

Robert Jackson
raj8a@virginia.edu

The Western and the Southern: Faulkner, Genre, and the Crisis of Modernity

Long before Faulkner hated the movies, he loved them. Throughout childhood the Falkner brothers avidly watched silent films, once a week or more at the Opera House and on pleasant summer evenings at an outdoor venue called the Air Drome just southeast of Oxford's square.¹ The brothers' genre of choice: the Western, of course, especially the films of Broncho Billy (1910-15). "The opening scene in the westerns never varied," younger brother Murry Falkner later recalled. "There would be, in the distance, an enormous cloud of dust. The dimensions of the cloud may have changed from picture to picture, but the background—never. ... The dust cloud held to its size and volume and soon we could make out the first of the fleeing Indians, lying flat on the backs of their ponies, whose flying hoofs were keeping perfect time with the piano player, or perhaps the other way around. My brothers and I used to wonder what would have happened to us and the rest of the enchanted audience if the movie folks had gotten mixed up one time and let the cowboys blast out of the dust cloud first with the Indians chasing them. Probably we would have run out of the Opera House."²

I wonder if this description doesn't throw some light on Faulkner's famously hard time in Hollywood decades later. After all, if he had the impulse, even as a young boy, to imagine a crowd of moviegoers running screaming into the streets, could he really be expected to follow rigid genres and come up with Hollywood endings? Keeping his "enchanted audience" enchanted seems to have been a pretty low priority. Faulkner was deeply disappointed in 1936 when he failed to sell the film rights to *Absalom, Absalom!*

for \$50,000, the amount Margaret Mitchell got that year for *Gone With the Wind*. Joel Williamson sums up the studios' lack of interest with deadpan understatement:

“Interracial mixing was not a popular or saleable subject ... irredeemably failed families and dissolving fortunes were not welcome themes in the midst of the Great Depression.”³

Somehow Faulkner didn't get this.

In a few moments I'll return to *Absalom* and suggest a reading of the novel as exactly the sort of spectacle the Falkner boys fantasized about—that is, as a “mixed up” Western in which “the cowboys blast out of the cloud of dust first with the Indians chasing them.” Before I do that, I thought I'd subject you to some of my recent research on the early silent cinema. I'll make a case for the relevance of this material to Faulkner's fiction and regional affiliations a bit later; in the meantime, just keep picturing that terrified, fleeing cowboy.

So here's another Western scenario, from a few years before Broncho Billy's debut. I'm quoting an exhibitors' brochure describing a 1904 one-reeler called *Tracked by Bloodhounds; or, a Lynching at Cripple Creek*. In this story, a “tramp” begging for food at a miner's cabin in the Colorado gold rush town “asks for money and is refused. He strikes the woman and chokes her until she falls dead on the floor.” Her little daughter interrupts the scene, and “seeing the body of her mother lying on the floor, falls upon her, crying and calling her.” The tramp flees. The husband enters and “vows vengeance.” A posse of neighbors with a pair of “immense, savage bloodhounds” pursues the tramp. After a thrilling chase through the forest, the tramp leaps from a high mountain bridge into the river below. “He is finally overcome and brought to the shore, where the posse drag him out of the water and place the rope around his neck. ... He is hastily arranged

for hanging. The rope is thrown over the limb of a tree, where it is caught on the other side by willing hands and strung up with a howling mob of bloodthirsty miners and cowboys surrounding him. Before life is extinct bullets from their revolvers pierce the body.”⁴

