popularity of “hick flicks.” For Campbell, however, this is not a new genre, as these films “include the attractions of the Old South romances without quite the prejudice of the antebellum plots.” The mythology survives, says Campbell; “only the trappings have changed.”¹²

There thus seem to be two southern film “genres”—the antebellum plantation romances in the manner of *Gone with the Wind* (revitalized in the 1990s along with the popularity of the “New Old South,” as Tara McPherson calls the wave of plantation nostalgia tourism booming in the South), and the hillbilly/hick films exploring the emergence of the southern white working-class man, and his “centrality . . . to our understanding of American racism” as Allison Graham notes. Here the redneck/hillbilly/cracker character works not only as a scapegoat onto which the region’s guilt and evil is projected and thus done away with, but also as “a signifier of racial ambiguity, with his class-bound vulgarity consistently representative of contaminated whiteness.”¹³

Both options reverberate strongly in *Le Sud au Cinéma*, though its editors are rather reticent on the issue of writing the South into one particular genre. In her introduction to the volume, Taïna Tuhkunen claims that “instead of one ‘southern’ genre, we should definitely talk about a set of subgenres, or, if you wish, of a series of ‘southernisms,’” and locates the South as a cinematic subject at “the intersection of several artistic and cinematographic genres” (Tuhkunen, 23, Tuhkunen’s italics, my translation).

Trudy Bolter elaborates on this notion in her essay on *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Tobacco Road* and highlights the polymorphic character of the South and the precarious role of geography: “The filmic South is polymorphic, and the geography itself seems not enough to constitute a genre” (Bolter, 111, my

9. Jack Temple Kirby, *Media-Made Dixie: The South in the American Imagination* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), xvii.

10. Warren French, ed., *The South and Film* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981), 3.

11. French, ed., *The South and Film*, 11.

12. Campbell, *The Celluloid South*, 194, 195.

13. Graham, *Framing the South*, 13.

translation). Tuhkunen agrees, stating that the South is “more a mental space than a real geography,” where “the palimpsestic process . . . allows for transhistoricity of many places and characters” (Tuhkunen, 19, 23, my translation).

Despite these promising declarations, the book is surprisingly conservative in its composition and accent. Not only does it rely heavily on the literature/film scheme, as I have shown above, but it devotes much of its energy to the most stereotypical figures and places associated with the Old South—the belles and ladies, the gentleman, the plantation and the Civil War. Although the motivation behind this selection is obviously to knock these figures off their pedestals and offer their contemporary readings through the lens of recent films (*Cold Mountain* and *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, for example), this goal is not sufficiently accomplished. One of the main reasons, in my opinion, is the neglect of a racial or class perspective in the analyses, as well as the treatment of the stereotypes as static, not mutable. This is most clearly visible in the approach towards two central topics of the book, announced in its very subtitle.

“From *The Birth of a Nation* to *Cold Mountain*” sums up a centennial of Hollywood’s treatment of two significantly southern themes—the Civil War and its role in the national memory, and the figure of the southern woman, as both films deal with the Civil War (and its aftermath, in the case of the former) and in both, the action is influenced by a feminine presence in need of protection. I will now delve more deeply into the ways in which individual essays deal with these themes, to show their strong points, but also to illustrate the claim I made above.

Melvyn Stokes reshapes the perception of “loss” in the Lost Cause, as the Civil War was “dubbed” during the period of Reconstruction, by introducing a second war into the picture—while the South definitely lost the Civil War, it won the one which started right after the military conflict proper and was fought over the control of “the public memory of the Civil War” (Stokes, 27). The whole “moon-and-magnolia-antebellum-aristocratic-paradise” style stems from this victory, which replaced a yet-unborn history through an expansive myth of the pre-war South as a genteel and well-bred white society running elegant plantations with happy smiling and singing slaves.

