Gone with the categories, or the knotty naming of the genre "Southern"*

Taïna TUHKUNEN
Université d'Angers

Oh, what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practice to deceive!

Sir Walter Scott, "Marmion" (1808)

When browsing through the numerous anthologies on the authors of the American South, we are quickly convinced of the reality of a critical category called "Southern literature." Why is it then, one might ask, that in spite of the numerous films set in the American South, the term "Southern" ceases to apply to the realm of cinema? As highlighted by this article on the naming of a would-be genre called "Southern", it is interesting to try and understand why the use of this thorny adjective or knotty epithet still proves problematic today.

As we know, the first major films on the American South were all adaptations of novels. The most disreputable of them, Thomas Dixon's white supremacist novel, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*[1] (with supplementary material from Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden – 1865-1900*[2]) inspired Griffith's notoriously racist film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), released fifty years after the end of the Civil War (1861-1865). It was preceded and followed by several deliberately misadapted films based on Harriet Beecher Stowe's renowned pro-abolitionist novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Life Among the Lowly*[3] inspired by slave narratives and interviews with escaped slaves. Margaret Mitchell's huge bestseller *Gone with the Wind*[4] was turned into a blockbuster movie (directed by Victor Fleming, 1939), released on the eve of the Second World War. In their different, meaningful ways, each one of them has both stimulated and complicated the creation of the cinematic American South.

When digging into the tangled roots beneath the early Southern films and their racially, sexually and socially harmonious pastoral Edens, traces are found of mishandled myths, legends and stories brought into the New World South by generations of immigrants. Sir Walter Scott's eighteen-century historical novels, for example, were immensely popular among nineteenth-century white Southern readers. The influence of the Scottish romantic novelist's fictionalizations of History on the early filmic South and its transplanted, relocated

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[1] Besides *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905), Dixon's Ku Klux Klan trilogy included *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) and *The Traitor* (1907), (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1905).

[2] Thomas Dixon, *The Leopard's spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden – 1865-1900* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1902). See Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's* The Birth of a Nation: *A History of the 'Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[3] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Life Among the Lowly* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1852). The novel was first published as serial in 1851 in *The National Era*, a Washington D.C. abolitionist newspaper.

[4] Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* (New York: Macmillan, 1936).

scenarios is undeniable[5], as is that of the "plantation novels", "minstrel" and "[Uncle] Tom shows"[6] evoked in this essay. Hence, more than "gone with the wind", things seemed to have grown "crooked" well before the advent of cinema.

The ramifications of the intertwined roots – partly visible, partly invisible, like the aerial as well as underwater roots of some of the uncanny swamp trees in Southern horror movies — of the seminal adaptations have been significant. So considerable and far-reaching that, although a number of later films[7] delved into the obscurities, silences and denials beneath the ostentatiously white fairytalish "Cotton kingdom" of the early rural melodramas, the "goose" was, so to speak, already "cooked" in terms of naming. In hindsight, it seems indeed that at the turn of the 1930s and 1940s, it was already too late to endow the term "Southern" with a generic identity in any form other than a pejorative label, or the disturbing "sticky tag" of racism that American cinema did not wish to be branded with.

Although it does not disentangle all the tight knots around this largely nameless, "outlaw", yet desired and "wanted" genre — particularly in contrast with the canonized Western — this article seeks to provide an affirmative, yet speculative answer to the headlined question "'The Southern': *Another Lost Cause?*" opening Warren French's 1981 essay collection *The South and Film*.[8] According to French, after *The Birth of a Nation*, the second momentous portrayal of the legendary South in *Gone with the Wind* "came closer to establishing a regional genre," before post-Second World War films began to move away from the largely fantasized, nostalgia-laden South to peer into the "decadent backwoods and backwaters of William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Carson McCullers and Truman Capote's fictions."[9]

A more precise standpoint was adopted, twenty years later, in Larry Langman and David Ebner's reference guide *Hollywood's Image of the South: A Century of Southern Films*[10]. Here the generic category "Southern" is applied to films which "pass the Confederate test"; either by taking place (whatever the era) in one of the states of the Confederacy, or during the Civil War in another American state, provided the film involves Southern troops. Besides this History-based attempt at genre delineation, Langman and Ebner set up the Southern as something "subtler" compared to the "instantly recognizable" Western which "has lots of space, Indians and/or outlaws" and usually "pits a lonesome

[5] See, for instance, James Chandler, "The Historical Novel goes to Hollywood: Scott, Griffith, and Film Epic Today," Robert Lang, (ed.), *The Birth of a Nation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 225-249.

[6] "Tom shows" were loose, racially biased adaptations based on Stowe's novel. These extremely popular plays performed by travelling theater companies across the USA turned Stowe's characters and pro-abolitionist messages into buffoonish caricatures, which reinforced the notion of black inferiority. Reflecting "minstrel shows" that had originated in the 1830s, lampooning black people as lazy, dim-witted, superstitious and "happy-go-lucky" characters, some Tom shows were "pathos-laden melodramas", while others "resembled blackface minstrel theater". See Jo-Anne Morgan, *Uncle Tom's Cabin as Visual Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 139.

[7] Inspired by a far greater variety of novels, plays, scripts, but also by poems, songs, auto/biographies, etc.

[8] "Introduction: 'The Southern': *Another Lost Cause?*" in Warren French, (ed.), *The South and Film*, 3.

[9] Ibid., 4-5.

[10] Larry Langman and David Ebner, *Hollywood's Image of the South: A Century of Southern Films* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001).

individual against a group of bullies or predators."[11]

Endorsing the view that despite the peripheral position of these by no means marginal films – marked by the darkest chapters of American history, the "peculiar institutions"[12] of the South, but also by Hollywood's "dream factories" – I argue that there is, and will most probably persist an elusive film genre tacitly referred to as a "Southern" which cannot be defined in strictly temporal or topographical terms. While the issue of repeatedly annulled or negated naming seems to remain entangled with the foundational adaptations of the above-mentioned bestsellers, the question of the Southern as a film genre should be approached in the light of contemporary perceptions of cinema genres as intrinsically "impure" and unstable categories. For even if this study on the complicated, "knotty naming" of the Southern genre could not be extended to the field of adaptation studies, the question of generic impurity raised here inevitably connects with the historically rooted perception of film adaptations as "impure cinema"[13]. Although it may very well be too late to propose a precisely delineated taxonomy to postulate what a "Southern genre" might (have) be(en) at our time when film genres are believed to receive at least some of their vitality from permeability and inter-categorical negotiation, it seems crucial to address the issue within a larger cultural and historical framework of structuring types, persistent narrative patterns, and interactive, polysemic systems.

It is also important to keep in mind that, after missing the opportunity to acquire a name of its own, roughly at the time of the great American Westerns[14] – which have not always been called thus[15] – the always somewhat illicit and spectral Southern genre was to linger on through other forms, whose multiple, often complex expressions lie beyond the scope of this paper. Several remarkable post-Second World War films, often based on literary texts authored by a new generation of Southern writers[16], now approached the formulaic patterns of the seminal melodramas by interacting with, rather than merely enduring the tacit tag of a "malign genre".

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[11] Ibid., x.

[12] This euphemism for slavery – and the social, political and economic ramifications it helped maintain – sought to distinguish the American system of slavery from other slave systems. Most early Southern films present the "peculiar" *antebellum* system of slavery as God-ordained. It was not only seen as essential to the southern economy, but favorable for the blacks who thus "benefited" from the blessings of Christianity. See the speeches of the influential *antebellum* politician, John C. Calhoun (1782-1850), whose standpoint dominated the proslavery discourse and influenced the postwar ideology of the so-called "Lost Cause": "Never before has the black race of Central Africa, from the dawn of history to the present day, attained a condition so civilized and so improved, not only physically, but morally and intellectually." *Speeches of John C. Calhoun, Delivered in the House of Representatives and in the Senate of the United States* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1853), 630.

[13] See, for instance, Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan**,** 2010).

[14] Released the same year as *Gone With the Wind,* John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) proved that the Western was to be considered a serious genre, capable of exploring complex social themes.