Tracked by Bloodhounds was released in April 1904; no print of the film survives, and I haven’t found any other information about it. In November of the same year, a similarly titled film came out: *Avenging a Crime; or, Burned at the Stake*. This time, however, the scene is southern rather than western, with racial stereotypes serving as regional markers. “The picture opens showing two negroes playing a game of craps in front of a village tavern, when two others join them in the game.” One losing gambler “gets very sulky over his hard luck and leaves the game in a very ugly mood.” A few moments later, walking in the woods, “he sees a lady coming toward him, reading a book.” He tries to rob her, and in the ensuing “terrible struggle” he “seizes her by the throat and strangles her” and flees the scene. “Meanwhile, a little girl has been a witness to all, and has been hiding in the bushes.” There is also a man who arrives to help, and soon a posse of farm hands and neighbors appears and “swear(s) dire vengeance to the one committing the deed.” A bicyclist rides down the lane “with terrific speed, the villagers following, crying vengeance—a typical southern scene.” The fugitive is captured after leaping not from a high river bridge but from a barn loft. The closing scene: “FINAL—AT THE STAKE They are seen dragging him through the woods. Lashing him to a tree, they gather brushwood, and, stacking it around him, set it on fire. He is soon enveloped in flames, the angry mob fire shot after shot at him and the vengeance is complete.”⁵

There isn't time for me to say as much as I'd like about these films, about other early lynching films (including evidence of *nonfiction* lynching films), about the historical roles of lynching in the West and the South, about the presence of the lynching theme in American film up to the present day, or, for that matter, about lynching in Faulkner's work.⁶ But I want to stress two things regarding this pair of films: their production date in relation to popular American myths about the West and the South, and their generic similarities that suggest a case of cinematic plagiarism. In other words, I want to consider these regions not as two geographic spaces, but as two genres: not the West and the South, but the Western and the Southern.

The Western genre was being born in American mass culture around the time these early lynching films were made. To find the beginnings of the early Western myth, we might point to the national census of 1890, declaring the closing of the frontier, as the decisive event, and Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 "frontier thesis" as its entry into mainstream thought. After the early Western heroes of Owen Wister's 1902 novel *The Virginian* (which sent a Jeffersonian southerner to tame the West) and Edwin S. Porter's 1903 film *The Great Train Robbery*, the ever-popular Western would evolve for decades into its most recognizable generic form, the sort of all-male morality play of freedom and conquest and heroism and limitless space and triumphant whiteness we get in the films of John Ford. More recent Westerns would take on revisionist permutations, but even these acknowledged the centrality of the genre's familiar form.

But the turn of the twentieth century was also a transitional moment for representations of the South. Instead of the census and frontier thesis, bellwether events would include Mississippi's 1890 state constitution and the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson*

decision, which legalized segregation as a political program and social system. This coincidence of the “nadir” of black life in the U.S.—southern lynching statistics alone from this period are horrifying—and the embryonic development of motion pictures is important not just because it helps explain why so many dehumanizing images of black people mark the early record of American film, but also because it points to the consolidation of a culture of white southernness that had national as well as regional import. And a crucial part of this culture was its recourse to such elements as antebellum nostalgia, Victorian melodrama, Civil War memory, and willful racial amnesia in the creation of a distinct twentieth-century genre [i.e., post-local color] that we might call the “Southern.” Film historian Scott Simmon, writing about the many southern-themed early D.W. Griffith films, offers a provisional definition of this genre; the “Southern” is shaped not by the Western’s individualism and heroism but by “years of secret suffering”: generic markers include “the dark family secret, the mysterious mansion, the long-suffering matriarch, the emotional extremes, the motivating force of honor, the sense of history as burden.”⁷ To most Americans of the time, including Griffith, these mythic elements were romantic, even heroic; they were signs of the stoic New South’s long-suffering journey into modernity. To Faulkner, who took up every last one of them in *Absalom, Absalom!*, they pointed beyond romance to tragedy, beyond heroism to failure, and beyond white southern identity to an ambivalence of self that looks more than a little like Du Boisian double-consciousness.

By the earliest years of the century, then, it was region itself—whether constructed as the Western or the Southern—that offered a human face to Americans in need of recognition and connection in an anonymous modern world. Despite their distinct

traits and markers, both genres shared this impulse to familiarize, to narrate the unknowable; they also shared this often violently enforced code of whiteness that implied what many turn-of-the-century Americans did not want to say out loud: that their civilization's freedom was married to repression, and the children of this union were, indeed, mixed.