Stokes then examines two of the most canonical film representations of the Old South myth—*The Birth of a Nation* (1915, dir. David Wark Griffith), and *Gone With the Wind* (1939, dir. Victor Fleming) to emphasize what he calls their “problematic” relationship with the Lost Cause myth. Although both films help perpetuate the hegemony of that myth, as Stokes claims in one breath, they contain contradictions which go against a smooth interpretation and betray a complicated reality behind the image: for example, an allusion to the brutal treatment and sexual exploitation of African Americans, especially women, in one scene of *The Birth of a Nation* or Rhett Butler and Scarlett O’Hara’s skepticism about male codes of honor and their emotional detachment from the traditional plantation society in *Gone With the Wind*.

Unfortunately, Stokes does not develop his investigation into how these rather minor elements, which, according to him, “challenged the very foundations on which the legend itself was constructed” (Stokes, 35), were smoothed out and contained within the final racist and stereotypical treatment of southern history, or whether and how his hypothesis alters the position of these films in the southern canon.

The theme of the Civil War is taken up by Marie Liénard-Yeterian, who, in her analysis of *Cold Mountain* (2003, dir. Anthony Minghella), contrasts male heroism and the war ethos often used in cinematic treatments of wars with the feminine narrator in *Cold Mountain*, which, in her view, “offers a different version of remembering by rejecting the omniscient male historical discourse” (Liénard-Yeterian, 45).

This is definitely true, but what Liénard-Yeterian chooses not to say is that this discourse is replaced by a white romantic one—the drama of the film is based on the obstacles that Inman, a Confederate Army deserter, has to overcome to reunite with his sweetheart Ada, a southern belle left alone on a remote mountain estate, whose letters, read in voice-over, are interwoven throughout the narrative. The “alternative way of remembering history,” as Liénard-Yeterian calls it, is activated at the expense of another story, which stood at the heart of the military conflict in the first place—the story of racial contact and interaction, the issue of slavery. Liénard-Yeterian mentions this only fleetingly, as if the total absence of African Americans in the community were a revolutionary achievement: “[T]he image of the plantation home untroubled by the realities of slavery is undermined. The slaves [presumably working on the farm, though never seen—reviewer’s note] have been sent away by Ada, leaving the vulnerability of the white home exposed” (Liénard-Yeterian, 44).¹⁴

However, the decision to leave slavery and slaves out of the picture corresponds perfectly to the approach which Tara McPherson has called in her book “covert racial politics,” and which discloses a peculiar solution to the stereotyping of African Americans in cinema—instead of complex racial relationships among the planters, their slaves and the white non-slave-owning majority being unraveled and harmful clichés thus overcome, African Americans are simply omitted altogether.¹⁵ The absence of slaves in a Civil War film leaves the cause of the conflict blurred, and allows for the film to be seen as a “pretext for a larger project, . . . a deep criticism of war in general . . . as America faces the prospect of the war in Afghanistan and Iraq,” as Liénard-

14. In her contribution to the collection, Taina Tuhkunen does notice the absence of black slaves in *Cold Mountain*, but she also turns it into the film’s advantage. Instead of black servants, the film features a white hillbilly girl, who comes to help Ada manage the land, which Tuhkunen comments welcomingly: “The most innovative crack in the portrait of the *Cold Mountain* belle is the dual portrayal of a ‘Lady’ and a ‘hard-scrabble woman.’ Instead of recycling black and white polarities, the present-day filmmaker shows that a lady can also be a ‘buddy’” (Taina Tuhkunen, 72).

15. McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie*, 115.

Yeterian interprets it (45–46). Ironically though, in this context of a “war on terror” masking Western uneasiness about Islam, it also reveals deep-seated issues to do with race and the history of racial relations in the U.S. in the past, but even more at the present.

It is no coincidence that McPherson talks about overt and covert logic for the first time in relation to the representation of southern women in American cinema, discussing the disappearance of blacks in the 1991 sequel to *Gone with the Wind*, *Scarlett*, and the ensuing naturalizing of the whiteness of southern femininity.¹⁶ The broad skirts of the southern lady both reveal and conceal a history of racial interaction, while, as McPherson shows convincingly, the lady depended on slave labor for her very existence.

