

GRASS ROOTS: A CASE STUDY OF JOHN SAYLES' *LONE STAR*  
AND UTILIZING RURALITY IN CINEMA AS A CATALYST FOR  
SOCIAL CHANGE

by

ANTHONY DISTASIO

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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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Title: Grass Roots: A Case Study of John Sayles' *Lone Star* and Utilizing Rurality in Cinema as  
a Catalyst for Social Change

Approved: Ari Purnama, Ph.D.  
Primary Thesis Advisor

This thesis investigates the portrayals of American rural life in film, examining the historical context, commonly found themes and qualities, and cultural implications involved with them. Ultimately, the argument made is that films set in rural environments can influence social change by reshaping the image of American history and identity, pieces of the national fabric in which the image of rurality plays a large role.

To argue this, the thesis will first track the relationship between rurality, film, and the United States through time, pointing out important shifts in each subject and the development of the genre and thematic associations now related to rurality in film. Next, the general image of the rural United States will be crafted through compiling the common themes and features found among rural-set films. From there, a case study of John Sayles' 1996 film *Lone Star* will demonstrate how a film can utilize those features to provide commentary and reflect on the national image through a rural lens.

Overall, the thesis aims to show rurality in film as more than a backdrop, but a lens through which films can address the cultural foundations of the United States in order to serve as a catalyst for redefining the way history, national identity, and rural traditional life is perceived.

## Acknowledgments

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## Preface

To open this thesis, I believe it's beneficial to begin with what inspired me to pursue this project for my undergraduate thesis. I've lived in California all my life, first born and raised in the Sacramento area, then at the start of high school I moved to a town called Plymouth and my family has been there since. The town has a population of just over one thousand people, and is situated in a county of approximately forty-one thousand people. Though only 40 miles from Sacramento, the State Capitol, it was completely different culturally, politically, and in relation to access to urban conveniences like shopping, dining, and recreation.

I came into this community as an outsider, and at first, I found myself having trouble acclimating as I found my experience growing up in an urban and suburban environment to be very different from the rural surroundings. I spent my first period of time processing the differences between these two surroundings, and as I grew more comfortable in the rural one, I felt my general awareness covering two different ways of life. Ultimately, I found myself in a position of knowing both lifestyles intimately. I was then also in a position where I could hear people's perceptions about the seemingly opposing ways of life. My friends from Sacramento had many ideas about rural life, and my friends from Plymouth had many about urban life as well. Having experiences in both spaces, I started to take an interest in how those opinions I heard matched my observations and experiences, and I started questioning where those opinions came from.

After graduating high school, I came to the University of Oregon. During the COVID-19 lockdowns of my freshman year, I was watching a lot of movies and developing my passion for film. It was around that time that I first watched Peter Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show*. This was the first film that I actively recognized as making some commentary on small-town

rural life, and I felt it resonated with my experience. Realizing that was one of the first films I had seen to depict it intimately, I then began to start thinking about the relationship films can have with culture and its role in shaping perceptions for the broader public. That became the impetus for what would be this project. With every film I watched from that point on, I was marking my thoughts on how a film may be a product of and/or contributing to larger cultural norms and perceptions. With a large part of my identity being tied to spending my teen years in a rural community, I had a particular interest in how rural communities were being presented in media.

Although this project was born out of a personal curiosity, I feel that for a few reasons this discussion of rural portrayals in film is timely and relevant. First of all, the general topic of rurality is one that offers a wide array of different environments and experiences. Alongside that, rural environments can contribute unique qualities and characteristics to many broader discussions. For example, rurality plays a part in the larger topic of increased political polarization as rural communities are generally seen as being more politically conservative, while urban communities tend to be more liberal, overall making politics deeply intertwined with a location being classified as urban or rural. There are influences in both environments that offer an explanation of those differences and in the case of rural areas, such as larger demographic shifts years ago having left many rural areas with a sense of loss related to their traditional sources of income, access to housing, education, and healthcare. Combined these factors lead to a desire to return to a more traditional time – a more conservative stance. When analyzing the dynamics or factors associated with rural life, it is interesting how they manifest themselves in the broader social, cultural, and political topics we hear about today.



Overall, all these interests and questions have brought me to a point where I now want to look into film's role in those associations with rurality, and subsequently analyze what purpose these films can serve when contributing to those associations and what the larger results of these contributions can entail. With that being said, we can move into the thesis itself.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis will examine the subject of American rurality in film, looking at the history of rural portrayals in film, its common qualities shared among rural-set films, and its relationship with the United States on a broader scale through the intersection of film, cultural geography, and socio-politics. Through this examination, I argue that rural-set films have a unique position to influence social change by evolving the crafted image of American history and identity which both perceptions of rural life and film have associations with. Consciously or unconsciously, filmmakers can reinforce or redefine the popular conceptions of the United States and its past through rural-set films.

These associations between rural life and American history identity come with rurality's position as the marker for traditional life, which comes as a result of the United States move from agrarian society to urban industrialization, leaving rural societies to be a conservator of a way of life that has shifted out of focus to make room for the progression towards modernity in urban zones. The associations with film come through film's ability to visualize stories, and by rendering nationally carried stories on film, an image is created of the past. The Western exemplifies this, being a uniquely American genre that has created a collective image of America's expansion and evolution into industrialization, and so this film genre and its genre conventions have translated into the mythologizing of the national history of the West. Film does the same with rurality, creating an image of rural life which in turn the nation uses a lens to assess its history and traditional culture and values.

After providing background information to provide context to this larger discussion, I will display the relationship between film, rurality, and the United States throughout time, so to track the ways in which the three have interacted. Next, I will address the commonly found

qualities of rurality in film, how those commonalities contribute to the image-making of rural life in society more largely, and what that image does for the national image.

Lastly, to demonstrate my argument, I will produce a case study of John Sayles' 1996 film *Lone Star*, focusing in particular on the narrative and visual elements of the film. There are a few reasons why I have chosen this film. First of all, the existing discourse on the film seems to be lacking. There has been some more mentioning of it due to its recent restoration, but since its release it has rarely been referenced academically despite its favorable reception critically, and hasn't been examined to the same lengths as other rural-set films that could occupy this spot such as *Fargo* (Joel Coen, 1996) released in the same year, which has an already well-established film criticism surrounding it, with whole books dedicated to the film.<sup>1</sup> More importantly though, I've chosen the film for its unique expansive qualities. The film occupies many classifications, letting it hold opportunities for points of comparison with other rural-set films. For example, in terms of genre it can be seen as a Drama, Western, Romance, Mystery, and other further subgenres. Through its use of genre it structures itself similarly to studio filmmaking, but has the freedom that comes with an independent production to occupy spaces without classification.

Next, the film contains dense commentary within its plot, for example through utilizing temporal dislocation to cover generations of history through multiple storytellers offering a wide-ranging story with changing perspectives. Alongside that, the commentary can also be found in its meta-structural components which entails using the techniques which make up the film itself to engage with the message of the film. To go back to the film's use of genre, *Lone Star* utilizing the Western genre structuring and stylizing to contribute to its question of how the history of the

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<sup>1</sup> Luhr, *The Coen Brothers' Fargo*.

American West has been fabricated in part through the very same structures he is using to tell the story of the film.

That leads into the ultimate reason for the selection of this film, that being *Lone Star's* commitment to asking questions about the validity of perceptions, history, and borders which all hold relevance in this discussion of rurality. The film is set on engaging the audience past entertainment but giving a foundation for discourse in regards to the components of rural life that otherwise often go unexamined in rural-set films. *Lone Star* exemplifies the argument that films set in rural environments have agency in influencing the relationship between Americans and their relationship to the larger national identity. The film's aim is to make conscious the fact that mythologizing history is what establishes a national identity, and so it is necessary to reevaluate the held perceptions about America's traditions in order to find what about the national history has been altered. Rurality is a foundational aspect of that dynamic, and so the film is a strong choice for this argument.

As far as the case study goes, I will first provide an overview of the film itself, and then break down its notable components such as its cultural pluralism, its fluidity in flashbacks, and use of genre conventions. Alongside that, I will examine the film under the lens of the commonly found qualities of rural films generally, to see how *Lone Star* utilizes them to craft its commentary on rural life.

My analysis is based off three main theories. First, I am utilizing Rick Altman's genre theory which views genre less as a fixed category but rather are dynamic evolving pieces which are culturally influenced, and puts forward the idea that genres are nationally tied so a nation's specific interpretation of a genre can reflect the values and identity of the country.<sup>2</sup> Rurality's

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<sup>2</sup> Altman, Film/Genre.

connection to genres like Horror and Westerns make this background relevant in understanding how genre is being utilized in rural-set films and the case study film *Lone Star* in particular.

Secondly, I am working off of the theory of prosthetic memory, a theory developed by Alison Landsberg which puts forward the argument that with mass culture supported by technology and shared formats such as film allow for collective memories which are taken in and carried by those who did not experience those memories directly.<sup>3</sup> In this way, history has both the positive potential of allowing people to view pieces of history through perspectives they don't have insight into through their own experience, but there also comes the potential for a false history to be shared and carried forward because those who hold the memory don't have the direct experience and rather identify with a falsified history that was put forward through the mass media. Rurality functioning as an image contributing the national perception of American traditional life and history is possible through the prosthetic memory.

Lastly a foundational theory that stands as a foundation for this thesis is intersectionality, a theory developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw<sup>4</sup> and recently explored through the works of Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge.<sup>5</sup> Intersectionalist theory argues that people can hold multiple identities connected to different forms of social classifications such as age, race, gender, etc. and these multiple pieces interact and shape unique qualities to one's specific social circumstances. Rather than trying to approach someone through one aspect of someone's identity which ignores the other facets of their life which intersect with that one aspect, it is more accurate to view the pieces as one interlocking system which all simultaneously impact the experience of one's life. A rural background acts as one of these points of intersection to be considered when examining a

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3 Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory the Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*.