[15] Other names used before the coining of "Westerns": "cowboy stories/pictures", "horse operas", "Wild West films", "Western chase films" and "oaters" (in reference to the oat-eating horses, one of the key props of these films).

[16] Among the most notable ones: Clarence Brown's *Intruder in the Dust* (1949) based on William Faulkner's novel, Elia Kazan's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) based on Tennessee Williams's play, and Robert Mulligan's adaptation of Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962).

Today, dismantling the classic filmic South sustained by the segregationist rhetoric made up of "untarnished", "pure" Southern Belles, "chivalrous", "gallant" and "noble" white masters, and just as "happy" slaves and nasty "black bucks" may sound easy. But, as demonstrated by Quentin Tarantino's explicitly branded, twenty-first century "Southern"[17], *Django Unchained* (2012), a meticulously staged cinematic clash between Western and Southern types, the dismantling of the old filmic South can be brutal business.

Rather than exalting the pioneer and frontier spirit specific to Westerns, eager to tell stories about moving away from subordination to conquer the "New Continent", the implicitly termed early "Southern" tended to toil and tinker with old myths, legends and figures that connected the American South with the "Old World". Although nostalgic eulogies to the past are, of course, not absent from Westerns, Southern films started out by pivoting upon the un-American notion of a great, capitalized "Loss", before they were gradually unchained from some of their most restrictive meanings and legacies. This is what we shall probe, not to negate or tear out what cannot be uprooted, but to try and see what the early South-focused films might be the name of at a time of intense paradigm shifts and recategorizations.

The toxic roots of the grand Southern narrative

In his 1978 essay "The Image of the South in Film," the southern author Fred Chappell claimed: "The film image of the south generally breaks down into two very broad categories: the south as Eden and the south as Hell."[18] Chappell's polarized perception was extended in Maurice Yacowar's 1989 essay "Film Images" to contend that "Hollywood has presented the South as a corrupted Eden, dwelling first on an idyllic image and later on a harsher 'realistic' vision. Throughout, the treatment of the South centers upon the tension between a mythic ideal and a severely flawed reality."[19]

In the light of twenty-first century feature films and TV-series on the South, these definitions require further assessments, but they do evoke the sharply divided foundational beliefs, split moral ideals and aesthetic codes that underlie the early filmic reconstructions of the South, before they became an object of more critical examination and metafilmic reflections. Together with the denial of historical truths, the nostalgic need to reconstruct the "lost Southern paradise" – in the form of a tranquil, insular "Dixie/land" – these beliefs most certainly lie beneath the unsettled question of labeling of the still nameless genre. Equally crucial is the difficulty of these movies to offer a suitable national epic, a genuinely American motion picture genre that would mirror and convey what David H. Murdoch, the

[17] In a 2007 interview, Tarantino announced his plan to "do a Southern" in the following words: "I'd like to do a Western. But rather than set it in Texas, have it in slavery times. With that subject that everybody is afraid to deal with. Let's shine that light on ourselves. You could do a ponderous history lesson of slaves escaping on the Underground Railroad. Or, you could make a movie that would be exciting. Do it as an adventure. A spaghetti Western that takes place during that time. And I would call it 'A Southern.'" Blake Fehl, "Quentin Tarantino Wants to Make a Western", ReviewSTL.com, https://www.reviewstl.com/quentin-tarantion-wants-to-make-a-western-021510/.

[18] Fred Chappell, "The Image of the South in Film," *Southern Humanities Review*, 12 [Fall 1978], 303-311.

[19] Maurice Yacowar, "Film Images", in Charles R. Wilson and William Ferris ed., *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 925-927.

author of *The American West: The Invention of a Myth* calls the traditional American values: “individualism, self-reliance and an instinctive commitment to democracy.”[20]

If on today's big screens, and smaller TV, iPad and smart phone screens the iconic, well-tended nineteenth-century Garden-of-Eden South has turned into an increasingly plastic and ambiguous *topos* owing to its more contemporary reconsiderations and transmutations, besides Oscar Micheaux and other pioneering black filmmakers' “race films”[21], the early films on the South rarely dared touch upon what is now considered a more or less racist and sexist vision of the world.

This is the case for most of the early adaptations based on the Connecticut-born social activist Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel, considered by segregationist Southerners and writers (male and female) as an attempt to sully and slander the South. Looking back, their counter-attacks in the form of response novels called “anti-Tom” stories – which sought to rehabilitate the supremacist metanarrative of the “grand old (necessarily white) South” – worked with awesome efficiency, especially after they had been absorbed into D. W. Griffith's radically innovative motion picture, boosting the interest in other cinematically created “Southlands”. Underlining the impact of Hammatt Billings's engravings through his early illustrations of Stowe’s novel, Jo-Anne Morgan points out that they “did not so much leave a legacy as begin a strategy.”[22] The same could be said of “Tom films”.

Interestingly, the filmmaker who first adapted *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the same Edwin S. Porter credited with having made the first Western, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). However, unlike his "proto-Western", Porter's "proto-Southern" named *Uncle Tom's Cabin or Slavery Days* (1903) has been overlooked and generally left out from his filmography. To what extent these two early movies, made only a few months apart, already introduce some of the basic tropes and codes of the Western and of the more-difficult-to-name Southern[23] exceeds the bounds of this article. It is nonetheless certain that rather than setting up the South as a *topos* of entertaining *motion* – the case in *The Great Train Robbery* where the emphasis is on amazing, scaring, gagging, robbing, escaping, riding, pursuing, ransacking, shooting, shocking, as well as on alarming, dancing, saving and startling – Porter's American South unfolds as a series of motionless tableaux that bring to mind altarpieces, religious

[20] David H. Murdoch, *The American West: The Invention of a Myth* (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2001), Preface, vii.

[21] The so-called “race films” were films made between the 1920s and 1940s by mostly African American directors and producers who contested the type of racist stereotypes exposed by *The Birth of a Nation*. Reflecting the racial situation in America during the years of Jim Crow, the KKK and the Great Migration, but also Micheaux's belief that “a black man can be anything”, they sought to uplift the image of African-Americans. For more on Micheaux's films, and his less spectacular style contrasting with the racist, cinematic spectacle created by Griffith, see J. Ronald Green's books, *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000) and *With a Crooked Stick: The Films of Oscar Micheaux* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

[22] Morgan, *Uncle Tom's Cabin as Visual Culture*, 63; For more on the visual representations of Uncle Tom and his puzzling relationship with the white “Little Eva”, visit “Illustrating *Uncle Tom's Cabin*”, By Jo-Ann Morgan, Department of African American Studies, Western Illinois University, http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/interpret/exhibits/morgan/morgan.html.

[23] For the “two story lines” heralded by Edwin Porter's films which “would rapidly grow to be among the most beloved, the Western and the Old South romance”, see Edward D.C. Campbell Jr., *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 12.

paintings and early illustrations of Stowe's novel. As Barbara Tepa Lupack has observed:

> Comprised of a prologue and fourteen scenes or tableaux modeled after the tableaux vivant or living pictures popularized by French film artist Georges Méliès, [Porter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*] ran 1,100 feet and was considered both the longest and most expensive film made up to that time.[24]

No less meaningful are the final scenes of the two films. *The Great Train Robbery* ends with a thrilling, thought-provoking address to the audience, as a bandit points his gun at the spectators and "fires" at them. Conversely, Porter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* closes on a static, theatrical scene where the emblematic, all-forgiving Tom dies in the arms of the son of Mr. Shelby, the "gentle" Kentucky slave master who sold Tom to a cruel slave trader to pay off his debts. The various vulgarizations of the early Tom film not merely distorted Stowe's uncompromising condemnation of slavery as a corrupting force; Porter's division into "good" and "bad" slave-masters, into blameless bondage and shamefaced slavery left a noxious nuance and a poisonous option for later films to play with.