The links between race and gender are surprisingly neglected in *Le Sud au Cinéma*, though southern ladies and belles are central figures in at least two essays; the lady thus plays a rather sinister role here, making, in Tara McPherson’s words, “new modes of southernness more difficult to envision.”¹⁷ This is well documented in the title of Taina Tuhkunen’s essay, “Belles, Jezebels and Other Dis/reputable Ladies: Southern Women on Screen,” in which she promptly strikes out the majority of southern women, from colored, via white trash, to lesbians and the working class, paying only lip service to the issue of race towards the end of her article without proceeding any further: “The deconstruction of the iconic image of white womanhood cannot be separated from that of black women restricted to even more archetypal roles than the white mistresses of the Southern powerhouse” (Tuhkunen, 70).

The omission of race as a crucial factor in the making of southern femininity in Tuhkunen’s essay is even more striking, considering that she does mention class and considerably expands the repository of cinematic southern women, adopting as “paradigmatic female figures” “hard-scrabble poor women,” “the redneck woman” and “white trash slut”¹⁸ into the canon and even noticing “freakish expressions of femininity” exemplified by the Amazon Miss Amelia in Simon Callow’s 1991 adaptation of Carson McCullers’s *Ballad of a Sad Café* as part of the southern canon (Tuhkunen, 56, 70).

Race is not overlooked in Liénard-Yeterian’s inquiry into the representation of southern femininity in *The Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1997, dir. Clint Eastwood); her approach is, however, quite unprecedented. The film narrates the story of a New York journalist, John Kelso, who comes to Savannah to write an article and gets totally captivated by local eccentricities. He spends some time with a black transgender woman who wears extravagant dresses and makeup and goes under the name of Lady Chablis, meets a black voodoo priestess, Minerva, and finally falls in love with a white blonde bar-singer, Mandy.

16. See McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie*, 68.

17. McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie*, 11.

18. Tuhkunen borrows these labels from George B. Tindall’s article in *Myths, Manners and Memory*, vol. 4 of *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 130.

In her analysis Liénard-Yeterian claims that “placing Lady Chablis and Minerva at the center of the plot [of the film] proposes alternative models and spaces for southern femininity” (Liénard-Yeterian, 42). The center of the plot is, however, occupied firmly by Kelso, a white heterosexual non-southerner, who is later joined there by his lover Mandy, “the new southern belle” of Liénard-Yeterian’s description. Leaving aside the fact that a working-class woman would hardly be called a southern belle (the same objection can be raised with regard to Liénard-Yeterian’s labeling of the black Lady Chablis as “the old-fashioned southern belle revisited”), I would like to argue that the only space the film allows black women to occupy is the ultimate margin of eccentricity and otherness—both Lady Chablis and Minerva live outside their communities, the former between maleness and femaleness, the latter between the living and the dead.

What is most innovative in *Le Sud au Cinéma* is neither its effort at a revision of canonical plots, nor its treatment of stereotypical figures and prevalent modes of feeling, but the refreshing plunge of several contributors into the depths of southern gore, among slaughtering and beastly rednecks, crackers and hillbillies. Maxime Lachaud recounts the sources of cracker movies or hick films in the southern Gothic tradition, as well as Erskine Caldwell’s white trash characters, captured on the screen in the 1940s and 1950s, and comments on the genre’s boom going hand in hand with the period of the greatest glory of drive-in theaters in the South. Then he offers an intriguing re-reading of the redneck stereotype—while these characters are often liminal characters situated between humans and animals, at the same time, they play central roles in the American imagination. With their total immersion into their environment and their utter independence, they re-live the story of American pioneers and remind the viewers (at least the more conservative among them) of ancient American traditions, in the times of chaos when most myths were shattered, beginning with the death of John F. Kennedy and culminating with the war in Vietnam.