4 Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies."

5 Hill Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*.

character, but only indicating one piece of experience in a rural environment, and so considering the overlap between multiple identities is intrinsic to capturing the complex realities of rural life, making intersectionality a fundamental backdrop to this discussion.

Overall, with those concepts to provide the backing for the examination of both rurality in film generally as well as the case study of *Lone Star*, this thesis will engage with how rural-set films contribute to the perceptions of the United States, its identity, and its history, to therefore showcase how they can be harnessed as a tool for social change.

## Chapter 2: Background and Definitions

At this point, the word rural has been used a bit broadly, and so I'd like to break down some points so there is a concrete attachment to what exactly it means. To start, the term rural is one that most everyone probably knows intuitively, but one that encompasses many attributes. It can be defined in terms of population, where a rural zone is one with a low population or population density. Rurality can also be defined in terms of industry and infrastructure. Things like agriculture, forestry, mining, and various manufacturing industries all have tie-ins with rural communities, and more often than not a rural community's economic structure is usually geared around one industry principally.

While there is no one standardized scale that unifies the definition of rural, there are a few instances where the definition is quantified. For this thesis, I will follow The United States Department of Agriculture, USDA, which attaches the term rural to towns containing less than 5,000 people and 2,000 housing units.<sup>6</sup> While in the context of film, a town's population doesn't normally hold consequence, I wanted to mention this to create a mental baseline for reference when considering themes in a real-world context.

Beyond this classification, I'd like to also add other dimensions that quantify some relevant aspects of rural communities by the following national statistics. These serve to further define the average rural town by the demographic and statistical data that exists in rural communities. This data provides a common definition and set of factors that underpin my analysis.

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<sup>6</sup> "USDA ERS - Rural Classifications."

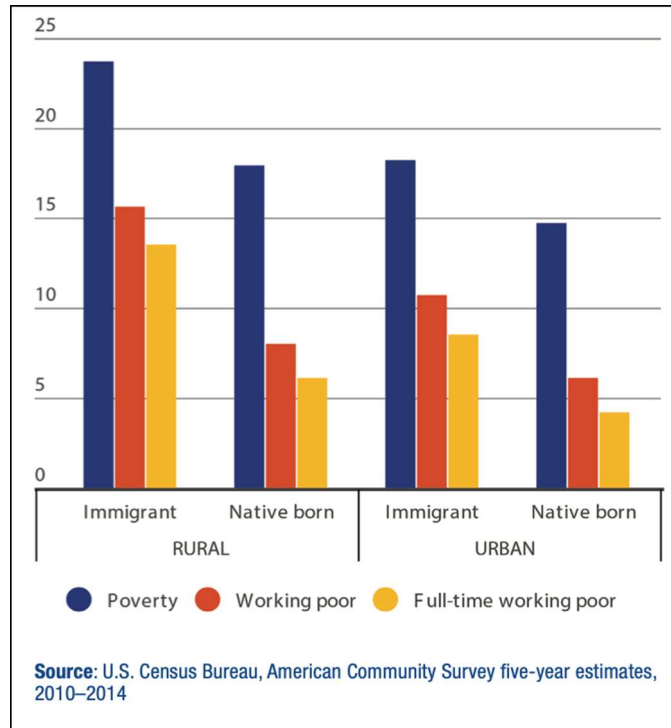


Figure 1: Poverty by Work, Metropolitan, and Immigration Status

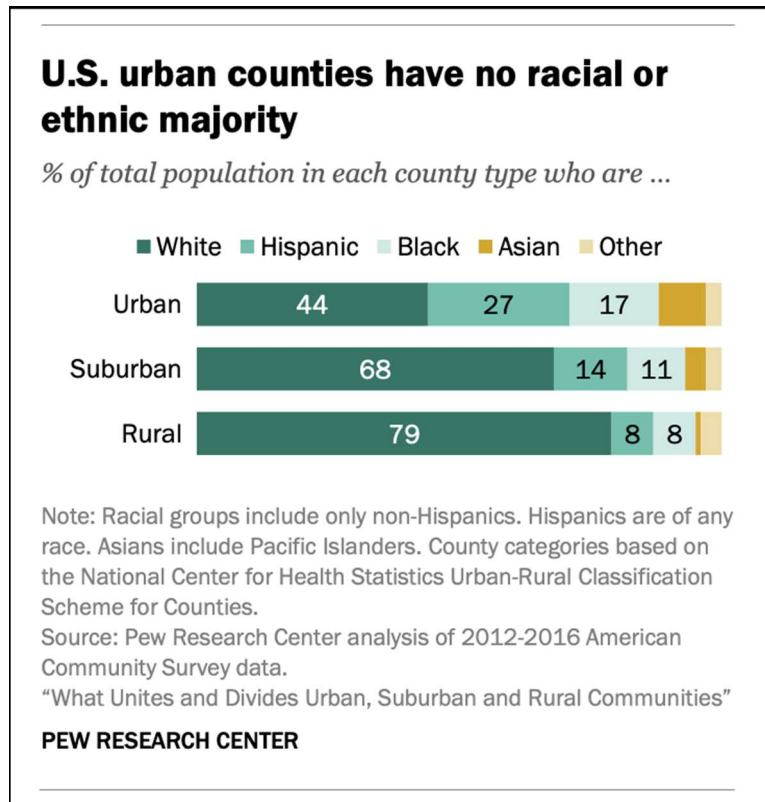


Figure 2: Percentage of racial groups within the total population in each county type



