

NAHEM YOUSAF

A Southern Sheriff's Revenge: Bertrand Tavernier's *Coup de Torchon*

This essay traces the story of a Texan small-town sheriff as first told and reworked by the American pulp fiction writer Jim Thompson in *The Killer Inside Me* (1952) and *Pop. 1280* (1964), and transformed by French film director Bertrand Tavernier when he transposes this particular 'Southern' sheriff's story to colonial Senegal in 1938 in *Coup de Torchon* (*Clean Slate*, 1980). To begin, this essay considers why Thompson shifts his story from the American 'West' in the 1950s to the American 'South' in the 1960s before examining in some detail the ways in which Tavernier's cross-cultural and trans-generic remake of *Pop. 1280* successfully interrogates southern tropes in non-southern settings.

The image of the Southern sheriff in twentieth-century fiction and film accrued mainly negative connotations, by focusing on the stakes sheriffs had in white supremacy and in maintaining a segregated status quo, or exploring their limited efforts to move beyond being either ineffectual or corrupt – or both. In novels such as Erskine Caldwell's *Trouble in July* (1940) and Elizabeth Spencer's *The Voice at the Back Door* (1956), for example, the small-town sheriff is mired in a moral dilemma. Spencer created Mississippi sheriff Duncan Harper while living in Italy. Thrust into office by the dying incumbent, he struggles against racist crimes that have been ignored in the past, the repercussions of which threaten the present. He dies having made a racially liberal plea to the town that after his death may choose to deem him merely eccentric. Caldwell's sheriff, Jeff McCurtain, is much more typical of the dominant image. He is the recalcitrant lawman who endures by looking the other way. His role was outlined by W. J. Cash in *The Mind of the South* (1941) and he is, Cash alleges, "a simple soul primarily interested in keeping his job and studying how to do the things which he cannily observes his masters – the ruling classes, of

course – really want. . . .”¹ That is to say, he conspires with lynch mobs and fails to investigate those criminal activities that serve to keep black southerners in their place. McCurtain’s long-term strategy is to go fishing out of town as soon as he becomes aware of a mob forming and to return once mob justice has been carried out and any repercussions have died down. Much admired by Richard Wright and the NAACP’s Walter White, Caldwell’s depiction also prompted considerable ire for its sharp and satirical examination of small-town law and order. Jim Thompson’s narrative begins from this kind of premise.

Very early in *Pop. 1280*, Sheriff Nick Corey confides: “I’d begun to suspect lately that people weren’t quite satisfied with me. That they expected me to do a little something instead of just grinning and joking and looking the other way. And me, I just didn’t quite know what to do about it.”² Where Jim McCurtain’s wife enables her husband’s cowardice, Corey’s taunts him with what she perceives as his emasculation, with which he ostensibly concurs: “I couldn’t really argue about her saying I was stupid and spineless, because I probably ain’t real smart – who wants a smart sheriff? – and I figure it’s a lot nicer to turn your back on trouble than it is to look at it. I mean, what the heck, we all got trouble enough of our own without butting in on other people’s” (5). Despite his protests and self-putdowns, Corey is the best judge of character in the novel. He knows perfectly well that his wife is having an affair with the man she has introduced into their home as her ‘brother’ and soon they will both pay the price he exacts. While the key to Corey’s success seems to be maintaining the status quo, he is about to shake the foundations of the town. Acting the part of the lacklustre sheriff affords him a certain freedom: “All I’d ever done was sheriffin’. It was all I could do. Which was just another way of saying that all I could do was nothing. And if I wasn’t sheriff, I wouldn’t have nothing or be nothing” (8). Out of ‘nothing,’ he has fashioned his role; he is invisible, colourless, and therefore will be largely undetectable as the architect of his enemies’ demise.

The ineffectual or corrupt sheriff is a motif developed through allusion as well as a media stereotype. It has endured from *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943) where the sheriff absents himself while his Deputy joins a lynch mob organized by a former Confederate soldier, through movies such as *Thunder Road* (1958) to *Tank* (1984), and the supernaturally evil sheriff played by Gary Cole in CBS’s *American Gothic* (1995-96). It is an image that the National Sheriffs Association has tried hard to combat. Jim Thompson, the son of an Oklahoma sheriff

