
Self-portrait of the Wrong-Eyed Jesus: The Mythical South Looking through the Mirror

By Marine Soubeille

Distinguishing history from myth is a hard task, and it has led scholars such as Roland Barthes or G. B. Tindall to conclude that all history contains a part of myth. As Tindall argues in *Mythology: a New Frontier in Southern History* that “we see myth and reality as complementary elements of the historical record”^[i] because history is written by selecting and organising facts in a way which allows people to make sense of what happened. Similarly, myth is according to Barthes a language which uses characters and images to give meaning to the world^[ii]. Both historical and mythical narratives follow an ideological pattern in which some events or characters are made more important, more significant than others for the understanding of a certain community and its genesis. Benedict Anderson famously defined the idea of “nation” as “an imagined political community”, but he insisted on its ambiguous nature as something that does not exist beyond the collective imagination – not a geographical or political reality – and something that has existed for a long time – the feeling of belonging to a “nation”, of a collective bond created overtime while facing the same ordeals. In other words, the idea of “nation” is itself a historical myth, which makes sense of history by turning traumatic events’ “fatality into continuity”^[iii].

The American South (the former confederate states minus Texas) can be understood as a mythical “region” that echoes, in many respects, Anderson’s view of “nation”. The issue of the boundary between history and myth is at the heart of the place’s identity. Tindall suggests that “there are few areas of the modern world that have bred a mythology so potent, so profuse and diverse, even so paradoxical, as the American South.”^[iv] Contrary to the rest of the country which builds its collective identity on American values dating back to the Frontier myth and often reinvested in western films^[v]; the mythical South, born from the collective imaginary of both southerners and outsiders, changes in values and colours depending on the period and the origin of the story being told, at times indistinguishable from its own history. The region has notably been depicted over the years by two main and opposing visions: on the one hand an ante-bellum tableau of gentility and beauty (such as *Birth of a Nation*, D. W. Griffith, 1915 or *Gone With the Wind*, O’Selznick, 1939 – celebrating the figure of the Southern Belle), and on the other, a darker, marginal southern wasteland harbouring a population of zealots and dangerous lunatics, which seem to have failed to recover from the stigmas of the Civil War and de-industrialization (*Deliverance*, Boorman,

1972; *Cold Mountain*, Minghella, 2003). These two sets of conflicting images – “Moonlight and Magnolias”^[vi] versus the “Savage South”^[vii] – could hardly be reconciled into a single production due to their antithetic nature, and yet they coexist in the collective imaginary of the place we call the South.

Searching for the Wrong Eyed Jesus (Douglas, 2003) is a musical documentary which sets out to look for this contemporary “South” which produced music, myths and cinematic images. If films often participate in the creation of a national feeling^[viii], the documentary form presents the same problematic relation to authenticity and myth as history does. The common belief that documentary should provide an authentic account of the real world is challenged by recent documentaries and, therefore, by documentary critics such as Jeffrey Geiger, who argues that “not all documentaries – or even all those considered ‘social’ or ‘political’ documentaries – have always worked to demystify the nation”^[ix]. Some of them, by reusing the same mythical codes, even reinforce the national narrative by providing visual arguments. In the case of southern documentaries, the films necessarily tackle this question of mythical representation, either denouncing the pitfalls of a mythical vision or participating in the regional narrative (*Louisiana Story*, Flaherty, 1948). I would argue that Andrew Douglas, British director of *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, takes the “Savage South” as contemplative object; not in order to denounce any kind of cliché, but to understand where the myth comes from and what southerners themselves think of the image it portrays of them. It is, in this sense, what Bill Nichols calls a performative documentary^[x]: the film, its director and its musician narrator Jim White openly side with the myth, asking the audience to believe with them by calling on the strange, otherworldly poetry of the place. In this article, I argue that *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* reflects on the Savage South as both part of a long-lasting mythological discourse meant to darken the region’s traits, and an ongoing process of mythmaking and re-appropriation nourished by Southerners themselves – and by films such as this one. The first section questions the film’s representation of the mythical south as a negative image of America, before focusing on its appropriation and acceptance by southerners as exceptionalism, their degree of implication in the process of myth making. My analysis of the documentary’s specificity will then allow me to question the role of the film in discussing myth and its existence on screen.