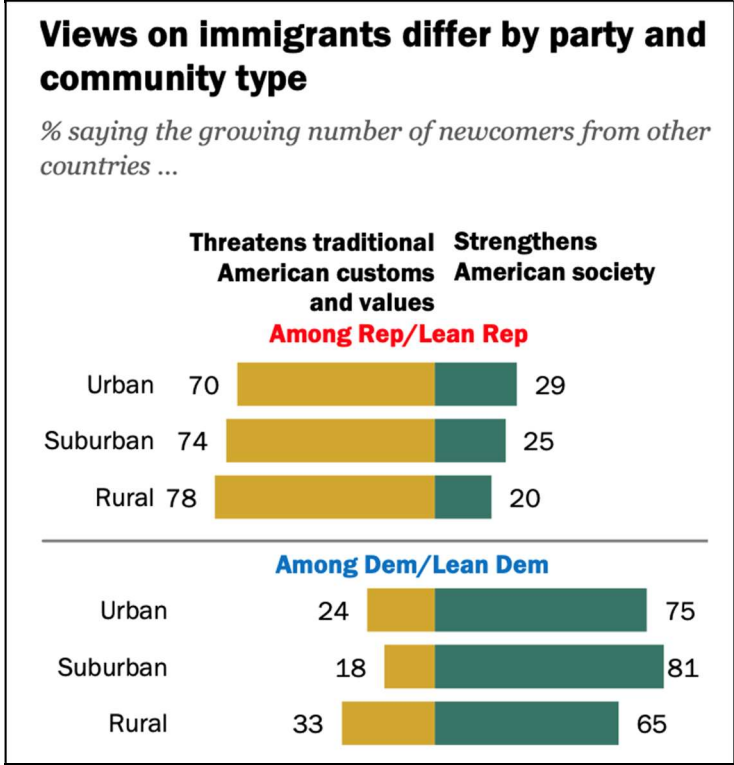


Figure 3: Views on immigrants by each party and county type

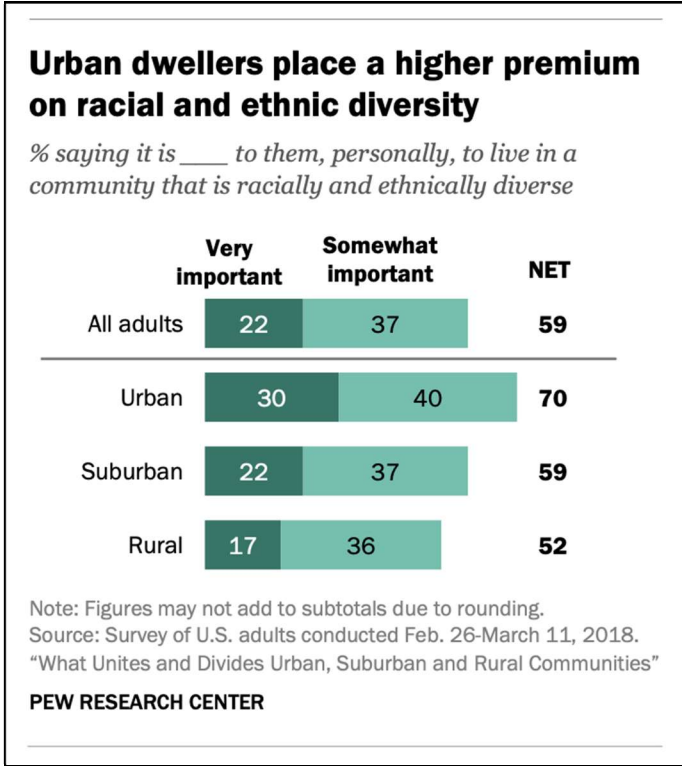


Figure 4: Opinions on importance of racial diversity between each county type

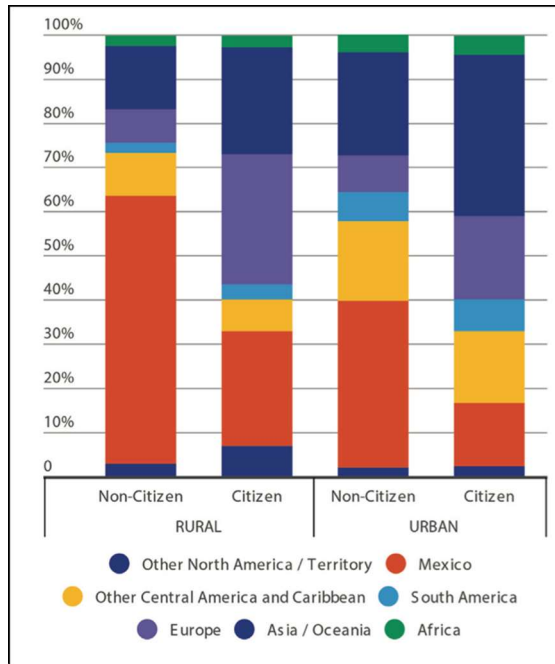
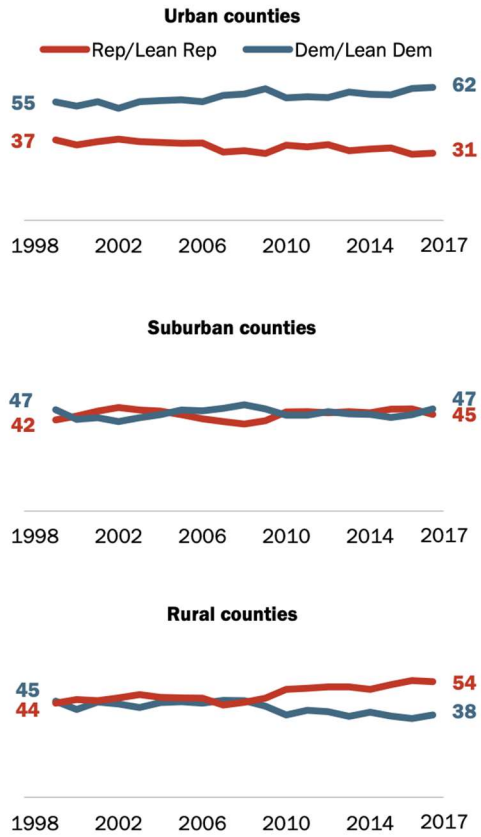


Figure 5: Region of Origin by Metropolitan and Citizenship Status

### Urban voters remain solidly Democratic; rural voters tilt increasingly Republican

% of registered voters who identify as ...



Note: Based on registered voters. County categories based on the National Center for Health Statistics Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties.  
 Source: Annual totals of Pew Research Center survey data (U.S. adults).  
 "What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities"  
**PEW RESEARCH CENTER**

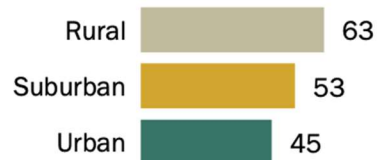
Figure 6: Political Party by each county type

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## Many in urban, suburban and rural areas are longtime residents

*% saying they ...*

*Have lived in local community for 11+ years*



*Would move if given the chance*



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Feb. 26-March 11, 2018.  
“What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities”

**PEW RESEARCH CENTER**

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Figure 7: Opinions on longtime residency by county type

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## Four-in-ten rural residents know all or most of their neighbors; shares are smaller in urban, suburban areas

*% saying they know all or most of their neighbors*



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Feb. 26-March 11, 2018.  
"What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities"

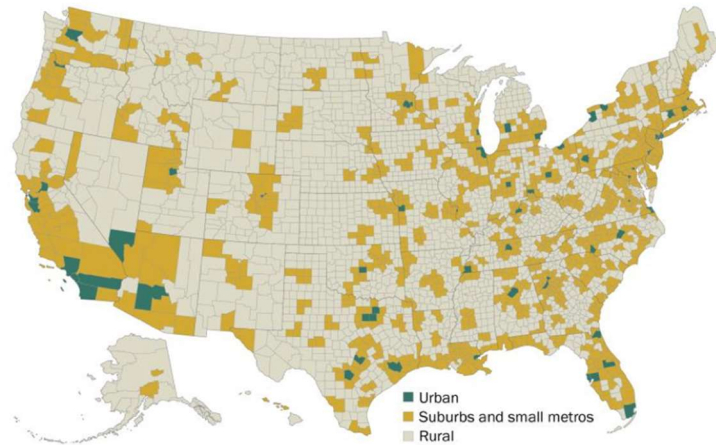
**PEW RESEARCH CENTER**

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Figure 8: Percentage of residents who know the majority of their neighbors by county type

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**Majority of U.S. counties are rural, especially in the Midwest**



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of National Center for Health Statistics Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties.  
“What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities”

**PEW RESEARCH CENTER**

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Figure 9: Visualization of county type across United States

Figure 1 is sourced from PBS, Figure 5 from the University of New Hampshire, and all others from the Pew Research Center. Together they portray various general details about rural life which inform this discussion.<sup>7</sup>

Overall, this gives an overview of some of the main demographic characteristics of rural society. Some main takeaways include first, that the majority of U.S. counties are rural, about 75 percent, yet it is important to note that 80 percent of the U.S. population lives in urban areas according to the U.S. Census Bureau<sup>8</sup>. This reality has occurred over time creating economic dislocation and a lack of access to infrastructure and public services. Small communities lack the population to support private economic development and the tax base to support public services, resulting in many rural areas being put in a state of social and economic stagnation.

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<sup>7</sup> Parker et al., “What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities”; Schaefer and Mattingly, “Demographic and Economic Characteristics of Immigration and Native-Born Populations in Rural and Urban Places”; “6 Charts That Illustrate the Divide between Rural and Urban America.”

<sup>8</sup> “Nation’s Urban and Rural Populations Shift Following 2020 Census.”

It is also apparent that rural communities are more tightly knit, with over half of rural survey takers having lived in their community for over a decade, and 40% knowing all or most of their neighbors. The fact that 40% of rural citizens know all or most of their neighbors is more a function of a small population environment than a reality that people are inherently more neighborly in rural populations. In my experience, there is also a reality that rural environments with fewer resources create greater interdependence within the population.

That interdependence however comes with the potential for marginalization, as shown by Figure 1, where rural immigrants have substantially higher poverty rates than native-born citizens and urban immigrants. This would be backed by figures 3 and 4 which show rural citizens feel wary of immigrants and among urban and suburban communities they put the least value on ethnic diversity in the community. That interdependence may not be evenly extended, leaving those without the connections to people with resources in greater disparity. It is no surprise then that rural communities both hold the largest White majority according to Figure 2 and measure as having more conservative voters who generally lean towards more traditional values.

I've found these statistics to be the most relevant to the larger arguments to be laid out in this thesis and showcase some of the primary descriptions to be found in films about rural life, but I also would like to cite other supplementary sources worth looking at which offer greater depth on the subjects of rural life: an article from University of West Alabama<sup>9</sup> which speaks to the limited access to resources like primary and higher education, physical and mental health services, internet, and other resources which impact education. Rural economic health is shown

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<sup>9</sup> "Rural vs. Urban Education in America."

from PBS<sup>10</sup>, and the larger more general summary from the study by the Pew Research Center<sup>11</sup>, from which many of the tables above are taken, contains an expansive overview of many issues relating to rural life. While they aren't the main focus of this thesis, they provide some additional examples of how differences in infrastructure, technology, education, and healthcare combine to form unique circumstances and challenges for those in rural areas, and showcase the reasons behind the current social, political, and economic landscape many rural counties find themselves in.

### **The National Identity**

I'd like to take a moment to also clarify the definition of the national identity here. For the purposes of this thesis, I'm defining a nation's identity as its collected beliefs, values, memories, and traditions. A strong national identity gives citizens a unified culture to belong to, fostering loyalty and solidarity within a nation. One of the foundational pillars that upholds national identity is the collected stories, history, and mythology of a nation's past which get carried through tradition. Tradition is used by nations to "inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past" as well as use it as "a legitimator of action and cement social cohesion".<sup>12</sup>

Rurality serves "as a conservator of the culture and a kind of archival entity that, however retrogressively, serves to 'inform and preserve the perception of the nation... and thus keep the cultural heritage alive.'"<sup>13</sup> In this way, rural communities signify tradition, and so that connection is established between the perceptions of rural communities supported by filmic

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10 "6 Charts That Illustrate the Divide between Rural and Urban America."

11 Parker et al., "What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities."

12 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

13 Fowler and Helfield, *Representing the Rural*.



representations and the values imparted through the national identity, and the validity of that concept of the national identity itself.

### **The Rural Timeline**

With everything now defined and background context provided, this serves as a proper jumping-off point to discuss briefly the history of rural life in film. This is not intended to be wholly applied, but rather provide some general trends I've noticed in exploring the subject. Cinema in the United States began its early years around a very important time in United States history. At the turn of the 20th century, there was a dramatic rush of urbanizing, which came as a result of industrialization throughout the 1800s in large cities. Historically, about 95% of Americans lived in rural communities at the start of the Industrial Revolution in 1790, moving to about 75% in 1870, and then in 1920 the population had shifted to where more people were living in urban communities instead of rural ones.<sup>14</sup> (we now have over 80% live in urban communities).<sup>15</sup>

With rural life being the standard during that period, much of this population shift was seen as a threat to the traditional way of American life. Many of the films of the period reflect this fear. Oftentimes that threat was manifested through relationships, such as films like *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (Mack Sennett, 1914) and *Way Down East* (D.W. Griffith, 1920) which have an innocent country woman being taken advantage of by a duplicitous womanizer from the city. Or, in a similar vein, there is a romance that gets corrupted when one of them moves to the city and returns as morally corrupted as seen in films like *True Heart Susie* (D.W. Griffith, 1919)

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14 "United States Summary: 2010."