himself, builds on popular cultural images of sheriffs to create a psychopathic lawbreaking Deputy in *The Killer Inside Me* and a messianic avenging sheriff in *Pop. 1280*. In the mid-twentieth century when Thompson was writing, it was the Southern sheriff who was beginning to have the most popular currency as a type and while Andy Griffiths played benign Mayberry sheriff Andy Taylor on CBS, the real sheriffs and police commissioners, such as the bigoted and bullish Harold Strider and Eugene "Bull" Connor, were becoming media pariahs around the world. As LeRoi Jones (latterly Amiri Baraka) recalled, it was "the daily atrocities which fat sheriffs in Dumbbell, Georgia could run on blacks" that contributed to his rejecting Martin Luther King Jr.'s philosophy of non-violence in the mid 1960s.³ The proliferation of stereotypically lawless Southern lawmen in the late 1950s and the 1960s may explain Thompson's decision to develop his west Texas murderous Lou Ford in *The Killer Inside Me* into east Texan and Southern sheriff Nick Corey in the mid 1960s for *Pop. 1280*.

In 1952 in *The Killer Inside Me*, "Central City," West Texas, is a place of "a lot of cattle and a little cotton."⁴ The characters live on ranches and homesteads and they feel "as frazzled as a cow's hide under a branding iron."⁵ However, by 1964 and *Pop. 1280*, Potts County where Nick Corey is high sheriff has become a place of cornbread and catfish, grits and gravy (7, 16). Corey grows up in an old plantation house (31) and lynching is a 'civic duty'; black men can be killed for even looking at a white woman and 'Colored Town' is set alight to keep the black community in line. Racist whites have red faces and use rhetoric such as, "You tellin' me a white man can't whip a nigger if he feels like it? You sayin' there's some law against it?" (99, 51). The town pimp is a disowned member of "one of the best families in the South" and his murder must be avenged by the same wealthy family (150). Thompson's setting exhibits something of the mood and landscape of William Goyen's fiction, also set in the first half of the twentieth century in east Texas, where racially segregated attitudes are entrenched and the violence is psychologically warped and grotesque. In *Pop. 1280*, Thompson's Nick Corey even delivers a twisted eulogy on the kind of racial violence he has inherited:

I figure sometimes that maybe . . . we don't make as much progress as other parts of the nation. People lose so much time from their jobs in lynching other people, and they spend so much money on rope and kerosene and getting likkered-up in advance of other essentials, that there ain't an awful lot of money or man-hours left for practical purposes. (9)

Fred Hobson has argued that after the 1960s “southern savagery in literature appears, if not contrived, at least removed from the social base which gives rise to the fiction.”⁶ This may also be a contributory factor for Thompson setting *Pop. 1280* in the era of racial segregation and for Tavernier in reiterating his responsibility to recent history in his focus on French colonialism in 1938. 1964, when *Pop. 1280* was published, was, of course, a year in which southern violence was rarely out of the media. The murders of James Chaney, Mickey Schwerner and Andrew Goodman in Neshoba County, Mississippi during Freedom Summer received much attention, but so did church bombings and racial intimidation at the height of the Civil Rights Movement which had been epitomised by the murder of four little girls in Birmingham at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church the year before. Thompson could not have been unaware of his character’s standing among not just the fictional but also the real sheriffs of the American 1960s.

As a writer of *roman noir*, the stereotypes Thompson employs so liberally form a loose shorthand for the socio-geographical co-ordinates on which a formulaic pulp fiction can rest easily. But Thompson’s Texan lawmen also rely on these very stereotypes to prop up their act; their disguise as ineffectual or simple-minded is effected by their use of stereotype and cliché. In *The Killer Inside Me*, for example, Deputy Lou Ford who does calculus for fun, and reads medical books and philosophy in the evenings, entertains himself by acting the clear-eyed innocent fool. He strings together dull platitudes which so prompt the county attorney’s contempt that he is barely able to stifle his laughter. “I’ve always felt we were one big happy family here,” Ford confides, “Us people that work for the county . . . kind of brothers under the skin . . . We’re all in the same boat, and we’ve got to put our shoulders to the wheel . . .”⁷ Ford has ensured his image is that of a soft-headed and soft-hearted rube and in *Pop. 1280*’s Nick Corey the act is easily perfected when he visits the police chief in the neighbouring town. It is a scene that is transposed almost verbatim in Tavernier’s *Coup de Torchon*. When he is asked the population of Bourkassa, Cordier answers that it is a place of 1275 souls in an allusion to the original story.⁸ Marcel, the police chief is withering because “Your 1275 souls includes niggers but niggers have no souls . . . because they are not really people.” The example that Cordier uses to contradict him is a classic of southern cultural productions – what about the black mother whose milk saves a white child whose mother has died. Isn’t

