

Alessandra Magrin

Bernice M. Murphy, *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture, Backwoods Horror and Terror in the Wilderness*

Warning

The contents of this site is subject to the French law on intellectual property and is the exclusive property of the publisher.

The works on this site can be accessed and reproduced on paper or digital media, provided that they are strictly used for personal, scientific or educational purposes excluding any commercial exploitation. Reproduction must necessarily mention the editor, the journal name, the author and the document reference.

Any other reproduction is strictly forbidden without permission of the publisher, except in cases provided by legislation in force in France.

revues.org

Revues.org is a platform for journals in the humanities and social sciences run by the CLEO, Centre for open electronic publishing (CNRS, EHESS, UP, UAPV).

Electronic reference

Alessandra Magrin, « Bernice M. Murphy, *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture, Backwoods Horror and Terror in the Wilderness* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2016-2, document 2, Online since 14 May 2016, connection on 14 May 2016. URL : <http://ejas.revues.org/11395> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.11395

Publisher: European Association for American Studies

<http://ejas.revues.org>

<http://www.revues.org>

Document available online on:

<http://ejas.revues.org/11395>

Document automatically generated on 14 May 2016.

Creative Commons License

Alessandra Magrin

Bernice M. Murphy, *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture, Backwoods Horror and Terror in the Wilderness*

1 Bernice M. Murphy, popular literature lecturer at Dublin's Trinity College, opens her wide-ranging survey of *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture* with a telling remark: "it is no coincidence that when American authors and film-makers fantasise about the end of civilisation as they know it, they so often produce narratives which unconsciously evoke the beginnings of European settlement"(2). Indeed, a body of scholarship in gothic fiction (Fiedler, Goddu, Lloyd-Smith) concurs in tracing back the trope of the inherent monstrosity and grotesqueness of the American wilderness and its inhabitants to the literary production that stemmed out of the earliest days of the New World's conquest, ranging from travellers' memoirs to captivity tales and puritan novels. In her study Murphy therefore appeals to these early works, and to the primal tension which they convey—constantly hovering between savagery and civilisation, between the abominable and the enchanting—in order to justify the existence of what she defines as the *Rural Gothic*: "a distinct subgenre existing within (and closely related to) the wider American Gothic tradition"(5). What renders Murphy's book particularly enjoyable and refreshing is her ability to seamlessly merge classic works of fiction with contemporary film analysis and cultural critique. Such approach proves highly beneficial to the persuasiveness of her arguments, also thanks to the historical contextualization that she carefully provides in every section.

The chapters are organised thematically as well as chronologically, and each of them examines a different facet of the *Rural Gothic*. Chapter 1 addresses the trope of the "cabin in the woods" which, according to Murphy, must be considered "the true starting point of American horror" since this cliché "retains its power precisely because the nation is still grappling with the legacy of colonisation, expansion, and consolidation" (15-16). The author then goes on to examine the archetypal cabin in the woods found in Lars Von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) which she then connects to a lengthy, but focused, digression about the origins of the concept of wilderness in early Puritan settlements and its evolution in modern European history of thought. The anxieties of Puritan society are then assessed in the backdrop of Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative. This proves to be an interesting interpretive key to understand the complex nature of the relationship between Puritans and Native Americans, as well as a means to realize of the ambivalent social dynamics within New England's Puritan settlements. Murphy conceives the captivity narrative as a descriptive means for Puritans to exorcise "haunting memories" and appoints this genre as one of the forefathers of contemporary horror fiction (37).

The second chapter delves deeper into the subject of Puritan community, as well as backwoods communities in general, and draws insightful parallels between Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's gothic narrative, and modern works of fiction such as *The Lottery* by Shirley Jackson, Thomas Tyron's *Harvest Home*, T.E.D. Klein's *The Ceremonies*, and Stephen King's *Children of the Corn*. According to Murphy these works feature "the trope of the isolated rural community which mindlessly replicates the attitudes and behaviours of previous generations... which often revolve around the idea of ceremonial human sacrifice"(75). This concept—as the author's interpretive work reveals—has been revisited by several horror DVD-releases of the late 1990's and early 2000's, such as: *Skeletons* (1996), *The Spring* (2000), *Black River* (2001), *Population 436* (2006), as well as by the critically controversial *The Village* (2004). If any criticism can be moved against the second part of this chapter is that Murphy draws a plethora of interconnections between minor novels and semi-obscure films which can at times disorient the reader who does not possess the same breadth of knowledge in American popular culture.