15 "Number of People Living in Urban and Rural Areas."

and famously in *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (F.W. Murnau). In all of these examples, urban city life is the root cause of the characters' problems.

This trend continued into the 30s with films like *Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin, 1936) which highlighted urbanization and industrialization of the city to be an oppressive force, fueled also by the financial downturn of the Great Depression.<sup>16</sup> Moving into the 1940s, many films tackled the events of the Great Depression through a rural lens, famously through classics like *Of Mice and Men* (Lewis Milestone 1940) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford 1940). *The Grapes of Wrath* also stands as another trend in rural films during this era, that being increased epic storytelling films, which carried into the 1950s with films like *Giant* (George Stevens 1956) and musical spectacles like *Oklahoma* (Fred Zinnemann 1955) and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (Stanley Donen, 1954).

Arguably more important though during this period of the 1940s-1950s is the popularization of the Western genre film. Hollywood Studios were prolific in producing Westerns during this period, and its portrayal of rural expanses has made as a result made rural life indelibly linked with the Western. I believe this also is what helped that shift in perception from rural life being the standard to urban life, since by that point more people were living in urban centers, and so the Western made the vision of rural life partly into an anachronism, as most Westerns also function as period pieces showcasing life in the late 1800s.

This ties in with prosthetic memory because with the large majority in urban centers by that point, the memory of rural life becomes less experiential, allowing for the images presented in pop culture dominate the associations. Urban centers having the majority of population by this

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<sup>16</sup> Morgan and Davies, "Chaplin's *Modern Times* and the Great Depression."

point also meant that prosthetic memories of urban life came under more scrutiny, weakening the hold the filmic image could contribute like it did during the silent era.

Westerns then have a shift in the 1960s, going from a less polished studio film look to a more rough and rugged stylizing, as well as more morally grey anti-hero protagonists, driven by the explosion of Spaghetti Westerns and the entrance of New Hollywood films at the later end of the decade. A key factor to point out as well is that the Spaghetti Western is defined partly by its main local of films being produced being in Europe. While there are many more factors at play, when looking through the lens of genre theory, there can be an argument for these Westerns presenting a less heroic or glamorous view of the historic West due to its detachment from the United States, meaning it has a step removed from having the same responsibility American-made Westerns did in legitimizing the national image, showcasing a nation's role in dictating genre.

Shortly after, there were films like *Butch Cassidy* (George Roy Hill 1969) and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (Robert Altman 1971) which maintained that period piece side within New Hollywood, it seems to have been a time where directors were taking that classic rural Epic drama style from the 1940s and merging it with the gritty Euro Western style, making films in modern times with Western themes and stylizing, most notably films like *Hud* (Martin Ritt 1963) and *The Last Picture Show* (Peter Bogdanovich 1971).

Then further into the seventies, we enter into one of the golden eras of American horror films, and this period had a lot of films that took place in rural environments. In fact, so much so that it has earned an array of titles to label the subgenre: the hillbilly horror film, hixploitation movie, or hick-flick.<sup>17</sup> The urban-rural divide is especially strong in these films. Films like

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<sup>17</sup> Von Doviak, Hick Flicks.

*Deliverance* (John Boorman 1972), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper 1974), and into the 1980s with *Friday the 13th* (Sean Cunningham 1980) all function around a similar plotline of a group of friends from the city going to spend some time in the rural countryside, then being terrorized by the locals, which is today one of the most classic and well-known horror movie setups.<sup>18</sup>

One interesting thing to mention is that although at this point the story has flipped from the urban zones being the area of danger and corruption to now the films having the rural zones hold the danger, there is still an issue of morals. Within this larger trope of city friends in the country, there are tropes which carry with them moral consequences. For example, a popular rule in horror movies is couples who have sex will more likely die, as well as those who drink or do drugs. The question of innocent traditional rural life being threatened by urban life still pervades through these characters' more loose and modern social mores. The rural-urban dynamic serves as the battlefield for tradition versus modernity in this way as well.

Moving on from that period, I feel that the dominant form or genre containing rurality becomes less defined. There are the crime thrillers of the late 80s through the likes of *Witness* (Peter Weir 1985), *Mississippi Burning* (Alan Parker 1988), and *Next of Kin* (John Irvin 1989). In the 1990s into the 2000s there is a significant American indie/independent film renaissance bringing films like *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Peirce 1999), *Sling Blade* (Billy Bob Thorton 1996), and of course *Lone Star* (John Sayles 1996).<sup>19</sup> However those films also release alongside more mainstream rural dramas like *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), *A River Runs Through It* (1992), and *Oh Brother Where Art Thou?* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2000). In all, there are a few varying streams carrying the topic of rural life at this period.

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18 Vellum, "Cultural Chaos in the 1970s Part 1."

19 Hellerman, "How Did Indie Films Rule the 1990s?"

In the 2000s up to now one of the main trends being witnessed is the post-modern or deconstructionist film taking hold. Films like these take the well-worn structures, themes, and styles of previous decades and work to investigate those pieces, and often provide some sort of meta-commentary on the film form being referenced to. Some earlier mentions including *Lone Star* begin this, but it really comes into stride over these past two decades, primarily in horror. Films like *The Cabin in the Woods* (Drew Goddard 2011) and *Tucker and Dale vs. Evil* (Eli Craig 2010) comment on the established structures for humor, while a film like *X* (Ti West, 2022) strongly harkens back to the aesthetics of that aforementioned period in the 1970s-1980s to create a film holding interest through pairing the classic and vintage with contemporary film perspective. While using the same stylistic conventions of the genre, it is felt that the two periods however are not the same, and the cultural frame and timing surrounding the films have also influenced the genre itself, showcasing that the malleable nature of genre is what allows for films to reflect and comment on the current social landscape.<sup>20</sup> Rurality's ties within these genres have in turn helped make the image of rural life responsive throughout this time frame created above.

Now caught up to today, it is clear to see that rural life in film has been transformed, innovated, and recontextualized into several forms. It is also clear that the depiction of rural life has changed with broader social change adding complexity to the rural context and reflecting shifts in how society views rural life pairs with its historic role in defining traditional American life. While I've tried to cover some of the major movements I've come across through this project, this isn't a comprehensive history and there are undoubtedly many pockets and exceptions to these trends that can be found through the years. However, with these trends highlighted, I've found that they still provide a good view into the vast landscape of rural life in

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<sup>20</sup> Altman, Film/Genre.

film. As we start to look more deeply into specific pieces of rurality in film, it will also stand as a signpost indicating the more macro general surroundings of those pieces. With that being said, it seems there is enough background now to move towards discussing the relationship of the qualities that make up rural life and how it translates to film, and then how film's collective portrayal translates to the image of rural life that feeds the national identity.

### **Chapter 3: The Distinct Qualities of Rural Life in Film**

The setting is one of most key elements of a story. Not only does it give the viewer a time and place, but it helps to dictate different aspects of a film from its plot to visual style. By choosing to place a story in a rural setting, there are multiple qualities the story may take on. After having watched and studied a selection of films taking place in a rural environment, I compiled some of the most common features I noticed.

I want to point out that I am specifically pointing out the qualities found in the films in particular, and while some of these may be derived from common qualities found in rural life, not all of these qualities may be evenly applied to all rural communities. I will begin with a quality that is the most self-evident in terms of rural life, but there will be sections below which may draw more strenuous connections to rural society but are commonly found in films about rural society.

#### **Geographic Isolation**

With both the low population and sparse population density, rural environments are situated in a way that people are more geographically isolated from one another. In terms of plot, this is especially useful for horror films, where the characters have the added barrier to their survival through limited access to help or other resources. Much of this feature comes through visually as well.



Figure 10: Frame from *No Country for Old Men* (Ethan Coen, Joel Coen, 2007)



Figure 11: Frame from *Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders, 1984)

Rural environments are often framed in wide shots, letting the camera take in the vast landscape while dwarfing the characters within them. Whether out in a natural expanse as seen in *No Country for Old Men* (Coen Brothers 2007) or in a more developed street of a town like in *Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders 1984), there is a sparseness that comes across that can extend into the horizon. For a town shot, even the architecture of these types of towns adds to the effect, as most



are only one to two-story buildings, and because of this it can be seen as more flat and open, as compared to a more urban setting in which the buildings would typically be too tall to see past.

This type of image of rural expanse is especially popular in Western films, as it can portray the countryside as a vast untamed landscape untouched by civilization. The geographic isolation visually screened can also work to highlight a character's emotional isolation, as well as compare a character and their life to what can seem like an infinite surrounding. Partly because of this, these themes can often work themselves into rural-set films because the landscape naturally lends itself to those motifs.

### **Antiquity**

In rural films, the country often shows its age through its objects. It could be expected that these towns don't get the busy traffic to necessitate modernizing and are too cut off and insignificant to have the resources to improve the conditions. It is also in part the nature of the lifestyle, where objects are subjected to hard conditions and therefore are built for function and longevity over aesthetics.



Figure 12: Frame from *Badlands* (Terrence Malick, 1973)

Take a look above at this frame from *Badlands* (Terrence Malick 1975). The building itself is dilapidated, with rusted corrugated sheet metal, and outside the building most of the objects are similarly well-used. The house in the back is similar with chipped and faded paint. Even the character on the left works to this effect. He is visually much older looking, and his clothing style is more traditional and old-fashioned. The car on the far right is the only object in frame which looks new, and quietly sets to contrast the aged surroundings.