“Savage South”, the myth of the margins

As explained by Geiger, the “reality claim” to which documentaries are said to obey should prevent them from conveying myths, since the latter is a narrative system which functions on stereotyped characters and pre-established values – it is simplified and constructed – while non-fiction

films supposedly take on reality as their filmic object, shooting places and people which are unique especially because they exist in the world. Yet some documentaries inform social myths as vigorously as fictions do. The documentary *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* (SWEJ), along with the productions of its featured guests, the songwriter Jim White and author Harry Crews, belong to this stream of cultural productions which have decided to rework and perpetuate the myth of the Savage South. Historian Fred Hobson[xi] defines the Savage South as the image of an impoverished and violent place born sometime around the 1920s when the South was undergoing one of its darkest periods - strikes, anti-Catholic and racist outbursts, KKK lynching - under the pen of journalists and social critics of the time[xii]. This idea, coupled to the more ancient one of the Benighted South, a myth through which the European colonists fantasized the region as a land of all dangers in the 18th century - gave birth a literary genre, the southern gothic, notably represented by such authors as William Faulkner and then Flannery O'Connor, whom Jim White refers to towards the end of film. This genre adds a touch of mystery to a savage and unruly region, an unsettling otherness and haunted figures representing the place's troubling past whose ghosts keep re-surfacing[xiii]. In the 1930s, Faulkner painted the South as a land of "decaying gentry, idiocy, religious fanaticism, murder, rape, and suicide". This harsh description of Southerners matches a particular setting, made of crumbling houses and wild landscapes, which metaphorically render the idea of defeat and abandonment. The cinema avoided gothic representations of the South until the Production Code started losing ground, notably in films like *Night of the Hunter* (Charles Laughton, 1952). In the last forty years, however, this negative, savage vision of the South has prevailed on both big and small screens, with a wide variety of productions including *Deliverance*, *Oh Brother Where Art Thou?* (Joel and Ethan Coen, (2000), the recent HBO shows *True Blood* (2008) and *True Detective* (2014) and), *The Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Ben Zeitlin, 2012).



Still from Searching for the Wrong Eyed Jesus (15:38)

All follow the visual codes and moral values originally set by Faulkner's approach to the southern gothic. Half of the time in *SWEJ*, the camera, embarked in Jim White's newly purchased old car, films through the window an endless dirt track winding its way through a jungle of weeping willows, passing by abandoned buildings and vehicle carcasses overgrown by plants, precarious houses or sedentary trailers replacing homes and churches. The wilderness, a symbol of the domination of men over Nature in the days of pioneers [xiv], seems to have gotten the upper hand once again in the Deep South. Fifteen minutes into the film the camera tracks around the carcass of a yellow school bus, recognizable symbol of American culture, abandoned in the middle of the woods, entangled in branches and trees which seem to swallow its familiar shape. This, along with swamp houses, rusted diner signs and the overall faded colours of the film roll which appears to be worn out, contribute to the depiction of a disenchanting rural South. Just like the "freaks" with which Flannery O'Connor [xv] or Harry Crews populate their short stories, people encountered in the film seem to diverge both physically and morally from Hollywood canons: overweighed tattooed sisters, amputees and toothless old women cross paths with petty criminals and exiled poets. Harry Crews, interviewed numerous times in the documentary, recalls that in his youth, the children used to compare themselves with the Sears Roebucks magazine's pictures, and be amazed by the perfection of the people they saw in it as compared to their own flawed bodies: "Everybody in there [the magazine] had all the fingers that was coming to them, nobody had any open and running soars on their bodies."

But everybody we knew had a finger missing, or one eye put out (...). In other words, in our world everybody was maimed and mutilated whereas everybody in the Sears Roebuck world was perfect."The film's social actors[xvi] also evince a troubled relation to morality, and seem particularly engaged in the battle between Good and Evil; as the camera enters in turn the county jail, the local bar, or a Pentecostal church in Louisiana the viewers encounter people who have either found God or rejected him. One of the convicts explains:"I had never gone to church, until when I was thirteen, [my family] thought I was big enough, that I was gonna find God, but I never did. I just couldn't turn over that function". There seems to be no in-between in the southern mind: you are either definitely good or definitely bad. Jim White, at one point, sums it up thus: "In a small town like this, it's in your blood. You either choose Jesus or choose Hell".Later in the documentary, Jim also links the essential pre-determination of Southerners to the gothic when he says "[these people] have what Flannery O'Connor called the Wise Blood", implying that they do not, in effect, have a choice: their southern blood and lineage determine their lives, as well as their relation to Faith.