she, he asks, a figure of real humanity? In Thompson's novel, Corey confides that he is the child "put to suck with a colored mammy. Wouldn't be alive today except for her sucklin' me" (21). Tavernier reproduces the words in colonial Africa to render something of the same racial/racist constructions and Cordier is ridiculed and bullied, literally kicked out for challenging them. It is this that begins the trail of destruction and that prompts Cordier to frame the police chief Marcel for the first two murders he commits. When he returns to the railway station to go home, Cordier hears a blind white man tell black Africans to "get out of my sight." Cordier seems to be alone in recognising the racial irony of the colonial situation, specifically the debased humanity of the colonizers. On meeting the new schoolteacher, he tells her: "Thanks to you, black schoolchildren will be able to read their fathers' names on French war memorials," at once a reference to the Second World War that looms on the horizon and a double irony in that no memorials will be constructed to honour the African dead, the 'shock troops' or cannon fodder, as African Americans were traditionally held to be in American wars.

In this way, Thompson wrote – and later Bertrand Tavernier adapted – a 'Southern,' the topological subgenre of the novel that Leslie Fiedler argued had always challenged the putative distinctions between high and popular culture.⁹ The dominant mode of 'the Southern' is the Gothic and it is this, Fiedler believed, that distinguished it from the Western, the Gothic being "out of key" for the Western since, "The real West, alas, contains no horrors which correspond to the Southerner's deep nightmare terrors."¹⁰ In the essay "Boxing the Compass," Fiedler creates a taxonomy of the American novel in which topography is writ mythologically large and it is possible to read Thompson's shift from west Texas to east – or from a 'Western' to a 'Southern' – through Fiedler's lens. Fiedler was far more interested, after all, in taking a position than in providing dense social commentary; he courted the sensational as well as the serious and, like Thompson, he was a precocious literary mind and bold in marking out his territory. While Fiedler's taxonomy is hardly useful in delineating historical or 'real' differences between the West and the South, it is suggestive of the tropes that are foregrounded in the literary and popular imaginations. Larry McMurtry, for example, has spoken similarly about the connection between his fiction and a geographical imaginary: "I cannot imagine," he says, "writing about West Texas in the lush prose of the Deep South. West Texas needs a barer, more

stringent prose, and to describe it lushly would constitute a serious incongruity.”¹¹ It is the perceived incongruity that coincided with the dramatic representations of Southern sheriffs in the mid-1960s that prompted Thompson to try to write a ‘Southern.’ Fiedler’s caveat about the West – “The real West, alas, contains no horrors . . .” – is, in my view, the same assumption that prompted Thompson to move his “Savage Art,” as his biographer describes Thompson’s fiction, to the ‘Savage’ South.

In *Pop. 1280*, Thompson introduces Nick Corey in his own words: “I guess you could say that Kingdom Come was really here as far as I was concerned. I had it made, and it looked like I could go on having it made – being high sheriff of Potts County – as long as I minded my own business and didn’t arrest no one unless I couldn’t get out of it and they didn’t amount to nothin’” (1). Corey’s reference to Kingdom Come takes on new meaning when the story reveals that he is an existential vigilante who has modelled himself on a vengeful Jesus Christ and who believes he is a principled avenger: murdering evil men can never be as base as the horrors of racial subjugation or sexual terrorism. Corey/Cordier is an adulterer, a murderer, but most significantly he is the townsfolk’s judge and executioner who tries to make the punishments he metes out fit their crimes. When he shoots the pimps dead, for example, he kicks them into the water to join the black dead bodies they so despise. Thompson’s sheriff in all his permutations is the lawman as villain, his villainy firmly anchored in a morally legible belief in his role in wiping clean society’s dirt (perhaps a better translation of ‘coup de torchon’ than ‘clean slate’ in that it emphasizes the process rather than assumes the end result). In Tavernier’s film, colonial police chief Cordier describes his role to an African child as “dirty work” and to the schoolteacher as “getting rid of trash.” Elsewhere he says “I just help people to reveal their true nature.” Corey and his French counterpart Lucien Cordier are chameleon characters. Cordier is dramatized with verve by Philippe Noiret, an actor so well known for amiable comedies by the end of the 1970s that when he shoots two pimps with alacrity some 15 minutes into the film, he is remade surely as Tavernier remakes Thompson’s novel.