All of this suggests to the viewer that those living on land like this have been living there for a long time, as all of these things have had the time to compile outside and rust, and with that, it can be inferred that it is a place without much change. This is a view into one scene, but when all that rust, crust, and dust gets expanded out into a larger rural setting, those same conclusions can be extrapolated to form a view of a rural community as a stagnant one.

An important factor beyond all of these points of reasoning comes when viewed in light of broader social dynamics, specifically urbanization. The landscapes reflect economic

dislocation, the loss of traditional jobs that now belong to corporate agriculture, manufacturing obsolescence, and retail consolidation. These factors provide the context to explore changes in people and communities when faced with significant changes to the industries integral to their collective livelihoods. Many rural communities exist with a sense of economic decline resulting in a focus on the past and a certain resentment about the present and future, so the visualization of antiquity holds within all of those feelings and histories, beyond any surface perceptions of the quaint and simply old-fashioned look that may first be attributed to that landscape.

### **Simple Honest Living**

Stemming off of this view of a stagnant unchanged landscape, there also comes the implication that rural life, through being unchanged, is also uncomplicated by modernity. This perception forms a way of life governed by well-worn traditional cycles and routines. The nature of rural life being oftentimes agrarian also works into this through the seasonality of agriculture. Beyond that, the work entailed also has what is oftentimes considered to be honest labor, whether because of its roots in traditional life, its connection with working with one's hands and the earth directly, or humility implied with working a job that may be perceived as less desirable or prestigious than a white-collar job.

Regardless, rural life then is presented as being peaceful and uncomplicated. An interesting result of this popular portrayal is the reversal of this, where on the surface life may seem to be idyllic and good-natured, yet beneath carry some darkness. The case study film for this thesis *Lone Star* provides a good example of this, where a quiet town in fact has a bloody history which is slowly disclosed to the audience once a body is discovered in the outskirts of town. So within this quality, there is some play with that image to create a more contradictory image.

## **Tight-Knit Community**

As mentioned earlier in figures 7 and 8, rural communities have more long-time residents and more residents who know their neighbors. Compounded by the fact that rural communities have smaller populations and thus fewer people to know, it is more natural for everyone to be more intimately connected. Due to this, there is a quality in rural films which makes a point of showing the closely tied members of the community.

Paired with the previous quality, a notable trope arises, that of “the small town with a big secret”. In terms of storytelling, having a community in which everybody knows everybody else and their business makes what would seem an impossibility in a more urban setting become plausible, where a whole community can collectively decide to hide something important about their town, as seen in *Bad Day at Black Rock* (John Sturges 1955) and again seen in *Lone Star*.

That trope also carries with it the representation of human nature. The human condition is a combination of both good and bad and the tension between the two. The small town with a big secret by extension is also set to depict an individual’s inner conflicts, such as their public persona versus their deepest secrets and trauma.

Another facet of this is the dynamic between insider and outsider. The choice of subjectivity is a big one, in that the protagonist following may be local, may have just moved to town, may be traveling through, may be there to investigate, or some other scenarios. In all of these cases, some relationship is set between the protagonist and the town at large, alongside individual relationships with other characters.

## **Bigotry**

Lastly, I wanted to touch upon a quality found in rural films which I feel encapsulated the previous qualities listed. While it is a much more multifaceted issue, these other points of rural

life intersect and form conditions where bigotry can grow. Through the geographic isolation, residents interact less with a large range of people, making it less often that they may meet those of different backgrounds or opinions. This ties in with the tight-knit community, where the people they do see are intimately connected, which can create a shared culture within that community. Therefore, it can establish a space in which ideas and opinions can be endorsed without larger challenge or disagreement. When hateful ideas are instilled and then acted upon, often portrayed through physical violence, intimidation, and exclusion, the shared culture also makes it so that the consequences are diverted, because the majority which created that culture also likely stands as the people in power in that community.

In this way, the rural setting is also an intersection point for film and commentary on issues of bigotry. With rural and urban often standing in for tradition and modernity, when the two backgrounds clash in a film it is often so that thematically the film is grappling with America's history of marginalization, where the rural stands for that history which gets carried to today, and the urban stands for the push for change.

## **Conclusions**

Having mentioned these qualities, it is important to question to what end they are being used, and what effects may be found through the popular usage of them. It is often taught that for film or art more broadly, simplification is necessary in order to get to the core essence of a topic. Moral simplifications are made constantly through stories to convey a more powerful and focused message, such as the classic hero versus villain narrative archetype. To that end, these rural tropes are useful and valuable for storytelling and can indeed touch upon some core or essence of rural life or humanity at large. That being said, these qualities may also skew the perception of rural communities through the majority of portrayals becoming overwhelmingly

homogeneous. These tropes may be formed into blanketed stereotypes, and so being conscious of how the possibility of simplification for storytelling may transfer to simplification of real culture is an important dynamic that lies within this topic.

Part of why the rural setting in particular needs to be concerned with this dynamic comes with the nature of rural life being for many an imagined landscape. In *Representing the Rural*, Catherine Fowler and Gillian Helfield explain this:

Our reliance upon and recourse to ‘imagined’ landscape may have to do with the difficulty of ‘picturing’ the land in the cinema, that is, successfully expressing and communicating through cinematic means the experience of the land for those who work on it and depend upon it for their survival. This stands in contrast to the seeming familiarity of the city—or images of the city—in urban cinema. Thus, it is the combined impenetrability of the land as captured by the camera and the ‘uncinematic’ nature of rural experience that have led to the ‘real’ soil being covered in ‘imagined’ strata.<sup>21</sup>

As previously mentioned, with now having over 80% of the American population residing in urban settings, experiencing rural life is significantly more uncommon. So instead, the concept of the prosthetic memory comes through, where mass culture has influenced the view of rural life when many of those who carry those views don’t have direct experience with rural life, resulting in the crafting of images necessary to be demystified<sup>22</sup>.

With all of the associations rurality has built up over time, the “imagined strata” extends into those associations, forming perceptions of subjects like American history, tradition, and identity. Films discussing rural life in one way or another contribute to these perceptions, whether it be creating an idealized state of simple traditional rural life, a critical projection commenting on the worst aspects of rural life, or something else entirely.

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21 Fowler and Helfield, *Representing the Rural*.

22 Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory the Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*.

This is where I'd like to start my analysis of John Sayles' *Lone Star*. In the next section, I will work to draw connections between the film and these trends and qualities that have been mentioned, and showcase how the film contributes to these collected conceived images that relate to rural society, in order to comment on American history and its current identity. Through this example, it can be recognized how broader social change can be influenced through accessing the line between rural America and the imagery of the United States foundational traditions.

## Chapter 4: Case Study of *Lone Star* (1996)

*Lone Star* is a 1996 film by John Sayles, and is about a small fictional border town in Texas called Frontera. In it, the story follows the town Sheriff Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper) investigating the story behind a dead body found out of town, which is discovered to be one of the town's previous Sheriffs. The setup suggests a classic murder mystery thriller, but Sayles instead uses this to provide a foundation for a larger story, involving the larger town, with the different groups of people living there and the history which has deeply seeped into everyone's lives there.

John Sayles has described his film as one about borders.<sup>23</sup> Of course there is the physical border between the United States and Mexico, and that border is certainly present throughout the film, but *Lone Star* makes a point to discuss the other invisible borders around people. Borders between races, sexes, and generations all come into play, and Sayles makes the case that these borders serve to distort reality and fabricate ideas which can serve to support the lens of those in power. These borders have been built up over time, and so there is a tie-in with the burden of history. Sayles says, "It's in every relationship—racial history, personal history. In all of those histories, you have that question of—how much do I want to carry this? Is [the history] good, or is it possible to say, "I'm going to start from scratch? Do I still live my life in reaction to—for or against—my father?"<sup>24</sup> *Lone Star* intersects one's personal history with a larger cultural history, and throughout the film questions the idea of an objective history.

Sayles has some ambitious aims for what the film should accomplish thematically, and in order to address those themes the film follows three main families. First off there are the Deeds,

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23 West, M. West, and Sayles, "Borders and Boundaries: An Interview with John Sayles."

24 Macaulay, "FILMMAKER FLASHBACK."



comprising Sam Deeds, the sheriff and main protagonist of the film, as well as his father Buddy (Matthew McConaughey) who like Sam was also Sheriff once. While in the current time that the film plays out Buddy has been dead for some time, the film oscillates between two eras in the town's history, and so for much of the film the audience follows a young Buddy who is deputy to the at-the-time Sheriff Charlie Wade (Kris Kristofferson), and the events prior to the Sheriff's disappearance. Sam's mother is mentioned sparingly and doesn't make an appearance, instead her existence is on the periphery of the film.

Next, there is the Cruz family, which revolves mainly around Pilar Cruz (Elizabeth Peña), a history teacher at the local high school. She has two children who appear in a handful of scenes, but more notable is Pilar's mother Mercedes (Miriam Colon). She is a restaurant owner and notable member of the community, and also is a Mexican immigrant who originally crossed the border illegally. It was during that crossing that she met her husband Eladio Cruz (Gilbert Cuellar Jr.). Eladio dies before Pilar is born, and although he appears in multiple scenes, one largely important one where he is caught and killed by Charlie Wade while trying to help bring immigrants across the border, he, like Sam's mother, remains mostly outside the scope of the film.

Lastly, there is the Payne family. There is Delmore Payne (Joe Morton), an army commander who was raised in Frontera and had left, but reluctantly has returned as he is assigned to run the local army base nearby. His father Otis Payne (Ron Canada), has and still lives there, now running the local bar Big O's. There is a tension between them as Otis abandoned him as a young child. Then there is Del's son Chet (Eddie Robinson), who similarly has tension with his father, as Del is trying to push him into a military career. He starts reaching out to Otis, and the three eventually form their individual relationships with each other.