Carefully avoiding any racial discussion - there are no black people in this version of the South the film presents - the film chooses to shed light on poor white communities who, by their imperfections and their otherness, stand in sharp contrast with both the American ideal and the southern moral and physical canon. One can think, for example, about the southern Belle, who is expected to be pious, virtuous, but also white and beautiful, but who seems to belong to a brighter, more ideal South which has no relation to this one. Though these people are not black, they do not reflect the neat and tidy white middle-class either; they are the poor and excluded "white trash". In Nancy Isenberg's words, these "marginalized Americans were stigmatized for their inability to be productive, to own property, or to produce healthy and upward mobile children - the sense of uplift on which the American dream is predicated"[xvii]. The South displayed in SWEJ is a region marginalized by its defeat in the War, and mostly by its own failure to adapt to a changing world. If the Civil War did function as the original traumatic event, the successive social and economic crises have reinforced the idea that the South keeps tumbling down the bad road: the racist exactions of white supremacists, followed by the Jim Crow era, contributed to label the South as a land of unforgivable violence and ignorance, while the end of the industrial era has left the South's lower classes unemployed and down spirited[xviii]. Everything that made America prosper is seen in ruins. For example, the appropriation of the land and its resources' transformation in the primary sector, which in terms of national narrative mirrors the work of the pioneer and Jefferson's agrarian ideal, is seen in the film as either struggling or dead. The miners in the last 10 minutes of the movie seem to come straight out of another day and age, and the only

plants seen in the movie are unattended, they are left to grow freely and seem to be eating the small towns alive. There is no sign of a southern plantation anywhere. Yet this South is not the passive victim of this ideological characterization. It is not, in other terms, a myth crafted by Northerners only to contrast and compare the two parts of the nation and make the North shine brighter – as is the case in a film like *Girl on a Chain Gang* (Jerry Gross, 1966), which clearly show an exploitation of the image of the South by the Hollywood industry [xix]. On the contrary, one could argue that, if the cultural marginalization of the South has never been desired, it has, however, been appropriated by southern authors and people as a way to forge an image for the region's common identity. This identity therefore stands somewhere between the myth created by literature and cinema and the Southerners' perception of themselves. Making a documentary seems, for the director, to be a means to explore a kind of authenticity in this complex southern construct, at least because it offers the audience the testimony of "real" Southerners.

Southern exceptionalism: Going against the flow

Following the Civil War, and even though the country was supposed to be reunited, Southerners became identified as the ones who lost the war. In so many ways, the turn of history forced them to belong to a nation from which they had ideologically severed themselves. The trauma of both defeat and forced reunion has been deeply rooted in the representation of the region up until today; and it led right after the war to the birth of a myth: the Lost Cause [xx]. Romanticizing their loss against the North, idealizing the past and turning Confederate soldiers into martyrs, Southerners took back control over their own narrative, re-interpreting defeat. This is probably the first example of the South taking the matter of mythmaking into its own hands; the term "Lost Cause" was coined as early as 1867 by Edward A. Pollard, and it still appears in contemporary representations, even in the bleaker ones, in the form of a looming fatality. The idea that the ante-bellum world was a kind of southern Eden made only for God's People, destroyed by the War, encourages the collective southern memory, which crafts the regional identity through oral and written stories, to select from the myth the ancient but positive values of community and spirituality. This desire to return to better days is evident in a number of southern movies and TV shows, from *Gone with the Wind* (O'Selznick, 1939) to *Steel Magnolias* (Ross, 1989) and *Hart of Dixie* (CW, 2011), but also in those reprising the imagery of the Savage South (*True Detective*, *SWEJ*).

There is no re-enactment of glory and gentility in *SWEJ*, no plantation mansions, but a tenuous sense of disconnection with the present and a nostalgic cry for days gone by. The number of ruins visible on the sideway in the documentary, as well as in season one of *True Detective*, hint at a

bygone age, but it is the way people live, and the values they live by, which truly make this return to the old days a choice. Both productions display Southerners driving vintage cars, eating in 1950s diners and dressing accordingly. In the last few minutes of the film, the camera intrudes in a motel room and pans to the right, revealing an analog TV where a black and white music video of Elvis is airing. Jim White asserts at the beginning of the documentary that, "if you go a few miles away from the interstate, you can see the South as it was some fifty or maybe a hundred years ago. That's not something you can find anywhere else." As he speaks, the camera tracks in on the battered steering wheel, to which is tied an old wristwatch. Both sound and image conjure the idea of a remote time, towards which Jim is driving us. The documentary conveys the idea, as do many southern fictions (such as *Steel Magnolias* or *Hart of Dixie*), that being stuck in a constructed past is a conscious choice for Southerners; the choice to remain in a sweeter, fantasized world, preferred by far to the charmless, aseptic world offered to the poorest classes by today's society. Listening to the social actors and storytellers portrayed in the film, including Jim White, the choice is clear indeed. This fantasized past encapsulates a set of codes and moral values which no longer match the reality of our world, only the idea that people – Southerners and outsiders – might have of the region. Without them, the contemporary South would be adrift. This was already in 1941 J. W. Cash's contention in his pioneer work *The Mind of the South*. For him, the South is particularly apt to trigger the imagination because of its harshness, creating "a mood in which nothing any more seems improbable save the puny inadequateness of fact, nothing incredible save the bareness of truth" [xxi]. Even though Cash blames it on the land itself, and on a certain atmosphere, his statement remains valid. The South – or rather, its inhabitants – require positive myth. Thus, they have created a nostalgic world grounded in the very stereotypical backwardness the North has associated them with. From the margins they have been pushed to, they have built a community. And finally, in response to the allegation that they are either religious fanatics or depraved criminals, Southerners claim the vigour of their Faith, which has been lost everywhere else in the country.