While definitions of the villain are often limiting insofar as they settle on his image and his crimes without paying equal attention to his psychology, William Van DeBerg has described the villain’s place in society in more nuanced terms: “No stranger to paradox and irony, villains often unwittingly strengthen accepted community standards

by deviating from them.”¹² Corey/Cordier's villainous sheriff is ostensibly the community's standard bearer but there are no heroes against whom a 'bad' sheriff may be measured and barely a good citizen in book or film who can act as conscience or counsellor. Most tellingly in *Coup de Torchon*, there is a new character: the Catholic priest who is seen carefully nailing Christ to a new cross because the old cross has been eaten by termites. As he taps in the nails, he inadvertently affirms Cordier's vigilantism with a Christian integrity that Cordier twists for his purposes. Only half listening to his parishioner, the priest intones: "Do your duty. Get rid of the trash that poisons us all . . . each thing in turn and one after another . . . May God grant you the courage you lack." Cordier is a chilling combination of egomania and Catholic guilt. He writes his confession towards the end of the film on the school blackboard, ostensibly so that it will be read by the African children and Anna, the schoolteacher. It reads "God told me to kill them. I wasn't sure" and he signs it "Jesus Christ." However the children are unable to read French and Anna is able to convince them that the words on the blackboard are the beginning of "Le Marseillaise." Not without irony, she instructs them to recite after her: "Children of the land, the day of glory's come, the bloody flag of tyranny's against us. . . ."

Jim Thompson was acknowledged in France as a master of the *roman noir*, a creator of morally-tarnished American anti-heroes. *Pop. 1280* was his most critically acclaimed novel; a Gold Medal paperback in the US, it was honoured in 1966 when Gallimard made it the 1000th title in the prized *Série Noire*, an accolade for the author as well as an acknowledgment that the darker his fictions were the more they would be read and appreciated by French readers. *Coup de Torchon* is a revealing title, in this regard, especially because 'les torchons' is also a French idiom for the cheap or popular press and signals mass market appeal. In this way, it seems as though *Pop. 1280* was destined to be filmed by a French director, even if it was not always imagined as a 'French' film.

To begin with, Alain Corneau as director and Jacques Peron as producer sought to adapt the novel for the screen, apparently hoping to make a version of the popular hit *The Wild Bunch* (1969) with Warren Oates playing Nick Corey. While Corneau sought Thompson's help with the screenplay and he did produce one, the film was never made and one reason given was the difficulty of translating Sheriff Corey's mental life into cinematic terms, an issue to which I shall return.¹³

Thompson's novels are, by and large, incredibly cinematic and they have been made into some very successful films such as Sam Peckinpah's *The Getaway* (1972) and Stephen Frears's *The Grifters* (1990). But early attempts to adapt *Pop. 1280* for the screen were aborted. Gary Graver and Orson Welles shelved their idea because Welles feared that the burning of Colored Town would prove too expensive.¹⁴ Alain Corneau did finally adapt Thompson's *A Hell of a Woman* in 1979, after Thompson's death, but he retitled it *Série Noire* and dispensed with the idea of reproducing a Hollywood product, instead asking French experimental novelist George Perec to relocate the action to France.¹⁵

The problem of adaptation and of deciding where to set a Thompson story is reinforced in a further example. In 1960 Buck Houghton, Rod Serling's producer for *The Twilight Zone*, assigned Thompson to write a novel based on a screenplay, the kind of publicity tie-in that was becoming popular and lucrative. The story *Cloudburst* was set on the Texas-Mexican border but it would be transferred to North Africa, it was decided, in an ironic foreshadowing of *Coup de Torchon*. Again, however, the project never came to fruition and, as his biographer explains, in the version Thompson wrote he ended up returning *Cloudburst* to Texas and turning its protagonist back into his own Lou Ford.¹⁶ While Thompson seemed unable to extricate himself from the settings he had made his own, in my reading, it is Thompson's reception in France and Tavernier's transposition of *Pop. 1280* to French West Africa that augments Thompson's local detail. When this thriller about social and racial complacency, guilt and messianic revenge is transposed from a stereotyped 'Southern' locale to French Senegal in 1938, Tavernier can be seen to improve on the original.