The duplicity at the heart of the bluntly named, sub-generic "Tom films" inspired by Stowe's novel was bound to complicate the more general baptismal problems of Southern movies. The image of the mistreated black slave, a perfect Christian who never raises his hand against his torturers persisted as an ambivalent, tragic as well as polemic icon that kept surfacing under different names and guises. During the middle decades of the twentieth-century, it was the joyful and comic black entertainer who thrived in Hollywood movies; as a sort of follow-up of the dancing, singing and clowning of black slaves in front of a mise-en-abyme white audience in *The Birth of a Nation*.

In the 1930s, at a time when virtually every film on the South included at least one generic "Tom", a joyous, reassuring, multifunctional servant, train porter and/or entertainer, it was not uncommon to fall upon a little white girl (vaguely reminiscent of Stowe's Eva St. Clare) and her companion figure, the supporting black servant. The best illustrations of this new type of cross-racial coupling, meant to entertain and soothe racial anxieties, are David Butler's films *The Littlest Rebel* (1935) and *The Little Colonel* (1935) featuring the child star Shirley Temple and the Broadway dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. This "Uncle Tomming" – to use the expression coined by Malcom X in reference to black subservience to white authority[25] – seemed to replace the adaptations of Beecher Stowe's novel that practically ceased at the end of the 1920s. The transformation of the overtly Christian, loyal black slave into a "servant pal" for an endearing white Southern "missy" says quite a lot about the changes and persistencies of the 20th-century visual culture and its difficulties to move away from the deeply-rooted Tom caricatures[26].

After the nine Uncle Tom adaptations of the silent era[27], the later decades of the

[24] Barbara Tepa Lupack, *Literary Adaptations in Black American Cinema: From Micheaux to Toni Morrison*, "The Birth of Defamation" (Rochester: The University of Rochester Press, 2002), 4.

[25] Malcolm X went as far as calling Martin Luther King "a modern Uncle Tom", Brando Simeo Starkey, *In Defense of Uncle Tom: Why Blacks Must Police Racial Loyalty* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 196.

[26] For more on "The Tom Caricature", see Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, Ferris State University, https://ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/tom/homepage.htm.

[27] For more on the silent era film adaptations of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, visit the multi-media archive "Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture", and more specifically "Uncle Tom's Cabin on Film", University of Virginia, http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/films/fihp.html.

twentieth century produced only one adaptation which sought to restore the name and reputation of Stowe's abolitionist novel. Stan Lathan's 1987 TV-drama *Uncle Tom's Cabin* drew, however, far fewer spectators than *Roots* (1977), the hugely popular TV-adaptation based on Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American family*[28]: a largely fictionalized family history traced since the year 1767 when Haley's black ancestor Kunta Kinte was, according to "carefully preserved oral history"[29], kidnapped in Gambia by slavers and shipped to the United States.

The object of some of the most intense political, racial and cultural debates since the 1852 publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Roots* confirmed the late nineteenth-century need to break away from previous victim and submission narratives. In 2011, the story remerged, obliquely and unexpectedly, during Barack Obama's White House Correspondents' dinner speech. In reaction to Donald Trump's and the so-called "Birthers'"[30] repeated allusions to President Obama's "foreign" origins that sought to disqualify him as the U.S. president, Obama released what he called his "official birth video" in the form of an extract from Disney's *The Lion King* (Roger Allers, Rob Minkoff, 1994). As a pointedly satirical "birth certificate", the video extract – the naming sequence of the lion cub Simba which replicated the naming gesture of the infant Kunta Kinte, held similarly towards the sky in a generic African setting – exposed Obama's acute awareness of the Birthers' attempt to delegitimize his presidency with implicit racial anti-Black signifiers. For these reasons, when tapping into old racial scripts involving the question of African-American citizenship, the extract could not but recall the deeply engrained process of racial discrimination and "othering" in *The Birth of a Nation*.

Because of some of these increasingly ludicrous offshoots of the racial "other", it was predictable that the Uncle Tom *persona* and the slavery South would be revisited through different camera lenses. The year following Obama's speech, Tarantino's *Django Unchained* – a brutally parodic (self-named) "Southern" set in an oversweet, unsavory "Candyland" – literally ripped apart the sugarcoated, syrupy "moonlight and magnolia" plantation world. The ironic resonance between Tarantino's Candyland and Griffith's iconic "Southland" is obvious, and a good example of how the imagery as well as verbal expressions of *The Birth of a Nation* are picked up and readapted by later movies, also through derision. One of the first title cards that accompanies the first Southern "tableaux" of *The Birth of a Nation* sets up the generic South, already as a "quaintly" land which is about to vanish ("In the Southland. Piedmont, South Carolina, the home of the Camerons, where life runs in a quaintly way that is to be no more"). Interestingly enough, Tarantino's renamed "Southland" plantation as "Candyland" seems to resonate with the current debate on the hazards of sugar – highlighted by Damon Gameau's documentary *Sugarland* (2014) – adding thus another bitter truth about the classically over-sweetened cinematic *topos* of the South

[28] Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American family* (New York: Doubleday, 1976).

[29] At its publication, the African American author Alex Haley claimed that *Roots* traced his family history back through seven generations to a Mandinka Warrior called Kunta Kinte, but it is now widely agreed that the book is largely a work of imagination.

[30] The Birthers deny that Barack Obama was born in the USA and assert that he became president in violation of the requirements of the U.S. Constitution. For more on the racialized Birther campaign seeking to destabilize Obama's presidency on the basis of false claims and birth fantasies, see Martin A. Parlett, *Demonizing a President: The "Foreignization" of Barack Obama* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014).

rooted in a different set of images of America compared to "the land of milk and honey" proposed by Puritan mythology.

More strikingly, besides unfettering Django (Jamie Foxx) from the stereotype of a white-woman-chasing black rapist through deliberate "Westernization", Tarantino tackled – more frontally than any filmmaker before him – the counter-image of the "black brute" by transforming the house slave into an agent of manipulation and betrayal. Once re-named Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson), Tarantino's "Tom" turns out to be as corrupted and corruptive as his white master, Calvin Candy (Leonardo DiCaprio) and the Southern Belle sister, Lara Lee Candie-Fitzwilly (Laura Cayouette) with whom it is suggested M. Candy has illicit sexual intercourse. As Oliver C. Speck observes in *Quentin Tarantino's Django Unchained: The Continuation of Metacinema*, Uncle Tom is "the manipulative mastermind behind the workings of the Candie plantation."[31] In this extended revenge fantasy that challenged the Hollywood-sustained image of the "happy darky" stereotype, Tom ceased to be the devout Christian who persuades a female slave, a victim of (what is today called) "serial rape", not to seek freedom from torture by killing herself after killing her abuser.

To what extent *Django unchained* could or should be viewed as a denunciation of Stowe's depiction of the perfectly behaving, pious slave – an image that has plagued films on the American South for more than a century – is another matter, but the film definitely raises the question of a nineteenth-century white person's idealized vision of how a slave (or a colored person) should respond to tyranny and violence. Less concerned by the question of fidelity to the source con/text, Tarantino was far more eager to attack the "peculiarities" and hushed taboos of a more global movie industry.

As demonstrated by the explicit generic roots of Tarantino's movie, Tom's hagiographic yet malleable figure has not "gone with the wind", but keeps resurging through popular culture, including consumer culture (the smiling, elderly black man being still used, for instance, to market "Uncle Ben's rice". For, what we have here is something inherently circuitous and recyclable. If the 1970's revenge narratives of the so-called "blaxploitation films" (from the words "black" and "exploitation") marked the return of the dead, black slave in films such as *Mandingo* (Richard Fleischer, 1975) and *Drum* (Steve Carver, Burt Kennedy, 1976), the alarming spectral figure was already present in Harry Pollard's 1927 *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. To show Tom's capacity to come back as a "buck", Pollard used superimposition to create a guilt-generating counter-image of the genial "uncle figure". Here, the superimposed image of the vengeful Tom (James B. Lowe) and the cruel slave master Simon Legree (George Siegmann) appears when Legree is about to rape a black woman. Pursuing Tom's bare-breasted ghost, Legree eventually falls through the window of his mansion and dies. As John W. Frick notes in his preface to *Uncle Tom's Cabin on the American Stage and Screen*, Harriett Beecher Stowe's text was not just an abolitionist novel:

> [R]ather, it was the beginning of a full-scale phenomenon – a cultural, commercial, ideological, and theatrical phenomenon. It dealt directly with a social institution, the existence of which divided the United States for decades, which contributed to a bloody protracted Civil War, and which remains to

[31] Oliver C. Speck ed., *Quentin Tarantino's Django Unchained: The Continuation of Metacinema* (New York: Bloomsbury), 2.

this day a source of national guilt.[32]

The American South as a Motion picture

When dealing with the political and cultural mechanisms that the imagery of early Southern films was ingrained in, we cannot ignore the historical context or the ambiguities of the "separate but equal" doctrine, declared legal by the American Supreme Court in 1896.[33] The belief in the legitimacy of segregation was one of the basic components of the fierce regional exceptionalism promoted by the best-selling Southern writer Thomas Dixon (1864-1946). His popular novel and play *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905) inspired D. W. Griffith's (1875-1948) infamous, yet technically brilliant silent movie *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) which, in turn, helped trigger the revival of the viciously racist organization the Ku Klux Klan.