The idea that the South is populated with marginals – dating back to southern gothic literature, finally becomes a cliché in the era of anti-heroes on screen. "Marginal," in the South, is to be understood geographically as well as socially. The most destitute Southerners have traditionally been labelled "eccentrics" because they did not fit in the physical or social canons of a proper society. Jim White plays on this eccentric characterization on several occasions in the film, calling people "your regular southern insane lunatic", or explaining in a typical southern small town, that fanatics, criminals and artists are crushed by social pressure and find themselves on the margins, literally "off the centre" of

town. By being socially marginalised, they thus end up in the geographical margins. The whole region, after undergoing numerous social and economic crises, is seen by popular imagination as a margin; that is what the term Deep South means. Because it could not objectively remain the “same old South”, the myth has turned this marginal space into a unique place of struggle and endurance which began to make sense, as a story, in the regional consciousness. In the *Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, people seem to assert their ownership of the territory: people living in the mountains of Kentucky readily admit that the place is inhospitable, the cameras shoot them in shabby grey cabins and covered in black soot, but the old miner interviewed says it himself: “if I could go back into the mine I would.” By living together and between themselves on the land they have been forced to inhabit or do not have the means to leave, and by sharing the same vision of themselves, they create a mythical bond: that of a community. John Livingston argues that “a sense of community is most simply put as an awareness of simultaneously belonging to both a society and a place, and also an awareness of self-identity as that society or place”[\[xxii\]](#). In the South displayed by *SWEJ*, there is indeed this strong, almost foreordained connection between the land and the people who live there: they make up and are the South. Yet the documentary often qualifies the idea that the people met were actually free to choose to live in those small towns. Some, indeed, would never think of leaving, while others, including Jim White, confess that it is all they have ever dreamt about. Paradoxically, the desire to escape is also something that links them together, that reinforces the feeling of belonging and participates in the myth. Thanks to all these shared values, however paradoxical they may be, the southern myth provides a “sense of place”[\[xxiii\]](#) to fill the need of its people to belong somewhere that looks like them, somewhere they can identify as their own.

In the same way, the representation of southern spirituality and morality shifts from an external criticism to a regional identity claim incorporated to the myth. In the *Wrong Eyed Jesus*, morals and faith still seem closely intertwined, more so at least than in the rest of the western civilization. Yet the image we get from the film is that of a rough, even uncivilized place, that is both a land of sinners and of fanatic bigots. If the movie shows an “old school” baptism in a river at night, where two men hold a semi-conscious woman underwater, and if this image is for a secular European audience as excessive and unsettling as a fifteen-year old girl dancing lasciviously in front of the camera a few minutes earlier in a bar, both of these images are nonetheless justified by the people’s visceral attachment to their faith, and more broadly to their constant search for their place on earth. A repented drug addict, now priest in a Pentecostal church, proclaims during his service: “They say you folks are crazy and you have lost your mind. We’re not lost, we have found our mind, we have found our purpose;” he later adds: “Yes I am radical, yes I am fanatic, yes

I am extreme". This exuberant faith –often represented in southern movies –seems to be something they are actually proud of, the sign that spirits have not definitely left this age. By opposing “we/I”and “them”, the priest also strengthens the claim of southern exceptionalism. A country musician explains in the back of a car: “if we have more demons in the South, we also have more angels, it is our spirituality being still alive.” This vision and practice of the religious rituals the spectator witnesses is certainly not based on Puritan restraint, but it allows elevation all the same. The resurgence of fundamentalist faith since the 1970s in America caused a profound misunderstanding between the religious and the secular for the general public as for scholars, who considered that such a shift was no longer possible in a modern, rational world[xxiv]. This feeling or misunderstanding and fear has only grown since, as those who already looked down on Evangelical or Pentacoastal currents tend to regard them as a threat towards American values of liberal rationality and progress. And yet the South, as part of the US, is not ready to tame its most enthusiastic believers, to let reason and rationality prevail. The audience, identified with this “they”, finds itself excluded from the ritual, as looking through a window. In the end, the imaginary South, recreated with pieces of the old and the new, with its monsters and angels, is certainly not perfect, nor is it rational, but it is meaningful. This patched-up, backwards world is precious, because it is, for Southerners, proof of southern exceptionalism chosen or not, and of the meaning of a wretched life. Even in a documentary film, which is meant to deal with authenticity, what matters is not so much to give a comprehensive, down-to-earth vision of the rural South, but to show which of its representations is meaningful enough to replace the South in the grand narrative of history. The representation people have of themselves, if it is distorted, is still very much real to them because it constructs their identity.