Blending expressionist images with surreal dialogue and absurdist scenes, Tavernier typically produces films that are explorations of dark and desperate characters in difficult times. In borrowing Southern motifs, the Southern sheriff becomes one of Tavernier's alienated protagonists for whom morality and malice are inextricably bound into injustice, insanity and murder, as in his film *The Judge and the Assassin* (1976), a study of a serial killer. In displacing Thompson's sheriff both historically and geographically, Tavernier retains the images that have traditionally characterized the sheriff in the American South while linking him into the French colonial regime in Senegal, a setting that is inherently violent. Thompson's archetypal sheriff character had already undergone a series of transmutations before Tav-

ernier chose to transport the ethical quandary that he could be made to represent thousands of miles to a colonial outpost on the brink of war. Tavernier had tried several times to transfer the action to France but it was the character of the sheriff that proved the sticking point. Tavernier was all too aware that his role would not translate into French society. This presented a problem but the Introduction to the French translation of Thompson's novel, in which Thompson was compared to Louis-Ferdinand Céline in his nihilism, sparked the successful adaptation. Tavernier recalled the North African pre-War setting of Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932) [Journey to the End of the Night], a dark and satirical – even anarchical – narrative about the lunacy of war. Tavernier then collaborated on the screenplay with Jean Aurenche, the veteran scriptwriter then in his eighties who had lived in French West Africa before the Second World War. Tavernier even includes a scene in which blacks and whites attend a segregated outdoor film screening, a publicity film, *Un Matin à Mexico*, that Aurenche directed in the 1930s.¹⁷ Transposition is a creative intervention into a text and, as the result of the change of setting, the Jim Crow South and colonial Senegal are conflated as similarly repressive; the colonial French are complicit in reducing blacks to similarly servile roles. Most specifically, Tavernier was reassured that the French colonial cop complicit in maintaining this status quo, but who eludes the control of the French administration, could be easily compared to the unrestrained maverick Southern sheriff.¹⁸

Even before he began making films, as a film critic for the journal *Positif*, Tavernier expressly admired films that were “not afraid of ugliness,” where the filmmaker “keeps his eyes on the world even if what is shown is hurtful, and the truth [he says] always hurts.”¹⁹ While adaptation is often thought to be conservative in approach and execution, Tavernier re-visits and re-visions ‘pulp fiction.’ Not only does his misprision vault over the canonical in favour of the popular, he also shifts medium and disturbs assumptions about genre. Breaking open the boundaries of the text, he transforms *Pop. 1280* into an anti-colonial thriller, set in a period of French history that he believes should not be forgotten. He calls *Coup de Torchon* “the first black African film noir” to be distinguished from a French film noir set in the colonies. While French colonial cinema emphasized the African ‘other’ as dangerous and the French as heroically regenerating the land, Tavernier successfully infuses his narrative with a sense of the regeneration through violence that Richard Slotkin argued was the structuring

metaphor of the American ‘frontier’ experience.²⁰ The colonial frontier is precisely the liminal space where Thompson’s bleak but anarchic protagonist can find place. That Tavernier intended the film as a critique of the violence inherent in colonialism is succinctly demonstrated when a French critic described the film as “an insult to the white race,” and Tavernier remembers the criticism with a wry chuckle as “one of the greatest comments I had on that film.”²¹ The ugliness of colonialism is conveyed through Cordier, driven mad by his complicity to uphold the status quo in a corrupt French demi-monde, where it is assumed that blacks are without souls but where the colonizers’ moral lassitude goes unpunished – until he wreaks revenge.

While Thompson expressed and emphasized these factors, Tavernier’s is the more intensely moral tale of social and mental disintegration. In *Bourkassa*, there is an epidemic of dysentery that the colonial authorities are loath to address: the bodies of the Senegalese dead are entrusted to the river after funeral ceremonies but infection is rife. Sex is cheap in a lawless and corrupt backwater – the boondocks of French colonial Africa. If Tavernier succeeds in conveying Thompson’s aesthetic and heightening its effects, it is because he recognizes and distils the darkest comedy in Thompson’s most disquieting protagonist. He is unafraid of pushing Thompson’s critique of Southern race relations outside of its southern context in order to raise the concomitant issues of French complicity in forging similar racial hierarchies in the guise of colonial enterprise. In the moral universe of the film, colonial Senegal is a cruel world. French pimps shoot at dead black bodies for sport and when the sheriff challenges them, they retort; “But they’re niggers. . . .” The French have affairs at every turn and a brothel expects black girls to begin the trade as early as 12 years of age and white girls at 14. Rose with whom Cordier is having a long-running affair is a femme fatale and as duplicitous as Cordier’s wife who tricked him into marrying her on their first drunken date. Cordier’s so-called brother-in-law is a Peeping Tom – albeit largely inept. There is scant evidence of Tavernier reworking that other Southern stereotype of social etiquette and good manners. Instead, he draws out the crass sexual relations and the absurd in a darkly jubilant creative intervention into Thompson’s novel.²²