And so it is not simply Faulkner the chronicler of small-town southern life that interests me here, but Faulkner the miscegenator of genres (to offer a Bushian construction). There are occasions when Faulkner can be read as a kind of Western writer without too much strain: what comes to mind is much of *Go Down, Moses*; the prose sections of *Requiem for a Nun* dealing with the first settlement of Jefferson; short stories of Native American life like "A Courtship" and "Red Leaves"; and the Hollywood story "Golden Land," with the Ewing clan's morbid manifest destiny. In each of these texts the fate of the frontier is at stake, manhood is defined by confronting the wild, and communal values reflect the need to come to terms with nature itself.

But the most interesting of Faulkner's works to consider as a mixed product of both genres is also his greatest work: *Absalom, Absalom!* This novel is at once the *summa theologica* of the Southern genre—recall Simmon: "the dark family secret, the mysterious mansion, the long-suffering matriarch... the sense of history as burden"—and a withering critique of the modern conditions that motivate the genre's doomed search for such authenticity in the mythic past. But as I suggested earlier, another way to understand *Absalom*'s unique power and perspective is to read it as a kind of "mixed up" Western, or better yet, a failed Western. For *Absalom* is, among many other things, a novel about frontiers. Thomas Sutpen's figure evokes the classic Western hero; even his first arrival

in Jefferson is rendered in terms entirely at home in the mythic Old West: “—a man who rode into town out of nowhere with a horse and two pistols and a herd of wild beasts that he had hunted down singlehanded because he was stronger in fear than even they were in whatever heathen place he had fled from, and that French architect who looked like he had been hunted down and caught...—a man who fled here and hid, concealed himself behind respectability, behind that hundred miles of land which he took from a tribe of ignorant Indians, nobody knows how...”⁸ Sutpen is an empire-builder who tears his plantation out of the very wilderness; he aims to father himself, to live on as a self-invented patriarch. So when I call the novel a failed Western, I am pointing to the ultimate demise of all these things: the house of Sutpen, the sprawling plantation, the faith in one’s eternal newness. And in setting up, and then frustrating, the generic expectations of the Western, Faulkner betrays the trust of the American mainstream; knowing that his audience, raised on the exploits of Broncho Billy, will recognize these early narrative promises and intuitively expect their fulfillment, he refuses keep his word: indeed, he lets the Indians chase the cowboys right into the lap of Quentin’s “enchanted audience.” And the story goes south from there.

Absalom is thus a limit text, not just a failed Western but what we might view as an always-aspiring Western, its westward progress and imperial ambitions frozen forever like the unrequited lovers on Broncho Billy Faulkner’s beloved Grecian urn. In form and content *Absalom* represents the highest achievement of the Southern genre, its haunting, tragic vision of modern American identity, a humane challenge to the most famous Western of them all, whose relentlessly optimistic heroine saw only new conquests and empires ahead, insisting to the last: “After all, tomorrow is another day.”

Notes

¹ Murry Falkner later recalled that the movies “provided a vast new field of incredibly attractive entertainment. This was especially true in such a small town as Oxford.” See *The Falkners of Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1967), 49-52.

² Falkner 50.

³ Joel Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 256.

⁴ *Tracked by Bloodhounds*. AFI Catalog online.

⁵ *Avenging a Crime*. AFI Catalog online.

⁶ Most Americanists are familiar with lynching photography catalogued in James Allen’s 2000 book *Without Sanctuary*, but lynching films, aside from *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and its famous lynching sequence, remain elusive to scholars. There is strong evidence that nonfiction films of lynchings did in fact exist as early as the first decade of the twentieth century; and lynching is depicted or, more commonly, suggested in scores of films before World War II, in both Hollywood movies and independent films, including a number of “race films” produced by black filmmakers. In the late 1930s a series of Hollywood films dealt centrally with lynching, including *Fury* (1936), *They Won’t Forget* (1937), *Black Legion* (1937), *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939), and *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943); of these, none featured black victims, and only *They Won’t Forget*, a fictionalization of the Leo Frank murder case and lynching, is set in the modern South.

⁷ Scott Simmon, *The Films of D.W. Griffith* (New York; Cambridge UP, 1998), 120.

⁸ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936; New York; Vintage, 1986), 10.