Something important to note is that in all of these families, there is only one parent in focus, and in particular the relationships of fathers with sons and mothers with daughters. John Sayles explains this choice:

It tells you something about the whole community, but sometimes that becomes a metaphor for personal history. For me, very often the best metaphor for history is fathers and sons. Inheriting your cultural history, your hatreds and your alliances and all that kind of stuff, is what you're supposed to get from your father in a patriarchal society... it was also important for me to include the story of Pilar and her mother. I think people generally take the same-sex parent as their role model, and so here's Pilar finding out about her family history very, very slowly.<sup>25</sup>

These three families occupy the majority of screen time, but there are a couple more characters outside this circle worth mentioning. First would be Charlie Wade, who as mentioned was the Sheriff of Frontera before his murder. Sayles has filled this script with round and complex characters, but Wade is very noticeably flat because Sayles wanted to have Wade personify all the dark history of the town and that legacy of evil deeds<sup>26</sup>. Wade is first referenced in the film as “your old-fashioned bribe-or-bullets kind of Sheriff”, and throughout the film we see that description confirmed, as we see him use his position of power to exploit the minorities of the town. He works separate from the legal code, allowing underground gambling and immigrant smuggling as long as he gets his cut, and those who are seen trying to cross him are either killed, beaten, or intimidated. When he first disappears from the town, Frontera is more than happy to see him gone. Then there is Hollis Pogue (Clifton James), the mayor of Frontera and was once a deputy for Charlie Wade alongside Buddy Deeds, and who we find out to be the true killer of Charlie Wade. His younger self is shown to be quite passive, easily bossed around by Wade, but after witnessing enough injustices he kills Wade in a fit of rage. Buddy comes in shortly after

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25 West, M. West, and Sayles, “Borders and Boundaries: An Interview with John Sayles.”

26 Ratner, “Borderlines.”

and agrees to fabricate the story that he ran Wade out of town after a disagreement in order to cover for Hollis, and so he spends much of the film in the modern timeline praising Buddy and his sense of justice.

Then there are a few characters which only appear for select scenes, yet make an important impact on the rest of the film. Priscilla Worth (LaTanya Richardson Jackson) is an army sergeant whose conflicts about being in the army challenge the headstrong devotion that Del has. This relationship serves to give Del a new perspective which softens him and helps heal the relationship with his son.

In one scene we meet Bunny (Frances McDormand), Sam's football-obsessed ex-wife who seems neurotically tied to her father. Sam also visits a Native American man (Gordon Tootoosis) in another scene, who is seen selling knick-knacks on the side of a long empty stretch of road where he lives. While these two aren't related in any way within the plot, they showcase the two opposite ends of how one can respond to living with history. John Sayles makes this point about that dynamic:

For me, what's important is when Wesley says, "I tried living on the reservation but I couldn't take the politics." Reservations are extremely political, with very tough infighting, and what he has decided to do, once again, is to take that individual accommodation. Where you see him is, as he says, "between nowhere and not much else". He is extremely isolated, and he happens to like that, but that's where that choice can take you. The choice to escape the politics, to escape history, to escape that struggle and to do the antisocial thing, can leave you enormously isolated.

He is very self-possessed and he seems fairly content, so he is the upside of that kind of isolation, whereas Bunny, the ex-wife of Sam Deeds, is the opposite of that. She's kind of like the Ghost of Christmas Future, she's the person who has not escaped her family history. She's somebody who is a warning to Sam. In twenty years she's going to be in that room, bouncing off the walls, talking about how "I loved my daddy, I hated my daddy." He'll be five years dead in the ground

and she will still be living in his shadow and she's never going to get out from under it.<sup>27</sup>

All the characters, big or small, serve a purpose in the film and add a new aspect to the dynamics explored throughout the story. Now that all the important characters are introduced, it is time to see how all of this information relates specifically to rural life on screen. To do so, I will use the qualities laid out in the previous chapter and use it as a lens to examine how *Lone Star* leans into or diverts from each.

### **Geographic Isolation**

Many of the devices of the film work due to the isolated nature of Frontera. The sparseness of the environment provides a space for Charlie Wade's body to be buried and go without being discovered by anyone for forty years. It is in part that same geographic isolation which allowed Charlie Wade to be as exploitative as he was, as Frontera's isolation made for a zone cut off from intervention, and the insignificance of the town on a larger scale make it possible to keep its goings on hidden.

Similarly discussed, the visual style of the film assists in showcasing the natural expanse around the town. For one, the 2.39:1 aspect ratio offers a wide field of view, giving room for the environment to take up space around the subject(s) of the shot.

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27 West, M. West, and Sayles, "Borders and Boundaries: An Interview with John Sayles."



Figure 13: Frames from the opening and closing scenes of *Lone Star*

Both the opening and closing scenes begin outdoors. The first (top photo) takes place in an empty desert, what long ago was once an army shooting range that has long since been abandoned. The last scene (bottom photo) is similar in that it is set in a drive-in movie theater that has also been abandoned, now surrounded by overgrown grass. The isolation of the town can be signified by these man-made places intersecting with nature, and it also portrays a place that is too small to get the traffic required to uphold these industries. Ultimately though, the geographic isolation allows for a microcosm to be built that is used to track the social dynamics

of the United States that span between races, generations, positions of power, and others, as it distills them into a setting that is small enough to be intimately explored.

### **Antiquity**

This quality is a cornerstone of the whole film. *Lone Star* is a story about a town's relationship with its history, and as such how the history stays with the town in its present day. Thematically, the film is showing a push to break away from the past and fix the issues that come with that antiquity.

The opening credits hint at this, where the titles are seen backdropped against a wall which looks to have an old coat of paint that has been stained and chipped. So from the very beginning there is some interest taken in examining the age of the setting.



Figure 14: Frame from the opening credits of *Lone Star*

When the film passes these credits and begins its story, it doesn't take long for this theme to come up again. One of the most overt examples comes about sixteen minutes into the film, when Pilar is holding a parent-teacher conference in which the group is discussing in what manner the history lesson regarding the Alamo should be taught. It opens with one parent concerned with this push for a more sympathetic view for the Mexican side of the war, saying they're" just

tearin' everything down. Tearin' down our heritage. Tearin' down the memory of people who fought and died for this land." This begins a heated debate on how the history should be represented, and in particular if America is to be painted favorably or negatively. Juan A. Tarancón de Francisco writes in regard to this concept," by drawing attention to the mechanisms employed to legitimate and perpetuate the official version of history and the purposes it serves, Lone Star emphasizes a dilemma that besets contemporary societies: the need to find a balance between traditional historiography and the recognition of cultural pluralism."<sup>28</sup>

An important factor about Frontera during this conversation is that although it has been predominantly White, the Mexican population is growing and starting to press against the power structures the White population has historically had an impenetrable hold on. This scene marks one of the first pieces of evidence for this, but there are other notable scenes that build on this, such as the conversation about who will replace Sam as Sheriff in the coming election, and it is understood that there will be the first Mexican Sheriff in Frontera coming up. Another scene involves Sam investigating a bar and the bartender pointing him to a biracial couple sitting in a booth down the bar, and the bartender laments that back in the day that wouldn't have been tolerated much less seen in that bar years ago.

Through these moments, while we see a town attached to antiquity, it is not fossilized however, as often seen in other films about rural life. There are signs of growth and change in the town, and the role of the Sheriff showcases this quite clearly. Charlie Wade is seen to be the most violent and exploitative, Buddy is also said to have put pressure and taken advantage although in different forms, Sam reluctantly taking on that role, and Ray (Tony Plana) set to take over the role, showing a progressive shift. John Sayles touches upon this during an interview:

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28 Tarancón De Francisco, "Film Genre and the Power of Symbolic Thought."

The first generation says dark people are inferior and I will take their land, the next generation says oh they're not so bad let's give them a little something and we can all live together, but I'm still in the driver's seat. And then there's the third generation where people said what have we done, what a terrible legacy we have... They question everything and can't really enjoy being in the driver's seat—they don't want to be there.<sup>29</sup>

While this signifies some sort of progress, Matt Zoller Seitz in his review of the film makes a valuable counterpoint when saying:

Through the investigations of Sam and his allies, we learn that Buddy was not actually the antidote to corruption, but merely incarnated a more socially acceptable form of it, in much the same way that the supposed "civilization of the frontier"—a key theme in many Westerns—was a cover story, obscuring how subjugation, bigotry, and rampant greed backed by violence all became institutionalized, subsumed into the normal operations of governments and corporations.<sup>30</sup>

There is a reading of the film in which corruption continues to reinvent itself and grow with the evolution of the town and its way of living. In the case of Ray, while he represents a new modern shift in the role of Sheriff, it still is up for debate who is in that driver's seat Sayles speaks of. However, regardless of which analysis feels more likely, both portray a rural setting that is dynamic and evolving.

### *Flashbacks*

One of the most important contributors to the film's relationship to the past comes visually through its presentation of flashbacks. Rather than opting for a dissolve or cut, the film utilizes long takes to transport the audience into the past. This is a running motif throughout the film, and while it may only seem to be a matter of aesthetics, it gives a distinct feeling that the

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29 Ratner, "Borderlines."

30 Seitz, "Forget the Alamo."



past is still present. Many of these transitions begin with someone telling a story, and that story will be taking place at the same exact spot in which they are telling it. The characters exist alongside these old pieces of the town. Sayles notes:

It is kind of an obvious conclusion because there's not even the separation of a dissolve, which is a soft cut. The purpose of a cut or dissolve is to say this is a border, and the things on opposite sides of the border are meant to be different in some way, and I wanted to erase that border and show that these people are still reacting to things in the past.<sup>31</sup>

This goes back to that larger theme of borders in the film, and in regard to antiquity Sayles argues the then and now are tied together, giving a comparatively more complex explanation than many rural films which either seem frozen in the past or view it as more of a memory than a living part of the social fabric in a rural town.