The crackers embody the death of these myths and thus offer no support to the outsiders’ quest for meaning; on the contrary, they reveal the emptiness of myths and meaning. As Lachaud puts it, “the redneck or hillbilly becomes a symbol of degenerated American culture, a figure not of counter-culture, but of non-culture, a grotesque allegory . . . of a country flown off the handle” (Lachaud, 94, my translation). The word “grotesque” is crucial here, as it points toward another direction followed by these films—the murder or rape scenes, which abound on the screen, trigger an uncannily festive atmosphere in the community where they take place. Here, Lachaud’s train of thought is taken up by Florent Christol, who in his essay directly connects the murders of northerners in a superb example of the genre, *Two Thousand Maniacs* (1964, dir. Herschell Gordon Lewis), with the spectres of early-20th-century lynchings and the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Noticing that “for many Southerners, the civil rights movement represents the second Reconstruction,” Christol reads the mobilization of the Civil

War myth and its “phantom” soldiers in the film as “an outlet for a desire condemned in the present” (Christol, 150, 152, my translation). However, he pays the most attention to the unrealistic, playful and carnivalesque aspects of violence as depicted in the movie, and points out that they were inspired by the lynching spectacles of the early 20th century. To these, as Christol aptly demonstrates, invitations were sent out and hundreds, sometimes even thousands of spectators gathered, and at times the lynchings even took place in auditoriums and tickets were sold to them, which made these events eerie theatrical spectacles despite their simultaneously mundane and part-of-the-everyday character. The blood flooding the screen in *Two Thousand Maniacs*, considered by many critics as totally unmotivated, acquires a new meaning in this context. What is more, the year of the film’s release, 1964, is regarded by many historians as the “official” end of lynchings, with the lynchings being judged and imprisoned. In this light, as Christol writes, the film “perpetuates, through the screen, a cultural tradition which has become taboo” and allows the spectators “to reactivate again and again a mythology which became nationally discredited” (Christol, 163, my translation). Gore films are thus shown to play a more significant role in southern history and culture in expressing deep-seated white anxieties than might have been granted to them far.

Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr., writes at several points in his book about the inherently conservative nature of films about the South, serving as a romantic escape for the viewer in exchange for fair box office receipts. This, as I have shown in my comments on *Cold Mountain* and *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, is definitely not just the case with “old” canonical works, and it is up to academic criticism to disclose recurring and harmful paradigms and read Hollywood spectacles against the grain to lay bare what they are carefully trying to hide. *Le Sud au Cinéma* shows that such a work does not necessarily need to take place outside Europe.

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Kopecký, Petr. *The California Crucible: Literary Harbingers of Deep Ecology*. Ostrava: Ostravská univerzita v Ostravě, 2007. 201 p. ISBN 978-80-7368-318-4.

In the opening of *The California Crucible: Literary Harbingers of Deep Ecology*, Petr Kopecký links the origins of his book to the resuscitation of American studies in Czech universities in the wake of the 1989 revolution. Czech Americanists at this time began playing catch-up with trends that had developed during a long-imposed period of slumber, with ecocriticism (short for ecological literary criticism) prominent among them. At an epochal European nature-themed American studies conference in 2000, young Kopecký, then a fledgling graduate student, observed that the sole panel chaired by Czech scholars bore the title “Nature Might Be Harmful to Your Health”—not a sentiment with which he wished his country to be associated. As far as I can tell on the basis of two extended stays in the country over the last two years, environmental or nature-oriented approaches to American literature and culture are still not markedly widespread in the Czech lands—not to the extent one might expect in a nation with, on one hand, a history of tramping, scouting, mushrooming, and a strong if diffuse feeling for nature threading throughout, and on the other, a landscape marked by decrepit factories, degraded watercourses, destructive mine sites and other graphic instances of environmental distress. I hope that for students and enthusiasts of American letters, and not only Czech ones, such an orientation toward literature and culture, as both a field and a cause, will be stimulated and advanced by Kopecký’s lucid book.