Founded during the Reconstruction era and known for its use of terror and violence to assert white supremacy, the Ku Klux Klan sought to maintain the antebellum racial hierarchy in the South. In *Hollywood and the American Historical Film*, J. E. Smyth writes that "the film's entire treatment of Reconstruction, with its lurid, obsessive Negrophobia, comes directly from Thomas Dixon's novels and play"[34], but Dixon's now largely forgotten texts were more than individual offshoots. His offensive *Clansman* and Griffith's subsequent *Birth* were part of a more collective segregationist pattern, as well as a "message"[35] addressed to the critics of the South's still "peculiar" racial logic and Jim Crow laws[36] at the beginning of the twentieth century.

As recalled by Anthony Slide in *American Racist: The Life and Films of Thomas Dixon*, the author of *The Clansman* was also involved in the production of about twenty films. Although most of these films have now disappeared, the multifaceted Dixon (a minister, lawyer, state legislator, as well as a popular author and a playwright) left an indelible spot on the American culture. Anthony Slide compares Dixon's cinema with Leni Riefenstahl's elaborate propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (1935) glorifying the Nazi party, and Dixon certainly was one of the first American filmmakers to use motion pictures to propagandize dogmatic opinions on race, but also on socialism, communism and feminism. Like Griffith, he was convinced that the legacy of the South had been slandered and needed to be defended.

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[32] John W. Frick, *Uncle Tom's Cabin on the American Stage and Screen* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), xiii.

[33] Issued in 1896, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation laws for public facilities, provided the segregated facilities were "equal in quality". This "separate but equal" doctrine legitimized the state laws which re-established racial segregation passed in the American South in the late nineteenth century after the Reconstruction Era.

[34] J. E. Smyth ed., *Hollywood and the American Historical Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 13.

[35] "I made no effort to write literature. […] My sole purpose in writing was to reach and influence with my argument the minds of millions. I had a message and wrote it as vividly and simply as I knew how." Thomas Dixon quoted in Anthony Slide, *American Racist: The Life and Films of Thomas Dixon* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 27.

[36]A series of laws enacted by state legislatures between 1876 and 1965 that mandated racial segregation in all public facilities in the states of the former Confederacy. To learn more about the history Jim Crow era caricatures which left a strong imprint on the Southerns, visit Ferris State University's Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, https://ferris.edu/jimcrow/#."

Pursuing the nineteenth-century "Lost Cause" argument, both men wanted the "true story" of the "tarnished South" to be told.

When facing the stereotypes and stock characters disseminated through Tom shows, Griffith understood, from the very beginning, the enormous potential of cinematography. In *The Birth of a Nation*, he exploited and further improved several cinematic techniques. According to film historian Donald Bogle, author of the groundbreaking *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, Griffith "altered the entire course and concept of American moviemaking, developing the close-up, cross-cutting, rapid-fire editing, the iris, the split-screen shot, and realistic and impressionistic lighting. Creating sequences and images yet to be surpassed, the film's magnitude and epic grandeur swept audiences off their feet."[37] Before Bogle, the American film critic Andrew Sarris compared Griffith's expressive editing to a "grammar of emotions", drawing our attention on the way "[t]he focal length of his lens became a function of feeling. Close-ups not only intensified an emotion; they shifted characters from the republic of prose to the kingdom of poetry."[38]

Just as surely, these technical innovations remained harnessed to a racist narrative, only thinly camouflaged by Griffith's highly romantic, melodramatized view of History. The fruitful, yet toxic, formula resulted from the cinematographically-enhanced interlacing of the Reconstruction years[39] with an overemotional love story between a Southern gentleman and a Northern lady. As Robert Lang puts it in his book on Griffith's controversial[40] masterpiece:

> In *The Birth of a Nation*, Griffith gave plastic reality to many of the images that dominated the historiographic Imaginary of the Civil War and its aftermath, and Griffith's narrative organization of history – his attempt to identify the causes of the Civil War and to explain Reconstruction to a people who needed romance, not realism – can perhaps be best described in terms of melodrama.[41]

However, as Maggie Hennefeld has recently suggested, "melodrama is only part of the picture" within the "generic hybridity intrinsic to Griffith's filmic storytelling language".[42] With the help of his ingenious camerawork and editing, Griffith managed to galvanize the rigid antebellum iconography regarding the South. Suddenly, the central element no longer was the already-told prejudiced and racist *what*, but the technical know-*how*, as the chivalric, post-medieval grand narrative of the "Lost South" was endowed with an air of novelty.

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[37] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 10.

[38] Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968* (Boston: Da Capo press, [1968] 1996), 52.

[39] The Reconstruction era (1865-77) corresponds to the period when the ex-Conferate states were rebuilt after the Civil War. After southern states passed restrictive "black codes" to gain control over the former slaves, outrage in the North led to the enfranchised blacks' entry to southern state legislatures and to the U.S. Congress. Less than a decade later, however, reactionary forces reversed these changes, and violent backlash restored white supremacy in the South.

[40] See Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's* The Birth of a Nation*: A History of 'The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time'*.

[41] Robert Lang ed., *The Birth of a Nation: D.W. Griffith*, *Director* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 3.

[42] Maggie Hennefeld, "Griffith's Body Language and Film Narration: 'The Voluptuary' Versus 'the Spirituelle'", in Charles Keil ed., *A Companion to D. W. Griffith* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, forthcoming), 247.

The effect of newness was boosted by a totally new tempo. The first "moving picture" (in the literal sense of the two words) was made to pulsate by alternating stasis and motion, bucolic bliss and electrifying action which, already in the nineteen-teens, blurred the distinction between Westerns and would-be Southerns. The swift rotation of enthralling and appalling scenes reinforced the suspense and excitement already experienced in front of Porter's pre-Western bandit film, as distressed (white) damsels were pursued by (black) villains and hooded (white) horsemen dashing to rescue the helpless (white) ladies. The accent of the new film language was definitely on entertaining, not on sticking to historical facts.

After the Ku Klux Klan has imposed its law and order in Piedmont, Griffith's generic "Southtown," the film ends with a visual illustration of the "heaven" and "hell" split underlined by Fred Chappell. African Americans are brutally evacuated from public spaces and ballot boxes by white-hooded Klansmen; a graphic reminder of the "black codes" passed by state legislatures to restore the white "order" in the post-Civil War South. To force down this idea, the film foregrounds the love story between the KKK "knight", Benjamin Cameron (Henry B. Walthall) and the delicate daughter of the Northern senator, Elsie Stoneman (Lillian Gish). Until the end, their romantic relationship mirrors the complicated union between the North and the South.

The end of *The Birth of a Nation* is composed of tableau vivant-like scenes that sum up the propagandist message of the film. The first one shows a fiendish embodiment of warmongering horseman who is taunting the damned, whereas the second one focuses on a bright, amplified apparition of Jesus in a distinctly "Aryan" heaven. It is no coincidence that the latter tableau fades into a shining "city upon a hill" – the well-known image used, already in 1630, to evoke the Massachusetts Bay colony as a model community, a perfect Christian Commonwealth set up in the New World. The telling inclusion of this iconic, messianic metaphor rooted in John Winthrop's Puritan sermon (inspired by the Gospel of Matthew[43]) reveals Griffith's preposterous attempt to tie the knot between the myths of the "elect people" of the North, on the one hand, and the supremacist doctrines of social and racial concord of the legendary antebellum South.