Overall, by examining the history of the town and making the case that the antiquity presented is a fabrication which is meant to show an idealized image of the past, as well as saying that history is tied to the present, that lesson also gets translated into the larger national history which fuels the modern American identity.

### **Simple Honest Living**

I find this to be the weakest of the stated qualities in this film for a few reasons. First of all, as the landscape and culture are not stagnant, people's lives cannot be either. Secondly, there isn't as much of a focus on cycles and seasons which perpetuate simple living. There are a few general cycles shown through the film, notably the election season in the town, but work in a

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31 West, M. West, and Sayles, "Borders and Boundaries: An Interview with John Sayles."

more auxiliary sense, and as mentioned with each of those cycles comes more change and adaptation. There is also the aspect of the work and industry being tied into the lifestyle. In Frontera, the main industry fueling the economy of the town seems to be the army base. However, there is nothing simple about this way of life, as we see one of the most substantial side plots to be Del and Priscilla both questioning the army life and interrogating the nature of their relationship with the army.

With simple honest living comes a sense of peaceful and uncomplicated surroundings. Yet on multiple fronts there are elements of tension, such as the various moments of immigrants attempting to cross the border, the crime and corruption endorsing it, and the numerous examples of violence. The film does not seek to idealize rural life, nor does it present a darkness which goes against its more peaceful exterior, but instead seeks to present a more balanced and pragmatic view of the intricacies of rural life, demystifying the concept of rural that has served the national image.

### **Tight-Knit Community**

The tight-knit community comes strongly into play throughout this film. Many of the devices of the plot wouldn't be possible in the same way without one. There is a sense that everyone has some connection to each other. Beyond that, in Sam's case most everyone not only knows him but his family history. Anonymity is unlikely, especially in a prominent position like the one Sam has.

With this comes a lack of personal privacy, where for Sam everyone knows that his father Buddy cheated on Sam's mother, everyone knows his personal grudges against his father, and it is found that many know much more about his father than Sam does. When the

mystery is solved and it is found that Buddy did not kill Charlie Wade, that truth is already known by many.

The film ends with another discovery, that Pilar and Sam are in fact half-siblings, with Pilar being the illegitimate child of Buddy while he was having his affair. If this was to be set in a larger more urban setting, the chances of falling in love with one of your siblings would be a lot less likely. When Sam and Pilar decide to move away and start from scratch as Pilar says, they leave to escape rurality and find anonymity where they can live their lives together without the burden of everyone else knowing them and their business. John Sayles once again takes this aspect and ties it back into the theme of borders, saying:

So here are Sam and Pilar—they were raised separately, they're adults now, there's no question of one being the older brother or sister... they're not going to have children... she says, "If that's what the rule is about, I'm not going to have children". What they're left with is the realization that, "OK, we have this chance to do something that is going to be seen as enormously antisocial but it's good for us," and they choose to cross that border of moral opinion. But it's only an individual accommodation, and that was a lot of my point with the ending, it's not going to change society. They're going to have to leave the society they're in, they can't stay in that town.<sup>32</sup>

Rebecca M. Gordon also uses this same moment to comment on the relationship to history:

Sam and Pilar pay for their desire and knowledge of their origins, personally and emotionally, but they already know that social morality is something constructed, not natural. Only the generation that knows Buddy's secret needs to be spared the recognition of incest. When the generation that created Buddy's legend has passed, and his story no longer needs telling, it can be consciously—and guiltlessly—let fallow; that particular paternal legacy can die.<sup>33</sup>

These borders, physical, social, moral, etc., all are carried through history and the film asks the viewer to question the conceptualizing and fabricating that go into these invisible borders. These

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32 West, M. West, and Sayles.

33 Carson and Kenaga, Sayles Talk.

small rural towns being so tight knit create a culture and history of their own which is perpetuated through generations. If one needs to reject these rules, then one must push away from the community which upholds those rules.

## **Bigotry**

This one stands as possibly the most apparent quality of the film. The most obvious example is that Charlie Wade stands as the antagonist of the film primarily due to his mistreatment and exploitation of the minority populations in the town. The circumstances of this dynamic have been touched upon already, his position as Sheriff gave him the power and resources to act on his immorality with no consequence, and with it being a rural town it only exacerbated the scope of control that he had. For this circumstance, his bigotry is enabled through the rural setting, in particular one on the border, where the opportunities for abuse are high and the methods of recourse for those under his control. Charlie Wade represents the past injustices of the rural town, but there are various examples of the modern-day still holding to or fighting against injustices still present, such as through the PTA meeting or Sam's conversation with the bar as mentioned previously.

One difference that arises however is the subjectivity found within the film. While Sam is technically the main protagonist, the film holds multiple plots and multiple protagonists leading those plots. To showcase this, we can look at arguably the second largest plotline behind the murder of Charlie Wade, which is the reconnection of Del and his father Otis, facilitated through Del's son Chet. Although this takes up a substantial amount of screen time, Sam is never involved, in fact he never even meets Del or Chet once through the whole film. Juan A. Tarancón de Francisco explains the effect this has for the audience:

Lone Star is a multi-plot multi-protagonist film and not everything revolves around the figure of the hero or is focalized by him. Unlike early epic Westerns where larger-than-life heroes lead an unequivocal narrative that mirrors traditional historical accounts about the westward expansion, the film manages to circumvent the Eurocentrism and determinism of the Western by denying the hero the possibility of channeling all the information it provides the audience with.<sup>34</sup>

The other effect of this multichannel storytelling is that the concept of history which Sayles is concerned with in the film is shown to construct a history through the lens of different experiences. “Featuring as it does Anglos, Mexican Americans, and African Americans in the major roles, Lone Star endorses a revision of the country’s past and national identity by bringing to light their multiple stories and the complex interactions between the different ethnic communities”.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, by letting each member tell their story directly rather than only in direct relation to a White protagonist acting as the funnel, then a portrait of the rural community and its dynamics can be painted in a fuller picture. *Lone Star* is not only discussing systemic bigotry within the confines of the story and its setting, but also by manufacturing this format for the film also attempts to work against the systemic biases that are present in filmmaking and storytelling.

Another complexity which Sayles employs in the story is through discussing the complexity of the relationships between those respective ethnic groups. One of the strongest examples comes from Pilar’s mother Mercedes. While she entered into the United States illegally herself, she consistently acts negatively towards other Mexican immigrants in the town, going so far as to call border control to arrest immigrants she notices attempting to cross the border. John Sayles wrote this characterization in Mercedes for this reason:

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34 Tarancón De Francisco, “Film Genre and the Power of Symbolic Thought.”

35 Tarancón De Francisco.

When talking about borders and lines between people, very often when people cross these borders they want to slam the door behind them. They may have been banging against the door themselves, but because they have internalized the system and given it value, their attitude changes once they get to the other side of the border.<sup>36</sup>

A second example can be found when Otis introduces his son and grandson to the Black Seminoles. That history starts with enslaved Africans escaping to the Seminole Native Americans, who stayed in Florida until Florida was sold to the United States, at which point many moved and became mercenaries in Texas, and helped the U.S. Army track down other Native Americans. Del in particular internalizes this contradiction due to his own relationship with the army, pointed out when Sayles says:

Even Joe Morton's character is dealing with the history of Black and White relationships. When he asks himself, "Am I just a mercenary?" it's not only because of his personal feelings, it's also in a way a historical question, asking, "Can I be a black soldier in the United States Army and not be a mercenary like one of those Black Seminoles who just chased Indians for the Whites?"<sup>37</sup>

The film tracks a line of both capturing the various ways in which racial minorities in rural towns are subject to abuse, whether directly through the physical violence of Charlie Wade or the more institutionalized systemic forms such as Buddy's Perdido lakefront property purchase mentioned in the first half of the film, while also not succumbing to flattening or simplifying the characters or the social groups to which they belong to. Tarancón de Francisco summarizes the power of these various points below:

In *Lone Star*, the new identity politics of the 1990s appears as a complex subject that resists the binary reductionism found in other Westerns and that, moreover, can only be articulated through co-presence, through the grouping of many different experiences of the frontier, and through the substitution of the conventional linear representations of the past for a discontinuous version that is

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36 West, M. West, and Sayles, "Borders and Boundaries: An Interview with John Sayles."

37 West, M. West, and Sayles.

more attentive to the numerous overlapping experiences and to unanticipated or unlooked for relationships of the kind unearthed by Sam.<sup>38</sup>

## The Use of Genre

One last related subject to cover in relation to rurality in film is the use of genre. As covered in the rural timeline, rurality has notable associations with various genres, principally the Horror film and the Western. *Lone Star* is a film which covers many genres: Drama, Romance, Mystery, Family Melodrama, and Western. The film very deliberately utilizes these genre's conventions to contribute to the larger message of the film. The images of American identity have been deeply informed by and intertwined with the Western. A uniquely American genre, it is one that is concerned with the mythologizing of the construction of the modern United States. These portrayals of early America serve the purpose of dictating and cementing our perception of that history. This time in the nation's history is a cornerstone of the national culture, and so with that, the importance of its image as a firm and unquestionable one is argued.