The most obvious clue to this last point is probably to be found in the documentary *Seven Signs: Music, Myth and The American South*, which is similar to *SWEJ* in the way both films take the shape of road trip down South led by southern musicians –here J. D. Wilkes– looking for peculiar places and people to illustrate their musical world. In this film, it becomes more evident than ever that the truth matters less than meaning, and that the South can easily distort reality in its search for its own mythology. Two minutes into the film, Wilkes finds himself in front of a Southern church on which a sign reads “THERE IS NO LIE IN WHAT WE BELEIVE” with the IE voluntarily inverted in “believe”. This extraordinary sign is the perfect metaphor for the South and its myth: it does not matter if it is false, so long as it matches one’s beliefs. Faith is stronger than reason. Should an analogy be made between Southern Pentecostal faith and Southern myth, this would imply that the myth, more than any other contemporary narrative, recognizes itself as

artificial, acknowledging its own constructiveness. This is what I propose to discuss now. Can it be said that the Southerners themselves, being aware of the artificial nature of the myth they bathe in, participate in its creation? Or is this just another idea promoted by outsider cinema? How can a performative documentary like *SWEJ*, which clearly sides with the South even though it is made by a British director, really depict this mythical image without questioning its own relation to the truth?

Southern Poetics: Performative documentary on self-conscious people

Jonathan Daniels famously said: “We Southerners are a mythological people, created half out of dream and half out of slander, who live in a still legendary land” [xxv]. The implication of this is that the southern community is a made up one, which only exists through myth. However, the use of the pronoun “we” also hints at the fact that Southerners are conscious of the myth within which they live, and more than that, it hints at the active part they may play in mythmaking. It could be said that the South, instead of being a product of fiction, has also been creating itself, telling its own story in order to reclaim power over History. This hypothesis, as discussed above, finds evidence in oral storytelling traditions which are characteristic of southern culture. In *Storytellers: Folktales & Legends from the South*, John Burrison argues that “the region’s fondness for storytelling” might originate in the migration of Old World inhabitants, especially Irish and African populations, who would have brought this oral tradition with them. These folktales, or “memorates”, are defined as “a firsthand account of a personal experience coloured by traditional belief” [xxvi]. And indeed, the whole structure of *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* depends on the stories and songs told and sung by Southerners. Moreover, its “southern atmosphere”, both magical and rustic, mythical and real, profits from the particular way these stories are told and the lesson they teach.

At one point, Harry Crews recalls a story told by his grandmother about killing “possums”. He explains that in the South, everyone knows a possum must be buried with its eyes looking downwards, otherwise it will come back and seek vengeance. If it is buried the right way, the possum will keep digging in the wrong direction and end up on the other side of the earth, unable to find its murderer. This tale qualifies as “southern” in every way: the possum holds a predominant place within southern culture, and its hunting is only the sport of a certain rural population. The moral of the story is about vengeance, and the return of the undead is a southern trope. Finally, the way the story is told sets it on the side of the southern dialect: the excessive use of g-dropping in “diggin’” and “lookin’”, the diminutive “possum”, the stresses and repetitions, etc. anchor the story in the Southern context. By recalling a childhood

memory, the author also hints at the oral transmission of these stories, which is a defining part of the Southern character. He concludes: "Everything was stories and stories were everything. Everybody told stories. It was a way of saying who they were in the world, it was their understanding of themselves." Thus, the audience understands that the legacy of such folk stories is what makes the South what it is now. Incidentally, one realizes that the aesthetic and narrative codes used by southern storytellers are similar to those used by literature or cinema to depict it. O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, for instance, does mimic the southern dialect, and its cinematic adaptation in 1979 follows the same codes of diction, the same tone. More recently, in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, a northern-made southern movie, the five-year-old Hushpuppy becomes the voice of the South and tells the tale of her people, starting with "there once was a Hushpuppy who lived in the Bathtub". It is hard to know which of the northern-made myth or the Southerners first influenced the other, but it appears rather that one draws from the other to build what has finally become a common story.