Although the message was garbled by two love stories – between Elsie and her Southern KKK "knight", and between Elsie's brother Phil Stoneman (Elmer Clifton) and Margaret Cameron (Miriam Cooper) – the idea beneath the double wedlock sealing the North-South ties remains unambiguous. Through its regional heroes and heroines, *The Birth of a Nation* struggled to fabricate a narrative of a united, godly people marked not only by regional but *American* exceptionalism. For this purpose, historical, biblical, Puritan and fairytale threads were mingled to compose a scenario of reconciliation inclusive enough for the two mythic *topoi* of the American imagination: the "Promised land" of the Puritans, and the "lost" yet retrievable, "regainable" Southland. Thus preordained, as a united yet segregative nation, this fantasy land was to haunt American movie screens for decades to come.

To legitimize the post-Civil War segregationist racial doctrines applied in the South, Griffith presented Northern politicians as naïve, gullible idealists. However, instead of Austin

[43] Mathew 5:11: "A city located on a hill cannot be hidden." In more contemporary America, the phrase has been used, for instance, by Presidents John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan.

Stoneman[44] (Ralph Lewis), the emblematic Northern senator who supported black citizenship, it was the manipulative villains and rapists born from interracial relationships who were finger-pointed for the tensions of the Reconstruction era. Like the white Southerners, never held responsible for the Civil War, the puppet-like Stoneman was incorporated into the victim plot cherished by the "lost cause" ideology. Recalling the final evacuation of Simon Legree, the merciless slave master and anti-Christ of Tom movies, the "disposable villain" became Silas Lynch (George Siegmann[45]), the power-hungry mulatto and his somber court behind the white politician who were banished from screen to ensure the racist film's just as biased "happy" ending. Once again, the highly metaphorized and dogmatic idea of the "Edenic", easily tarnished Southern garden reemerges as Northern/federal politics and miscegenation are staged as the ultimate form of "malignity".

Whether the budding Southern film genre, already bearing "strange fruit" – to cite the name of the song on racism and lynching in the South made famous by Billie Holliday[46] – could have taken a different turn, at this early stage, will remain a question mark. But, as the following years of American cinema underline, the paradigmatic couple formed by a fearless Southern knight and his just as fearful Puritan Belle was to impact myriad later scenarios, thus participating in other film fabrications of the "Reunited" States of America.

The naming and shaming of the Southern scarlet Lady

D. W. Griffith's legacy proved so poisonous that the allegoric white cotton blossom of *The Birth of a Nation* was already a foul flower when held by Benjamin Cameron, the "brave little colonel" Griffith presents as the founder of the Ku Klux Klan. Keeping in mind the protests against the savage portrayal of the black characters in *The Birth of a Nation*[47], producer David O. Selznick – in many ways the actual film "maker" of the box office success, *Gone with the Wind,* released twenty-four years later – was anxious to avoid similar controversies with this film. Three directors (Victor Fleming, George Cukor and Sam Wood) were needed to put Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh) and her gaudy Technicolored South "into the can", but only Fleming was credited. From the very beginning, the watchwords seem to have been to "soften", "water down" or "whitewash" any scandalous aspects that might recall Griffith's film. But, as W. Bryan Rommel Ruiz notes in *American History Goes to the Movies: Hollywood and the American Experience*, "[w]hile the racist narrative of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* became more muted by the release of Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* in 1939, the fundamental (mis)representations of slavery and black freedom remained

[44] Austin Stoneman is a thinly veiled portrayal of Thaddeus Stevens (1792-1868), the radical Republican leader who played a major role in defeating slavery. It was not until Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012) that Stevens ceased to be the fragile, manipulated politician who put to peril the white Southern culture, as suggested by Griffith.

[45] George Siegmann, the black-faced white actor in *The Birth of a Nation*, was to play the archvillain slave owner Simon Legree, in Harry Pollard's 1927 *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

[46] Recorded in 1939 by Billie Holliday, "Strange Fruit" had been composed two years earlier as a protest poem by Abel Meeropol, a white, Jewish high school teacher from Bronx.

[47] The film was banned in five states and nineteen cities for its blatantly racist sentiments. For more on this question, see "Fighting a Vicious Film", Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation,* 129-170.

strikingly similar"[48]. In *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness*, Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon go as far as to claim that "*Gone with the Wind* is *Birth of a Nation* without bedsheets and hoods of the Klan."[49]

The toning down of the inflammable slavery-related issues was motivated by the tacit conviction of classic Hollywood cinema that to reconstruct the American South on screen, the best thing was to reshuffle the race and gender cards. In *Gone with the Wind*, this was achieved by a series of de- and re-emphases within the existing typology of Southern characters. The stereotypical, loyal "darkies" and "toms" (Mammy, Prissy, Pork, Big Sam, etc.) were foregrounded as the more "civilized" house slaves who, according to the perverse logic of the "peculiar Southern system", had benefited from the proximity with their white master's family to be, in Donald Bogle's words, "elevated" from their "bestial instincts"[50].

Even more spectacularly fleshed out was the movie version of the Southern plantation mistress created by Margaret Mitchell (1900-1949) whose admiration for the pre-Civil War South and for Thomas Dixon is not a secret.[51] Distinguished from the leading madam of Atlanta's red-light district, Belle Watling (Ona Munson), the pivotal Belle now was a curiously hybrid Southern scarlet woman driven by her basic instincts. Conversely, the honorable white Southern gentlemen, emblematized by the disillusioned and "ashen" Ashley Wilkes (Leslie Howard), were plunged into the background – also to give more prominence to the roguish Rhett Butler (Clark Gable) who no longer needed to wear the grey Confederate uniform to be viewed as a Southern hero.

Gone were thus Griffith's lecherous black brutes wreaking havoc on the "civilized" white South; spending their time plundering their masters and raping white women, when they were not fostering plans to force their ways into white mansions through interracial marriages rendered legal after the Civil War. Instead, *Gone with the Wind* foregrounded callous white individuals, such as the Yankee deserter (Paul Hurst) who tried to loot Tara and rape its mistress, before Scarlett pulled out a gun and shot him during a somewhat Western-like scene. Other corrupted or depraved white individuals emerged in the form of carpetbaggers[52], scalawags[53] and white trash characters[54] whose beastly drives provide a

[48] W. Bryan Rommel-Ruiz, *American History Goes to the Movies: Hollywood and the American Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 49.

[49] Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon, *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 23.

[50] "Griffith propagated the myth of slave contentment and made it appear as if slavery had elevated the Negro from his bestial instincts", Donald Bogle, "Black Beginnings: From *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to the *Birth of a Nation*", in Valerie Smith (ed.), *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 20.

[51] In a reply letter to Thomas Dixon who had praised her recently published novel *Gone with the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell wrote: "I was practically raised on your books and love them very much." Anita Price Davis, *The Margaret Mitchell Encyclopedia* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013), 63.

[52] A derogatory term for the northern opportunists who moved to the South in the wake of the Civil War to gain political influence or personal wealth. The name refers to the cloth bag (or carpet remnants stitched together) many "carpetbaggers" used to for transporting their possessions.

[53] A "scalawag" is an equally pejorative term which refers to the white Southerners who supported, generally for self-interest, the federal plan of Reconstruction or joined the black freedmen and the carpetbaggers in support of Republican Party policies.

[54] For instance, in Robert Mulligan's *To Kill the Mocking Bird* (1962) and in John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972).

stark contrast to the Old South's ideal of gentility and stability. With these typological shifts in mind, which nearly created a Southern “mistress narrative”, and in any case, challenged the existing “grand master narrative”, *Gone with the Wind* may be considered a transitional Southern film, in spite of its persistent supremacist and sexist stances. However timorously from today's standpoints, the movie put to test the grand Southern victim narrative by raising the question of the white Southerners' own responsibility regarding the Civil war and its aftermath.