A primary function of the book will be to introduce ecocriticism to readers unfamiliar with this area of inquiry. Kopecký is a helpful guide: he lays out the origins, precepts and parameters of ecocriticism in a manner that is clear, economical, and well-informed. As an ecocritical practitioner myself, I find much to laud, little to fault in his crisp, reliable précis of the field. I would quibble about just one detail: while it is true, as Kopecký notes, that U.S. English departments have proved receptive to (or at least indulgent toward) ecocriticism in recent years, I cannot say it is the case that most major departments have “created positions for professors” in this area (11). More common than specifically created positions are situations in which professors get hired into jobs defined by traditional categories of period and genre. Announcements for these positions may include environmental literature among a list of possible specialties, or professors (sometime senior figures) may gravitate toward ecocriticism once established in a position. The embracing of ecocriticism within English and American studies seems to me to be still tentative and peripheral, though as news like the headline on the day I write this review—“Temperature Rising: As Permafrost Thaws, Scientists Study the Risks”—proliferates, this situation seems liable to change. This is ecocriticism’s curious plight, its growth predicated on the spread of conditions it bemoans.

Kopecký takes California as a representative case in the development of environmental literature, and he stresses so-called Deep Ecology, a philosophical and ethical orientation named and propounded by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, which Kopecký sees as pervading American environmental expression. He makes a thorough case for these emphases, elaborating elements of landscape, history and culture that make California distinctive within the U.S. (a sort of Nature's State at the fringe of Nature's Nation) and remarking on how its most prominent environmental expositors evinced Deep Ecology sensibilities well before the term existed. He devotes chapters to both California and Deep Ecology, and he is clear, informed and informative on both. These chapters (the second and fourth of seven in the book) bracket a chapter delineating pivotal episodes in the lives of the five writers he treats: John Muir, Mary Austin, Robinson Jeffers, John Steinbeck, and Gary Snyder. As Kopecký notes, these writers vary in terms of their degree of familiarity to Czech readers, with Jeffers and Steinbeck widely circulated and celebrated, Austin and Snyder at least partly accessible in translation, and Muir wholly untranslated and largely obscure. As he further notes, Steinbeck is not frequently a subject of ecocritical inquiry, unlike the others. So among the services this book renders are these: to introduce non-American readers to Muir, a crucial, fascinating figure in environmental history and letters, and to interweave the arch-canonical Steinbeck with writers more typically associated with nature and ecology.

These first four chapters comprise something of an extended introduction to the final three—especially to Chapter Five, the longest one and the core of the book. Entitled “The Common Ground: Ingredients of Deep Ecological Writing,” this chapter traces four such “ingredients” through the writers treated: “a syncretistic approach, a non-dualistic perception of the natural world, a rootedness in place and a scientific erudition” (109). The metaphor of “ingredient” has an influential precedent within ecocriticism—Kopecký appears to have gathered it from the best-known critic of environmental literature, Lawrence Buell, whose influential “checklist of some of the ingredients” of an environmental text¹ is cited at the outset of Kopecký's study, with the checklist's items termed not ingredients but “tenets” (12). The metaphor is resonant and yet in one sense inapposite, since it suggests a separateness to these elements as in items in a recipe. Yet, if “deep ecological writing” is figured as a recipe, it is one in which each ingredient presupposes and pervades all the rest, as if sugar were imbued with flour and cinnamon imbricated with cloves. Kopecký knows this well, for while he sorts out “ingredients” for the purposes of his analysis, in discussing them he demonstrates their interpenetration, remarking how, for instance, the syncretism of these writers includes and incorporates their grounding

1. Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 7.

in natural sciences among the diverse elements fused in their holistic, non-dogmatic ecological religiosity. Any critic performing an analysis of holistic, synthetic texts is, of course, subject to the embarrassments of classification. Their interpenetration demonstrated, it is sufficiently clear that the frames Kopecký employs to structure his discussion are as lines drawn in sand, as on the foreshore slope of a beach at Carmel (home to Austin, Jeffers and Steinbeck), where the next wave may bear them away.