The limit of such an analysis is that the audience can only access these southern voices through the film, which is in itself the result of a process of selection and editing as any other movie. However "real" a documentary might claim to be, it can never present a taintless reality. Geiger confirms that "though as a cinematic form documentary is aligned to nonfiction and factuality, it's easy enough to see that documentaries are constructs containing elements of subjective interpretation, selection, fictional techniques narrative modes and so on" [xxvii]. Discussing this allegation, Bill Nichols, in *Representing Reality*, establishes a number of categories to distinguish fiction from documentary in terms of purposes, means, setting and characters, or the viewer's expectations towards the film. To focus only on a few of these criteria, the purpose of the documentary is not a narrative, with a plot and resolution, but an argument to prove. The setting is not *a world* but *the world*, in which we all live, and the characters are not played by trained actors but are social actors, people playing themselves [xxviii]. In *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, the purpose evoked in the first intertitle is to look for the South as it is pictured in Jim White's eponymous album [xxix]; thus, from the outset, we know that the setting of the documentary will not exactly be *the world* but a constructed one, with a certain atmosphere, a certain poetry added to it, which does not belong to reality. The same goes for the social actors: if some of them are, indeed, anonymous folks, half of the people interviewed are musicians or writers (The Handsome Family, Johnny Dowd, David Eugene Edwards, Harry Crews...) who have not necessarily spent their whole lives in the South but share and heartily maintain this poetic view of the place. The fact that they are not named in the film however, might be a way to blur the line between them and the social actors and offer a unified vision. The documentary's purpose is

therefore not the direct telling of a tale, but the exposition of a persisting romanticised narrative constantly fed by all kinds of storytellers. All of this indicates that this documentary pushes towards what Nichols defines as the “performative” mode of representation. Indeed, among the different kinds of documentaries categorized by the scholar in his later work *Introduction to Documentary*, [xxx] the performative is the mode where the filmmaker clearly picks sides, arguing that the only way to know the world is through a subjective approach. Nichols explains that, for filmmakers using this mode, “meaning is an affect-laden phenomenon”, that is to say that the understanding of the world is only possible through feeling and experience, hence this documentary’s power to convey a poetic – and therefore subjective – sense of the South and of its experience by Southerners.

Indeed, as we have seen, the first intertitle exposes the longing presence of two subjectivities in the vision the film displays: that of the musician Jim White, whose album is the reason the documentary was made and named, and the filmmaker Andrew Douglas who was so fascinated by the album he decided to see if he could find an illustration of it in southern reality. Both intend to share their fascinated vision of the South with the public, hence the numerous direct addresses, particularly in the beginning, where the off-screen voice of a child says: “Do you know what you’re looking for? Do you think this place is on a map? Will you know it when you see it?”. The same goes for Jim White’s conclusion: “I hope you found what you were looking for”. These words are not an invitation to discover the real world; they evoke a quest for a fantasized South, a place which does not appear on any map, but which can be recognized by the audience because it looks like *the* South displayed by so many southern fictions already mentioned. Apart from the setting and characters the film depicts, the gritty 16mm reel with which the film was shot seems to conjure up images from Boorman’s *Deliverance* (1972). The persistence of the myth, and the social character’s role in its construction are the real subjects of the film.

As in Flaherty’s documentary *Louisiana Story*, whose slow opening shot on a natural, romantic swamp might have inspired the *Wrong Eyed Jesus*, music and its relation to the visual seem to be one of the main markers of subjectivity in the film. Indeed, the songs played in the film sometimes surface between two conversations with words such as “welcome to my world”, “unbelievable things” or “there was a murder here today” and they are the ones – along with the landscape – creating the poetic and gothic atmosphere luring the spectator into the myth. These musical suggestions are often associated through editing to extreme close-ups of people’s faces or deep-fried food, at a moment where the social actors seem particularly oblivious of the camera. If most of the time, music starts like this, disembodied, the film then discloses where the music

comes from by showing, a few seconds later, the band or singer playing on a semi-improvised stage. Such moments invite viewers to question the film's authenticity, because these people are actually performers, and the stage which is otherwise a real-life setting appears this time as artificial. Yet paradoxically, these scenes are also the moments when the filmmaker fulfils his promise to find the original place of southern music. When the camera tracks through the swamp and closes in on Jim White playing on a porch, the film implicitly succeeds in finding the "Wrong-Eyed Jesus". These moments are, then, both the most artificial and the most meaningful, because of the staging of the southern myth by the filmmaker and various characters, and it is up to the audience to keep believing or not. When social actors do reveal their awareness of the presence of the camera, they become performers as well, using their voices or attitudes to create the myth.