In allowing the “Lost Cause” mythology to linger on through other disguises, *Gone with the Wind*’s main change was, however, the stereotyped colored brute's transformation into a colorful female *persona* with a nasty nature. Most meaningfully, the film's color coding proposed an expressive, gendered update of the Manichean, openly racist black and white filmic visions of Southern history. As demonstrated by the enormous success of *Gone with the Wind*, audiences were ready for a revision of the waning model of womanhood promoted by the always somewhat ghostly, always ethereal, Griffithean angel of the plantation culture.

The culprit was no longer an evil white slave-master, nor an ominous “black buck” or “black brute”, nor a treacherous mixed-blood, but a flamboyant mansion mistress with a sharp tongue, perfect for nasty remarks. Striking new cords of tension into the previous binaries of the “Southern garden”, her serpentine charm and deceitfulness, devotion and egotism, rebelliousness and arrogance, courage and guts created such a strange, potent concoction that it gave the Irish immigrant's daughter the air of a different “species,” almost a “race” of its own[55]. But, even with her sense of superiority, Scarlett O'Hara was a woman with down-to-earth common sense and wisdom – best encapsulated by the Scottish word “gumption” used in Margaret Mitchell's prologue to her novel. And what made Miss O'Hara even more appealing in the eyes of wartime spectators, was her undefeatable survival instinct, her capacity to overcome barriers and obstacles to defend herself and her family; even if that meant having to lie, steal, cheat, kill, or eat radish roots from the ravaged earth of Tara!

As expected, this Americanization and in many a sense “universalization” of the Southern heroine allowed the displacement of the filmic focus from race to gender. The introduction into the limelight of the defiant, new phenix-like female “other” literally sent backstage Griffith's racialized figures of the more or less nameless “bucks” and other black stereotypes promoted by white supremacists which were replaced by revisioned “toms” who, as argued by Donald Bogle, even when "chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted […] keep the faith, never turn against their white massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind”[56].

Refusing to pronounce the real name of the unspeakable system the plantation fantasy remained rooted in, *Gone with the Wind* strengthened the presence, around the leading lady, of what Bogle calls “faithful souls”[57]; the most faithful of them being the

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[55] The impression of foreignness was emphasized by the casting of the British actress Vivien Leigh as the most famous Southern Belle in American fiction and drama. The same effect marks Leigh's performance as the corrupted, later Belle, Blanche DuBois, in Elia Kazan's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951).

[56] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks*, 4.

[57] Ibid., 4.

character of Mammy (Hattie McDaniel) whose corset-tightening and constant motherly fussing around Scarlet worked wonders in whitewashing the film. Together with the deleted "N-word" and the removal of Margaret Mitchell's references to the Ku Klux Klan, Selznick made sure the film would be viewed as inoffensive enough by (white) Southern and Northern audiences.

That the indomitable, unruly and outspoken novel Belle – later on, the man-eating Scarlett O'Hara Hamilton Kennedy Butler – was more empowering and thought-provocative than the previous Southern damsels put together is unquestionable. This is evidenced by her sharp contrasts with the blameless and spotless white maidens, such as her foil, Melanie Wilkes (Olivia de Havilland), and Ben Cameron's "pet sister", Flora (Mae Marsh), and the "perfect little Eva" in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – all embodiments of *antebellum* models of morality who were to die before the end of the story.

The transformation from the prey figure into that of an active predator, into a praying mantis[58], was a story made for large-scale talking moving pictures. Empowered by Technicolor, she desecrated the old female role by her masculine, entrepreneurial traits, having no trouble replacing the prototypical, beloved-but-boring white maidens Dixon and Griffith had set up as passive, wildly gesticulating objects to be saved by post-Ivanhoe Klan knights. Simply too ruthless and boisterous, the burning rather than "glowing"[59] white woman thus precluded herself from any later white apotheoses or Edens of the kind imagined by *The Birth of a Nation*.

But, according to classic genre and gender expectations, there was of course a price Scarlett had to pay for her hot temper and bad nature. At the end of *Gone with the Wind,* she is abandoned by Rhett who walks into the unknown out of their Atlanta mansion, perhaps to join a more Western world in the footsteps of solitary ex-Confederate soldiers of the sort personified by Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). But, although Rhett did, unforgettably enough, "not give a damn" about Scarlett's future, he did not condemn her to solitary confinement in Tara nor elsewhere. This was confirmed by later movies and TV-series which have kept rummaging through the Pandora's box opened by *Gone with the Wind* to create analogous specimen of Southern appeal. Finally quite a "wild bunch" of feisty female characters, these unladylike ladies include a number of equally oxymoronic, hot-tempered, red-haired, redneck and other white, yet "marked women"; fabricated to pursue the paradoxically triumphant tale about a land of losers which was to "rise again," to use the rallying cry used by Confederacy enthusiasts which has keep ringing through a great number of other films, such as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Richard Brook, 1958), *Suddenly last Summer* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1959), *Steel Magnolias* (Herbert Ross, 1989), *Driving Miss Daisy* (Bruce Beresford, 1989), *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (Simon Callow, 1991), *Thelma and Louise* (Callie Khouri, 1991), *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Jon Avnet, 1991), *Sweet Home Alabama* (Andy Tennant, 2002), *Southern Belles* (Paul S. Myers, 2005) to name just a

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[58] This facet of the heroine's character is rendered visible during Scarlett's visit to Rhett Butler in her famous green dress, made out of the green curtains of Tara. Here the color green seems less indicative of her Irish origins than of the flirtatious skills put to work to camouflage Scarlett's killer instincts.

[59] As suggested by Richard Dyer, within the contexts of Christianity, race and colonialism, the idealized white women "are bathed in and permeated by light;" tending to "glow" rather than "shine," let alone burn. See the chapter "The glow of white women" in Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, [1997] 2006, 122-142).

few examples[60].

As for the chromatic coding of *Gone with the Wind*, akin to Alice Walker's color purple[61], the color red is here far more than what meets the eye. Along with the other colors (white, black, green) signifying Scarlet O'Hara's multi-faceted character, redness participates most actively in the elaboration of the film's grammar through its dense, ambivalent language. It ought to be noted that, a year before the fiery *Gone with the Wind* these powerful chromatic effects were anticipated by another Oscar-winning Southern movie, William Wyler's *Jezebel* (1938) where Julie Marsden's (Bette Davis) highly dramatized "saucy" and "vulgar" red dress already played with the idea of discarding the overdetermined whiteness ritualized by Griffith. Literally the pivot of havoc, the red dress made initially for a New Orleans red-district *cocotte* – and whose specific tone the black and white movie invites the spectator to *imagine* – ceases to be a mere garment when worn by the "reBelle." Its rotating movement definitely put into cinematographic motion the static and expressionless white Belles of the ball, and the yet unnamed meanings underneath their stiff crinolines.[62]

The spinning motion was pursued by the light-footed Scarlett O'Hara who, outrageously enough, waltzed away the memory of her white wedding dress and of her recently deceased first husband in Rhett Butler's arms. That her thinly masked contribution to the war effort in the form of a flirtatious, danced participation in a Confederate ball broke away from the Victorian expectations of female sexuality and *praxes* of widowhood is undisputable. More implicitly, however, the lack of mourning expressed by the griefless black-clad lady escorted by a dark and seductive blockade runner illustrates *Gone with the Wind*'s subtle drifting away from the hegemony of whiteness and other insular values embodied by Benjamin Cameron and his alabaster-white, incorporeal Elsie[63] in *The Birth of a Nation*.