Rebecca M. Gordon speaks to this dynamic:

For if the concept of "nation" is exposed as fiction, then the association of masculinity to nationhood as similarly coherent, whole, and impenetrable is weakened. Furthermore, if a nation is conscious of other national stories—of other paternal legacies within its borders—then those who are traditionally entrusted to carry on the national story, namely men, have more than one legacy to choose from.<sup>39</sup>

With the help of the prosthetic memory, the Western in this way seeks to uphold patriarchal structures which form American society, and with a detached image at the base of those structures, the possibility of questioning the validity of that image then weakens those structures. *Lone Star* is formatted as a Western for the opportunity for the audience to not only question the

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38 Tarancón De Francisco, "Film Genre and the Power of Symbolic Thought."

39 Carson and Kenaga, Sayles Talk.

reliability and honesty of an objective history, but also how the Western itself has contributed to that history. By deconstructing the prosthetic memory perpetuated by the Western, it in turn helps call into question all that the genre has influenced culturally. *Lone Star* showcases that the history of the West that has been perpetuated thus far has sides of the story which have been smothered by the national image that reduces the many layers into one mythological story of heroism and righteousness. Tarancón de Francisco writes:

In short, when seen against the generic filmic system, *Lone Star* offers many shades of multiculturalism. Simultaneously, *Lone Star*'s reliance on genre brings to the fore the fact that history is not above suspicion. More concretely, drawing on standard Hollywood genres, the film combines elements from the Western, the detective film, the social observation film as well as the family melodrama, to illustrate how history is used by a dominant, ruling class as a means of defining national identity according to its own particular interests.<sup>40</sup>

Overall, *Lone Star* does not totally reject the qualities and conventions found in rural settings on film, but rather utilizes them with the intent to scrutinize and reframe the purpose and inherent power of those qualities more largely, and due to that intention the film disrupts the prosthetic memories carried through mass media.

For me, *Lone Star* represents what a film in a rural setting can accomplish at its best. It is at once a thrilling piece of entertainment on its face, a film which is able to stay focused, simple, and coherent while portraying the complexities and dynamics of rural life instead of reducing or caricaturing them, which comes together to help subvert the national mythmaking that film and the Western in particular has had a part in, and most importantly its a film which strives to use its subject to prompt the audience to be thinking about the relationship between rural life, film and

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40 Tarancón De Francisco, "Film Genre and the Power of Symbolic Thought."



mass media, and their intersections with the most pressing sociopolitical issues in the nation's history.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

The rural experience in perception, depiction, and reality has changed dramatically over time given broader societal changes. That said, the rural backdrop as a subject provides an insightful lens through which to explore and consider broader shifts in societal norms. The subject has ties to both the foundations of American society, but it has been held in less focus within media as to how it is connected to changes in the nation as a whole. This topic has effects that extend past the scope of filmmaking, and so there is an importance placed on creating the dialogue necessary to promote informed interactions with it. As *Lone Star* showcased, the exploration of rural life can help achieve valuable and necessary commentaries. However, on the other hand if considered superficially or carelessly it can perpetuate stereotypes about rural life that contribute to rules and structures manufactured to uphold national mythologies that hide the faults of the past and present. A failure to understand the realities of the past skews the understanding of the present and future.

Expanding past the subject of film, rural life gets used conveniently as a way to tell a broader story or to advance a desired narrative in countless circumstances. Take for example the current U.S. elections. Both of the nominees for vice president, J.D. Vance and Tim Walz, have used their rural backgrounds to contribute to their national image<sup>41</sup>. Both are advancing their rural credentials as a way to appeal to voters who value the perceived virtues of rural life. In fact, this has translated into the film world, with Vance's autobiography having been turned into a film called *Hillbilly Elegy* (Ron Howard, 2020). At a time when the rural image is being utilized on this scale, it is more important than ever to be mindful of what associations are attached and where those came from. Increasing the social awareness and media literacy thus has effects that

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41 Bierschbach, "Walz v. Vance."

extend past how film can affect social topics like national politics, but even the direct relationship between people and politics. Every year politicians have been more and more engaged with their media image and persona, and so its up to citizens to keep up with that political landscape and maintain the tools necessary to decode and translate the information given. That point is essential far beyond rurality's relevance to the discussion, but when viewing that side of it specifically it can be seen that there are many layers to rural life and many of the commonly held mythologies no longer exist given societal change or in fact never existed at all. Being conscious of that fabricated attachment is paramount for understanding what is being instilled in national identity and the structures which utilize it through the rural image.

In all, my goal with this thesis was to understand what the rural space can accomplish with it intersecting with many foundational facets of the American fabric, and I've concluded that rural life as depicted in film has a significant role in influencing broader change in the nation, whether it be redefining tradition, reshaping stereotypes, uncovering history hidden by national mythologizing, expanding or rejecting the national image for a more culturally pluralistic and dynamic enough to fit the varieties across regions, and many other changes, and so this all matters because people, whether it be filmmakers or film viewers, should be conscious of that potential and responsible in how the rural image is both utilized and examined. To not pay mind to the rural image is to miss out on an integral piece of American politics, history, and culture. With that being said, these pieces of the thesis together explain why rurality is connected to America's history and national identity, and how films can use the rural image to therefore shape the national identity and produce social change.

## Filmography

- *The Boys Think They Have One on Foxy Grandpa, But He Fools Them* (1902)
- *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (Mack Sennett, 1914)
- *True Heart Susie* (D.W. Griffith, 1919)
- *Way Down East* (D.W. Griffith, 1920)
- *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (F.W. Murnau, 1927)
- *The Crowd* (King Vidor, 1928)
- *Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin, 1936)
- *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939)
- *Of Mice and Men* (Lewis Milestone, 1939)
- *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1940)
- *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (Stanley Donen, 1954)
- *Bad Day at Black Rock* (John Sturges, 1955)
- *The Night of the Hunter* (Charles Laughton, 1955)
- *Oklahoma!* (Fred Zinnemann, 1955)
- *Giant* (George Stevens, 1956)
- *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960)
- *Hud* (Martin Ritt, 1963)
- *In the Heat of the Night* (Norman Jewison, 1967)
- *The Great Silence* (Sergio Corbucci, 1968)
- *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Sergio Leone, 1968)
- *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969)
- *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill, 1969)

- *Wanda* (Barbara Loden, 1970)
- *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, 1970)
- *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (Robert Altman, 1971)
- *The Last Picture Show* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1971)
- *Buck and the Preacher* (Sidney Poitier, 1972)
- *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972)
- *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973)
- *Badlands* (Terrence Malick, 1973)
- *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974)
- *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven, 1977)
- *Tourist Trap* (David Schmoeller, 1979)
- *Breaking Away* (Peter Yates, 1979)
- *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980)
- *The Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1981)
- *Just Before Dawn* (Jeff Lieberman, 1981)
- *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* (Robert M. Young, 1982)
- *Children of the Corn* (Fritz Kiersch, 1984)
- *Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders, 1984)
- *Witness* (Peter Weir, 1985)
- *Stand by Me* (Rob Reiner, 1986)
- *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986)
- *True Stories* (David Byrne, 1986)
- *Hoosiers* (David Anspaugh, 1986)

- *Raising Arizona* (Joel Coen, 1987)
- *Matewan* (John Sayles, 1987)
- *Mississippi Burning* (Alan Parker, 1988)
- *Next of Kin* (John Irvin, 1989)
- *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990)
- *Misery* (Rob Reiner, 1990)
- *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991)
- *City Slickers* (Ron Underwood, 1991)
- *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Jon Avnet, 1991)
- *My Cousin Vinny* (Jonathan Lynn, 1992)
- *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, 1992)
- *A River Runs Through It* (Robert Redford, 1992)
- *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (Lasse Hallström, 1993)
- *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994)
- *Dead Man* (Jim Jarmusch, 1995)
- *Fargo* (Joel Coen, 1996)
- *Twister* (Jan de Bont, 1996)
- *Lone Star* (John Sayles, 1996)
- *Gummo* (Harmony Korine, 1997)
- *The Blair Witch Project* (Eduardo Sánchez, Daniel Myrick, 1999)
- *The Straight Story* (David Lynch, 1999)
- *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Pierce, 1999)
- *George Washington* (David Gordon Green, 2000)

- *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Joel Coen, 2000)
- *Signs* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2002)
- *Big Fish* (Tim Burton, 2003)
- *Napoleon Dynamite* (Jared Hess, 2004)
- *Old Joy* (Kelly Reichardt, 2006)
- *No Country for Old Men* (Ethan Coen, Joel Coen, 2007)
- *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (Andrew Dominik, 2007)
- *Shotgun Stories* (Jeff Nichols, 2007)
- *Winter's Bone* (Debre Granik, 2010)
- *Tucker and Dale vs. Evil* (Eli Craig, 2010)
- *Take Shelter* (Jeff Nichols, 2011)
- *Rango* (Gore Verbinski, 2011)
- *Bernie* (Richard Linklater, 2011)
- *The Cabin in the Woods* (Drew Goddard, 2011)
- *The Place Beyond the Pines* (Derek Cianfrance, 2012)
- *Django Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino, 2012)
- *Nebraska* (Alexander Payne, 2013)
- *Interstellar* (Christopher Nolan, 2014)
- *Green Room* (Jeremy Saulnier, 2015)
- *Certain Women* (Kelly Reichardt, 2016)
- *Hell or High Water* (David Mackenzie, 2016)
- *Wind River* (Taylor Sheridan, 2017)
- *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017)

- *Logan Lucky* (Steven Soderbergh, 2017)
- *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (Martin McDonagh, 2017)
- *A Quiet Place* (John Krasinski, 2018)
- *Minari* (Lee Isaac Chung, 2020)
- *Nomadland* (Chloé Zhao, 2020)
- *Hillbilly Elegy* (Ron Howard, 2020)
- *The Power of the Dog* (Jane Campion, 2021)
- *X* (Ti West, 2022)
- *Pearl* (Ti West, 2022)



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