Still from Searching for the Wrong Eyed Jesus (1:14:21)



Still from Searching for the Wrong Eyed Jesus (1:14:33)

The last place Jim takes us to is an Outreach Church in Virginia, in an extremely poor area of the state. In this sequence an old woman is talking in a microphone about hell and salvation while the camera is slowly panning to the right and turning around her face. At first, we cannot see her audience, but the next still shot reveals the scene's staging once the woman is gone: we realize that she was not addressing people in a church, she was addressing two cameras, in what was actually a radio studio. By disrupting the continuity of action - one second she is there, the next she is gone - and showing the cameras, the film draws attention to its own artificiality, thus inviting a discussion on the constructed nature of both the myth and the film. The audience, then, can reflect on the entire movie and find clues of its artificiality from the beginning. For instance, the direct addresses, in their content, are a way to invite the audience to share a particular vision, but by breaking the fourth wall, they imply that, if there is a spectator, then there is also a spectacle, something created and staged on demand. Moreover, Jim White introduces himself as an "imitation of a Southerner" because he left the South and was only able to appraise its poetry when he came back - he physically took some distance with the South to see it. This distance, according to both White and the mythologist Joseph Campbell, is necessary to make sense of a set of images and codes, and turn them into a meaningful narrative [xxx]. The underlying reflexive aspect of this documentary, along with its nature and origin (the director is British), allow the viewer to step back and apprehend the constructedness of the myth. Thus, the film is not exactly proving that the real South is the

Savage South, but that this myth is a part of our collective understanding of the region, insiders and outsiders alike.

Conclusion

Depending on who tells the tale, the codes of the myth remain but the goals of each party are different: for the songwriter, the enterprise is a poetic one, trying to restore and protect the “sense of place” as a beautiful treasure by showing its colour, rhythm, and sometimes glorious absurdity. For the documentary filmmaker, the aim is performative and sometimes reflexive – sharing this poetic vision with the viewers while remind them that every film is the result of a subjective choice, even documentaries, and that they too, in their own way, have a story to tell. For Southerners, the heart of the matter is, first and foremost, identity: who are southerners if not creatures of the mind? What does it mean to be a Southerner in a global world? Whatever voice one decides to listen to, the South appears in the movie as a place both highly poeticized and yet powerfully truthful.

Although this form of contemporary documentary feels unstable, halfway between authenticity and myth, and torn between the various mythmakers, *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* still manages to give voice to the South, or at least to a south. The myth selected by the filmmaker, with its defined set of visual codes that are borrowed from fictional representations of the South, is that of the Savage South – a rough and inhospitable place at first glance, which eventually becomes imbued with gothic poetry. This myth, however, does not spark from Northern or foreign invention, but is co-created by Southerners and official storytellers in order to give the South a common narrative. The performative nature of the documentary invites the audience to follow the filmmaker in his biased poetic quest for a myth and the people who tell it. Even though it is probably foolish to think that audiences might one day really access the truth concerning the Savage South, precisely because of this bias, the film manages to highlight its constructiveness as well as its importance for Southerners and the rest of the world alike. Presented is a simplified, negative image of the US, and more generally a foil to the values supported by a globalized western civilization, this South allows the public to reflect on the ideology their nations embody, on the values they believe in. A cinematic myth is not a lie but a model to follow to make sense of the world. It is a miniature, simplified but substantial world for us to decipher our own. Nichols adds that “performative documentary restores a sense of magnitude to the local, specific, and embodied. It animates the personal so that it may become our port of entry to the political” [xxxii]. This gives the myth, the people and the film a common goal: to understand the value of myth and its strong imprint on our common understanding of the contemporary world.

Notes

[i] G B Tindall, "Mythology: a New Frontier in Southern History", in Patrick Gester and Nicholas Cords, *Myth and Southern History, Vol 2: the New South, Second Edition*. University of Illinois Press, 1989, p. 1.

[ii] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. Paris: Seuil, 1957, p. 222.

[iii] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 2006, p6 & p11 nations become "a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning."

[iv] G B Tindall, "Mythology: a New Frontier in Southern History", p. 2.

[v] The West was and still is seen - thanks to the western genre - as the land of the pioneers, of those who conquered the wild land and turned it into a community. By that, it embodies the values and ideal character of the American identity See André Bazin, "Le Western ou le cinéma par excellence"

[vi] "Moonlight and magnolias": expression alluding to walks in the moonlight and the scent of magnolias, a metaphor for the alleged antebellum romantic period in the South.