While in the first two chapters the figure of the Puritan was central to Murphy's argument, one can see that in chapter 3 the focus decidedly shifts towards Native Americans and the anxieties connected to the aftermath of colonialism. Murphy brings Charles Brockden Brown back under discussion with the novel *Edgar Huntly*, where the eponymous protagonist initially seeks for savagery in the wilderness but is then ultimately forced to come to terms with his own feral barbarity. Montgomery Bird's *Nick of the Woods* also briefly features in the debate in order to facilitate the comparison with Hollywood productions such as Roland Emmerich's *The Patriot* (2000) as well as with horror blockbusters such as Eli Roth's *Hostel* (2005). According to Murphy these works tell "a very familiar American story—that of the righteous avenger who becomes as savage as those that he or she is hunting down" and where the backwoods setting "is a place where resentful and violent locals like to take their frustrations out on more privileged outsiders"(108). The latter part of the chapter dwells on the psychological legacy of America's western expansion. Cannibalism—of which Indigenous peoples have been accused since the days of Columbus—is discussed as an element of moral and cultural degeneration which occurs to anyone excessively exposed to the corruptive influence of the wilderness, and it is linked to the insatiable desire for possession and consumption affecting America since the era of Manifest Destiny. Murphy sees the personification of this type of metaphorical cannibalism dramatised in the character of the Windigo, a figure from Native American folklore which feeds on human flesh, that she identifies in the 1998 film *Ravenous* directed by Antonia Bird. Abominations induced by immoderate consumption are further explored in *The Shining* by Stephen King, which the author sees as an allegory for "the murder of a race—the race of Native Americans" (127), and in Cormac McCarthy *The Road* which is in Murphy's view "a bitter mockery of the ceaseless drive towards movement, exploration, and consumption that has so often shaped the national character" (128).

Chapter 4, entitled "Backwoods Nightmares: The Rural Poor as Monstrous Other" is perhaps the most accomplished section of Murphy's book. Controversial author Jim Goad wrote in 1997 that rednecks, hillbillies, and white trash were America's scapegoat. Even though any direct reference to Goad has been carefully omitted from Murphy's book, his argument still resonates in this chapter of *The Rural Gothic*; but while Goad tackles the subject in strictly political terms, Murphy confines her discourse to the objective assessment of this phenomenon within the framework of popular culture. Murphy therefore analyses the negative stereotypes associated with rural communities which are most recurrently represented in backwoods horror: poverty, inbreeding, deformity, mental retardation, rape, and the ever present cannibalism. She establishes *Deliverance* (1972), and the various adaptations of the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974, 2003, 2006) as great receptacles for all the aforementioned features, eventually concluding that the "backwoods horror sub-genre...draws upon the powerful strain of eugenic thinking that flourished during the early twentieth century, and in particular, the belief that the fecund 'feeble minded' and 'regressive' rural family...are a threat to the racial and genetic purity of the US. ... According to this logic the stagnation and decrepitude of their surroundings and the proximity of the wilderness has bred in them a dangerous primitivism that can erupt into violence at any time" (128).

The final chapter discusses Ecocriticism—which along with the concept of wilderness underpins the entire monograph—in relation to Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic film and fiction. Murphy envisions this sub-genre as the "'final frontier' for the Rural Gothic" (180) and identifies two waves of eco-horror films: an early one, which began during the 1960s and 1970s, and a contemporary one which resurged in the beginning of the new century. Early eco-horrors—like Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), *Night of the Lepus* (1972), *Jaws* (1975), *Prophecy* (1979)—feature different manifestations of the flora and fauna which "strike back at humanity" (182) as revenge for the abuses that mankind has inflicted upon them, while the post-2000 productions move beyond the apocalyptic dimension in order to explore "undreamt new modes of being" (192) amidst a newfound wasteland, as in *The Book of Eli* (2010), *The Road* (2009), and the TV show *Revolution* (2012-2014).

The gripping narrative and the thought-provoking connections of this book make it appealing not only for scholars of gothic literature and horror fiction but for any reader interested in the

evolution and in the current popular expressions of the idea of wilderness, frontier, and the dichotomy between urban and rural.

References

Electronic reference

Alessandra Magrin, « Bernice M. Murphy, The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture, Backwoods Horror and Terror in the Wilderness », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2016-2, document 2, Online since 14 May 2016, connection on 14 May 2016. URL : <http://ejas.revues.org/11395> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.11395

About the author

Alessandra Magrin

University of Strathclyde, Glasgow

Copyright

Creative Commons License

This text is under a Creative Commons license : Attribution-Noncommercial 2.5 Generic