It seems appropriate—natural, as it were—to employ a littoral metaphor for the operations of a text concerning California, with its long seacoast the stuff of legend and longing. The relations between landscape and literary sensibility are an enduring concern to ecocriticism, embedded in the very notion of “environmental literature.” In his book Kopecký espouses what I call a strong view of the place-text relationship, one which deems literary and philosophical expression the effectual emanation of a tangible landscape. He posits “a coherent deep ecological stream” running through the writers and intellectuals he discusses, “whose source is grounded in the actual properties of the land they dwelled in” (163), and he quotes approvingly a quip related by the philosopher George Santayana, in an address to Californians, that “if the philosophers had lived among your mountains their systems would have been different from what they are . . .” (35). The difference Santayana postulates concerns anthropocentrism, the presumption that humans enjoy a special status apart from and above the rest of creation; what is posited is that California’s landscapes, in their radical scale and sublimity, undermine this presumption. There are good grounds for asserting this, judging from the testaments of the writers involved—the conversion narratives Kopecký adduces wherein exposure to extreme, uninhabited terrain occasions momentous shifts in perception and conviction—and from the myriad specific interconnections between environmental expression, political action, and deep ecology philosophy played out on the California stage, which Kopecký traces at length. In some respects, it must be said, the strong view of the landscape’s influence is hard to credit or parse. A landscape’s “actual properties” surely cannot exercise deterministic force, for the inhabitants do not all acquire the same views or values from exposure thereto, and even those whose views and values fall into patterns of consonance do not express themselves in the same ways. That landscape dictates behavior was a tenet of anthropology at an early stage in its development; in its strong form, the tenet has gone the way of the doctrine of humors. Even acknowledging the influence of place, there is a further vexation as to native status: whether a place’s effects are bred in the bone from birth or can be acquired through transplantation, as would have to have been the case for the likes of Muir, Austin and Jeffers. Kopecký cites the California-born Steinbeck asserting that the transplant Jeffers wrote about California as an Easterner—Jeffers came to the coast and “translated it into the symbols of Pittsburg[h],” Steinbeck claimed (59–60)—yet it is hard to tell how that difference gets manifested, particularly in stance, style or some symbolic repertoire that

distinguishes Pittsburgh from Carmel. Kopecký himself, a Czech sojourner in California, must feel the force of this prospect, that something crucial about place may be withheld from the non-native; I have felt it myself in peregrinations through Moravia (where I must depend on the landscape proper to speak, since I do not understand Czech).

I say all this not to rebut but to ruffle the surface of the relations Kopecký explores. For to note how various, ineffable and language-bound place-text relations are is not to dismiss the perception that such relations exist and may in some cases be decisive. Less satisfactory than attributing deterministic force to the landscape is the presumption that extra-social, extra-textual factors do not figure at all in cultural formations. Ecocriticism (broadly speaking) posits that such relations are not uniform or unidirectional but *ecological* in some fairly strict sense: reciprocal, various, emergent, indeterminate, yet still discernable through certain lenses, on certain scales of analysis. The scale Kopecký adopts—a broad, synoptic, comparative treatment of a recognized region—seems to me hard to improve on if we are to assert anything useful on so complex and various a topic.

Whatever the pitfalls, ecocriticism deems it necessary to find useful things to say about the relations between the environment and expression. It seeks observations and assertions that are factually warranted and yet broadly negotiable, even inspirational as rhetoric. *The California Crucible* serves well at this: it speaks well about writers who speak well about relations to place, for readers from Oakland to Ostrava. As globalization affects not just the virtual but actual properties of our landscapes, not just California but the whole world may acquire the aspect of a crucible—a really hot place in which seemingly permanent things lose form. We will need all the help we can get. Kopecký helps.

Randall Roorda
University of Kentucky
USA

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