[vii] Fred Hobson coined the term in "The Savage South: An Inquiry into the Origins, Endurance, and Presumed Demise of an Image" (1985).

[viii] Jeffrey Geiger argues in *American Documentary Film: Projecting the Nation* that "a film reflects and refracts national consciousness - it can help create a sense of national belonging through the national narratives and myths it (re)produces." p. 3.

[ix] Jeffrey Geiger, *American Documentary Film: Projecting the Nation*, p. 5.

[x] Bill Nichols, in the *Introduction to Documentary*, introduces "six modes of representation: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, performative." The performative genre stresses the subjective and affective dimension of our understanding of the world, showcasing the filmmaker's own emotional engagement in the object, p. 99.

[xi] Hobson wrote "The Savage South: An Inquiry into the Origins, Endurance, and Presumed Demise of an Image" exposing his main theory in 1985, and made a series of conferences entitled "The Savage South: Reflections on an Image". He is currently working on a study on the same

theme.

[xii] Fred Hobson in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 4 - Myth, Manners and Memory* by Charles Reagan Wilson, p. 27.

[xiii] Eric Savoy, in the 9th chapter of *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Literature*, explains that the region “has produced a strain of literature that is haunted by an insistent, undead past and fascinated by the strange beauty of sorrow.”

[xiv] This myth of the pioneers conquering the wilderness as a way to settle civilization dates back from the American settlers themselves and the biblical conception of Nature they brought with them. Historian George Stankey explains that “the submission of wilderness was a genuine source of pride for it represented ready evidence of success in overcoming the environment in which evil resided” (“Beyond the Campfire’s Light”, p17).

[xv] Flannery O’Connor, in *Good Country People*, tells the story of an amputee girl trying to find love, who finally has her fake leg stolen by an ill-intentioned Bible seller.

[xvi] A term used by Bill Nichols in his various works to distinguish characters in a fiction film from ‘real people’ allowed to be themselves in front of the camera in a documentary film.

[xvii] Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400 Years Untold History of Class in America*, NY: Atlantic Books, 2017, p. 3.

[xviii] One could mention the Great Depression period during which the South was deemed “America’s economic problem number 1” by the Roosevelt in 1938 (see the article “The South as ‘the Nation’s No. 1 Economic Problem’; the NEC Report of 1938” by Steve Davis), and the Sun Belt which saw the migration of industries in the South also excluded the poorest parts of the population.

[xix] See Sharon Monteith’s chapter “Exploitation Movies and the Freedom Struggle of the 1960s” in Deborah Barker and Kathryn B McKee’s *American Cinema and the Southern Imagery*, Georgia University Press, 2011.

[xx] Alan Nolan explains in the first chapter of *The Myth of the Lost Cause and the Civil War*, that “during the decades following the surrender at Appomattox, [ex-Confederates] nurtured a public memory of the Confederacy that placed their wartime sacrifice and shattering defeat in the best possible light”. 2000, p. 1.

[xxi]W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South*, New York: Knopf Eds, 1941, p. 48.

[xxii]John Livingston, "Other Selves" in *Rooted in the Land*, Wes Jackson and William Vitek, Eds. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996.

[xxiii]Term of Human Geography, notably developed by Yi-Fu Tuan or Robert Hay in 1998, hinting at the conscious creation of a place by people living by a common thought process.

[xxiv]Martin Riesebrodt begins his article "Fundamentalism and the Resurgence of Religion" by saying "the dramatic resurgence of religious movements since the 1970s has caught most scholars of religion by surprise. (...) [it] was not considered possible since the fate of religion in the modern world was an irreversible trend toward secularization" in *Numen*, vol 47, n. 3.

[xxv]Jonathan Daniels in *A Southerner Discovers the South*, quoted by G. B. Tindall in the *New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, Vol. 4, p. 125.

[xxvi]John A. Burrison, *Storytellers: Folktales & Legends from the South*, p. 2-11.

[xxvii]Jeffrey Geiger, *American Documentary Film: Projecting the Nation*, p. 8.

[xxviii]Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992, p. 108

[xxix]Jim White, *The Mysterious Tale of How I Shouted "Wrong-Eyed Jesus"*. Luaka Bop, 1997.

[xxx]Different modes of representation: the poetic, the expository, the participatory, the observational, the reflexive and the performative kind. Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*.

[xxxi]Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*: "read other people's myths, not those of your own religion, because you tend to interpret your own in terms of facts -but if you read the other ones, you begin to get the message" p. 6.

[xxxii]Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, p. 137.

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