This chromatic move towards more tangible physical reality would not be as powerful, were it not for the aesthetic and moral connotations conveyed by whiteness. A prevailing symbol in Western tradition of virtue, but also of "purity, spirituality, transcendence, cleanliness, virtue, simplicity, chastity,"[64] at the end of the 1930s, whiteness had, however, ceased to be "the color of God," of "eternity" and of "sexual untouchedness"[65] proposed by Dixon and Griffith. Anticipating other, even more hybrid heathens, the classic Jezebel and Scarlett women were the fundamental figures that facilitated the aesthetic, narrative and semantic sprawling perceptible in later Southern movies. By revealing their capacity to engage with other symbols and generic systems, they

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[60] For the genealogy and evolution of Southern women on screen, see Taïna Tuhkunen, *Demain sera un autre jour: Le Sud et ses héroïnes à l'écran* (Pertuis: Rouge Profond, 2013).

[61] Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

[62] For a more thorough analysis of *Jezebel*, see Taïna Tuhkunen, "New Orleans as the city of misfit women in *Jezebel* (William Wyler, 1938) and *The Flame of New Orleans* (René Clair, 1941), *E-rea / Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone*, mis en ligne le 15 décembre 2016, https://erea.revues.org/5343.

[63] See Dyer's analysis of "[t]he celebration of the Victorian virgin ideal in the cinema, in stars like Lillian Gish and Mary Pickford [as] part of a bid for the respectabilisation of the medium, a class issue but indissociable from ethnicity in the USA in the early years of the twentieth century," Dyer, *White,* 127-129.

[64] Ibid., 72.

[65] Ibid., 74.

opened up the cinematic South to meanings that exceeded their immediate topographical and temporal bounds.

Conclusion: A wilderness still in need of a name?

In *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*, Tara McPherson calls for "a reconstruction of southern studies, a study of the South that can shake us free from those tired old clichés of southernness," in order to "seek out livelier, less nostalgic Souths, challenging a monolithic portrait of the region."[66] This is a welcome idea and certainly resonates with the present article's call for further critical accounts on the American South in film. At the same time, it seems impossible to ignore the persistent types, iconic images, stock scenes and other examples of cliché-ridden film rhetoric that mark and scar these films, especially during the early decades of the twentieth century. Without this knowledge of the foundational patterns and figures, it seems difficult to probe into the later, often indeed, "livelier, less nostalgic Souths," and to understand the more recent ethnic and sexist slurs, conveyed by more recent films on the American South where the demarcations have little to do with the Mason-Dixon Line[67] and other such easily definable natural or man-made boundaries.

Far from having "gone with the wind," the myth of the plantation South has survived, and traces of the old iconography and typology can be spotted even in contemporary horror and redneck movies.[68] Through its various – including knowingly exacerbated and parodied – forms, the filmic South keeps impacting today's post-pastoral scenarios, illustrating its still "peculiar" capacity to constitute an attractive, collective, rural "home" which the American South has long been synonymous of in the eyes of modern spectators most of whom now live in urban areas. And just as it would be difficult to imagine a theoretical study on the Western genre that would overlook great classics such as John Ford's *The Iron Horse* (1924) or *The Searchers*, it is hard to imagine what a critical study on Southern films might look like, were it to disregard the "tired old clichés of southernness" and sentimental southernisms echoes by these films.

As Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee argue in their introduction to *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, with the cultural work it performs, the southern imaginary in film cannot be circumscribed by the boundaries of either geography or genre. Instead of "an offshoot or subgenre of mainstream American film," what we are dealing with, here, seems to point to something far less marginal or peripheral; and, most importantly, to something more "integral to the history and the development of American

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

[67] A boundary regarded as the dividing line between slave states and non-slave states before the Civil War. Today the line named after two Englishmen, Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon, who surveyed the marking of the line (between 1763 and 1767), originally to solve a property dispute, serves figuratively as the political and social divider between the North and the South.

[68] See, for instance, Maxime Lachaud, *Redneck Movies: Ruralité et dégénérescence dans le cinéma américain* (Pertuis: Rouge Profond, 2014).

cinema" than previously believed.[69] Indeed, as the American Western which cannot be classified merely as a series of temporal and/or topographical characteristics, pigeonholing the American South prevents us from seeing *beyond* the "particularities of place."[70]

The fact that the mythic West and the legendary South were initially re/constructed in film as racial and gendered systems can hardly be denied. Whilst the dynamic, heroic America conceived by the classic Western was structured as an open, male-centered territory of wide open spaces enabling the hero to march towards progress, the far more static latter "land" was marked by the troubling presence of submissive and vengeful colored men, white "losers," but also by spectacularly vivid women, energetic "tarnished angels"[71] whose primary business seemed to be creating havoc and breathing life into nineteenth-century binary systems and fading metaphors. And, as asserted by our article, these typological features, together with the underlying ideological, aesthetic and thematic oppositions between discovery and insularity, transformation and repetition, motion and stagnation, linearity and circularity have greatly complicated the naming of what might have become a "Southern genre."

However, despite the persistence of these and many other oppositions, the final conclusion need not be negative. On the contrary, the fact that the South has, as Barker and McKee contend, "failed to call forth a set of stable defining features,"[72] could be understood as a means for these films to work their ways through fixed categories and dead metaphors. Precisely because the Southern lacks generic fixity and the kind of legitimacy possessed by Southern literature and the historically preeminent Western, it seems, so to speak, doomed to die, as some of its early key characters. Flawless and simply too "perfect" to sustain interest and a sense of veracity, the early and classic Southern is condemned to reinvent itself, film after film. And, as illustrated by Tarantino's Southern, probably more intensely than most film genres, degeneration cannot here be separated from re-generation.

On the other hand, as a yet-to-be-fully-diagnosed cinematic syndrome, or a more extensive cultural disorder, the evasive Southern and the genre fluidity it represents raise questions that cannot be answered merely within the framework of oppositions, but more like extensions. One of them concerns the way this unsuitable national metanarrative, incapable of holding people together while promoting a sense of unity and inclusion, has generated a variety of sub-scenarios to challenge more official representations of the American imaginary, especially when exploring the glories and stigmas of the past. While more recent counter-examples of the "grand Southern narrative" tend to create genre and gender trouble within the "bigger," canonical "picture" of America, it is interesting to note a certain number of paradigm shifts they seek to operate within a certain number of dominant tropes.

The most distinctive of these changing tropes is that of "wilderness" which, in the context of the American South, is not something to be conquered and "civilized." This is not

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[69] Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee, "Introduction: The Southern Imaginary," in Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee eds., *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 2.

[70] Ibid.

[71] *The Tarnished Angels* (1957) is the title of Douglas Sirk's film adaptation based on the novel of the same name by William Faulkner.

[72] Barker and McKee, *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, 2.

because of the classic conviction of the antebellum films marked by "loss," that "civilization" is already "gone" and in the past, but because of the view presented by these films that American wilderness is no longer to be conquered, but – on the contrary – to be protected. This is the issue raised by several recent films that foreground the Southern bayous or swamps – a space Anthony Wilson compares to "the always present but always denied underside of the myth of pastoral Eden that defined the antebellum South and informs or colors general imaginative conceptions of the South even today."[73] Presented as *loci* of temporary freedom already in William Beaudine's silent film *Sparrows* (1926) and, later on, in Jean Renoir's *The Southerner* (1945), swamps and bayous also structure the narrative of Ben Zeitlin *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), Jeff Nichols's *Mud* (2012) and other contemporary Southerns that blend environmental hazards, devastations, crises and traumas of both individual and collective kind.

This is a meaningful change from films made during the decades when "Hollywood was busily romanticizing, sanitizing, and sanctifying the plantation South for popular consumption", as Wilson writes, adding that even if "[Zora Neale] Hurston and [William] Faulkner reimagined the swamps in a positive, regenerative light, Hollywood bombarded the public with films about swamp monsters."[74] The threatening swamp eco/culture might have been present already in the first Southern vampire film, Robert Siodmak's *Son of Dracula* (1943), a story triggered by a Louisiana Belle (Katherine Caldwell) who invites Count Alucard (Dracula spelled backwards) to her swamp-surrounded mansion. Tragically for the European bloodsucker (Lon Chaney Jr.), however, he falls on somebody even more wicked. Even today the American South (and particularly Louisiana) provides a peculiarly productive "promised land" for the regeneration for vampires, as suggested by the TV-series *True Blood* (HBO, 2008-2014) and Neil Jordan's film *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) based on stories of the New Orleans-born author Anne Rice.

Much remains to be said about the soggy "swamp gardens" of contemporary Southern films and their curious Cypress trees which stick out from unclear waters, these southern species differing greatly from the plants of the arid deserts and mountains of the typical American Western. As stated by Anthony Wilson's book on Southern swamps, "[t]he swamp occupies an intriguingly complex and liminal space in the Southern and national imaginations and signifies powerfully across discourses of race, cultural and literal contagion, ethnography, and ecology."[75] Although the mere number of films that represent the Southern swamp as a monstrous, disease-bearing place still outnumber its less hostile connotations, it is useful to keep in mind that Southern movies often tend to reverse well-known Western tropes. In John Ford's *The Man who shot Liberty Valence* (1962), Valence's (James Stuart) wife (Hallie Stoddard) says, when looking out the train window on their way back to Washington D. C. from Shinbone, a frontier town in an unnamed western state: "It was once a wilderness. Now it's a garden." In a Southern (where the characters seldom get on a train anyway[76]), the idea would, of course, be reversed, to insist on the lost paradisiacal

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[73] Anthony Wilson, *Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2006), ix.
[74] Ibid.,164.
[75] Ibid. ix.
[76] There is one notable exception, the epic train adventure film set in the context of the Civil War. See Taïna Tuhkunen, "Romance, Crime and Disaster in Buster Keaton's Civil War Railway Comedy *The General* (1926)," in

garden, now turned into a wilderness.

When faced with the list of parallelisms and differences between the Western and the Southern, it would be difficult not to agree with Warren French who notes, in *The South and Film*, that although *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind* are "epic portrayals of the South, neither fostered a genre of imitative films that became a backbone of the industry."[77] Thirty years after Fred Chappell divided the filmic South into a "heaven" and a "hell," it seems that the films the followed the seminal adaptations have been more interested in the latter. According to Ebner and Langman, the impulsion was, once again, given by literature: "Once Southern writers began destroying the myth of an idyllic society, together with the fiction of Southern 'family values', a flood of books and movies appeared critically examining all other facets of Southern life. By the mid-1950s, raw realism in Southern literature in the United States largely replaced romantic sentimentality."[78]

If the post-plantation South was dysfunctional in John Ford's *Tobacco Road* (1941), it was even more so in Martin Scorsese's Great Depression hell, *Boxcar Bertha* (1972), before Simon Callow's carceral hell in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1991). As anticipated by the early films, the South continued to be depicted as a world where women bloom and raise hell in their families, as in William Wyler's *The Little Foxes* (1941), or engender internalized infernos, as in Joseph Mankiewicz's *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959). Nor should one forget the debased hell encountered in John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972), and the various vampire and "wrong turn hells" in contact with the Southern nature.

Far more arresting is, however, the fact that it took so long for American cinema to start unmasking the stereotype of a happy-faced "darky," to explore the physical and spiritual hell of slavery. Although *Roots* had a dramatic impact on the filmic representation of enslavement, only since the release of films such as *Beloved* (Jonathan Demme, 1998), adapted from Toni Morrison's novel, and the even more recent *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013), based on the true story of Solomon Northup (Chiwetel Ejiofor), a free black man abducted and sold into slavery, has the experience of slavery been treated more directly on screen. Compared to the earlier filmmakers' readiness to commodify the mythic Southland for the growing movie audiences, today's filmmakers are far more distrustful when revisiting the Old South. To the point that some recent films on the South may have become "almost unwatchable," as Rupert Cornwell wrote when describing McQueen's graphic presentation of the slavery-era South as "brutal in its honesty," wondering if it was "too much for American audiences."[79]

Although the tangled, racist logic of the early films cannot alone account for all the whys and wherefores beneath the denied access to recognition, it is quite clear that the naming and labeling of these films have been retarded not only by their perception as a somewhat outlandish Southern "saga," as well as an "idealized simulacrum of plantation

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Taïna Tuhkunen ed., "Railway and Locomotive Language in Film," *Film Journal*, 3 (2016). http://filmjournal.org/fj3-tuhkunen/.

[77] French, *The South and Film*, 3.

[78] Langman and Ebner, *Hollywood's Image of the South*, xii.

[79] Rupert Cornwell, "Steve McQueen's acclaimed film *12 Years A Slave* is brutal in its honesty. But is it too much for American audiences?" http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/steve-mcqueens-acclaimed-film-12-years-a-slave-is-brutal-in-its-honesty-but-is-it-too-much-for-american-audiences-9050141.html .

tradition that downplayed its history of racial and social injustice."[80] Since the foul flowers of the early films, and the legacy of resilience received by Scarlett O'Hara from her Irish father under the black tree of Tara, the Old South has grown a long series of peculiar buds, the most recent one being the white carnation flower on Calvin Candy's chest shot through by Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz) to kill the master of Candyland. Against all odds, *Gone with the Wind*'s somber tree of life is, indeed, still bourgeoning and growing in multiple directions, generating seemingly endless stories of what is called, perhaps too restrictively, "the American South," bearing in mind the universality of the increasing number of themes. And as the "Southern" brings into the forefront other types of calamity characters and crisis scenarios, breaking down the very idea of a unique, culturally, politically and economically singular South, it also ends up defending a number of combined causes whose mutability and multiplicity may well hinder further attempts at definite naming.

"No longer merely melodramatic, but comic, parodic, gothic, vampiric or "post-romantic," the Southern genre is inseparable from a variety of "crisis scripts" pursued through twenty-first century movies. If the ominous horizon of the opening sequence of *Gone with the Wind* with the flamboyant colors that announce, in Gerald O'Hara's (Thomas Mitchell) words, the threats over the "only thing in the world worth working for, worth fighting for, worth dying for" is still there, cinema audiences have seen the singular early cinematographic Southland branch out into multiple scenarios. For, as the Scottish writer Walter Scott's fictionalization of history anticipated, Southern films have always been hybrid, referring back to History and fiction as something intrinsically mixed in form and content. It is against this background that it becomes easier to understand the contemporary, deliberately recreative "bastardizations" of the antebellum South.

Moreover, as Tarantino's movie shows, the "Southern" has not ceased to interact and overlap with the generic conventions of the Western.[81] Not only are Westerns (which tend to take place in the years after the Civil War) haunted by former Confederates heading West, like Ethan Edward, haunted by his pre-Civil War prejudices against miscegenation in *The Searchers*; they take on Southern themes during their move towards new frontiers, in a sense "tainting" the pure virginal West by a dream twisted into a nightmare, and processing problems left unanswered by the Civil War. If the Western and the (tacitly surviving) Southern are both, in their different ways, crisis and survival narratives, the latter has proved more sensitive to the outbreak of conflicts and corruptions. Focusing more keenly on "uncivil" than historical "civil wars," it has peered into countless crises, without necessarily providing a clear exit from the claustrophobic mansion home. This is why the outwardly chaotic, yet genre-conscious, allusion-, homage- and blasphemy-filled *Django Unchained* may prove useful for those wishing to understand how the generic play has been operating within unnamed Southerns. To what extent Tarantino's southernized western (or westernized southern), which unfolds in Texas and performs its way into the "Deep," yet no

[80] Wilson, *Shadow and Shelter*, 164.

[81] To learn more about the multiple interactions and hybridizations between the Western and Southern genres, see the special issue of *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal*, vol. XVI-n°1 | 2018 co-edited by Claire Dutriaux, Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris and Taïna Tuhkunen entitled *When the West Meets the South on Screen* / *Quand l'Ouest rencontre le Sud à l'écran*, Introduction by Taïna Tuhkunen, forthcoming 2018, URL: http://journals.openedition.org/lisa/9208

longer all that "good" old South, will generate other similarly self-reflexive films remains to be seen, but chances are that we shall attend more cinematic clashing and enmeshing to see the wilderness at the heart of the lost, corrupted or contaminated antebellum garden. For, just as Westerns never merely seek to tell us *How the West Was Won* (John Ford, Henry Hathaway, George Marshall 1962), Southerns tell us far more than how the South was "lost."