Tavernier’s disquisition on moral dissipation has an absurdist, satirical edge that remains razor sharp throughout the film. In *Coup de Torchon*, Tavernier dispenses with the first-person narration that distinguishes Thompson’s fiction – and that characterises the 1976 film

of *The Killer Inside Me* in which Stacy Keach plays Lou Ford. Forgoing a voiceover reinforces the sense of unease and disorientation: Cordier does not account for his motives. Norman Mailer – who has created such murderous characters as Stephen Rojack and written about convicted murderer Gary Gilmore – has said, “So long as you stay outside [the] head, your character can retain a certain mystery. We walk around such figures with the same respect we offer strangers who come into a room with force. Part of the meaning of charisma is that we don’t know the intimate nature of the human presence we’re facing.” Mailer is, unsurprisingly for Mailer, discussing his own characters,²³ but what his description shares with Thompson, and with Tavernier, is a refusal to moralize or explain motivation even in a character-driven narrative. In the film, the use of the steadicam reinforces this ambivalence in the viewer’s uncertainty. The steadicam is strapped on to the body of the camera operator so that it moves with him as he follows the action. Tavernier allows that there were economic and practical reasons for the decision to maintain physical control over expensive equipment while shooting on location in a very poor country. However, aesthetically, it had been decided from the first that the steadicam could capture the unsettling instability that catches the reader off guard when reading Thompson, the feeling of being on very shaky moral ground. In *Coup de Torchon*, Tavernier has said, he wanted “to translate, through film-making, those abrupt passages in italics that Jim Thompson was fond of, where the story yields to metaphysics, where the ground seems to open beneath the feet of the characters.”²⁴ There is no fixed defining centre to the image created by the steadicam as there is no liberal rationalizing of the character Thompson created. This is reinforced by what Stephen Hay determines is intrinsic to Tavernier’s “pensive cinema,” that is “an almost paradoxical blend of definite convictions regarding injustice and its perpetrators, and a frequent feeling of mystification about the individuals that populate his films.”²⁵ By augmenting the mystery and emphasizing what he deems is “lyrical, but devastating, wild, angry, funny” about *Pop. 1280* in each phase of this cross-cultural adaptation, Tavernier maintains the aesthetics of the original and enhances them.²⁶

One facet of the characterisation that Tavernier pays particular attention to in his adaptation is Corey’s sympathy for blacks in the Jim Crow South. As the film opens, Lucien Cordelier lights a fire for a group of poor Senegalese boys eating dirt as they prepare to spend the night in a barren desert landscape. He helps a little black girl ex-

tricate some dirt from her eye and kills his lover's husband, Marcaillou, not to get him out of the way but as justice for the cruelty he has shown not only towards his wife but towards a black man. "You gonna arrest me for clubbing a nigger?" Marcaillou asks. Cordier walks away, past the angry stares of onlookers, white and black, who are shocked that he could ignore the crime, but only because he must plan the white man's demise while appearing ineffectual in the eyes of his community. He shoots Marcaillou full of holes and kicks him as he kicked the black man, leaving him to suffer a slow and painful death. The only half-reluctant murder Cordier carries out is of the same black man, named John in *Pop. 1280*, but renamed Friday in *Coup de Torchon* in an ironic nod to a canonical colonial intertext. Like Defoe's Friday, named after the "unlucky" day on which he met Crusoe (to borrow James Joyce's interpretation²⁷), Tavernier's Friday appears at the most inopportune time. That he contributes to his own bad luck and consequent death is a turning point for Cordier. Despite having been beaten in the street by Marcaillou, when he finds his dead body Friday feels the need to return it to the family home. It is this that secures his fate:

Cordier: "Tired?"

Friday: "I'm not feeling well, my legs are shaky."

Cordier: "Don't worry, it'll pass. What's wrong? You know very well that I have to do it."

Friday: "But, captain, I trusted you. You're different from other white men."

Cordier: "That's your mistake."

Friday: "I've always believed your every word."

Cordier: "No, you didn't. Now you're lying. Coming from a good Catholic like you it worries me. Lying is a sin."

Friday: "Killing people is a sin too. And worse than lying."

Cordier: "Let me tell you a secret now, that it might offer you some consolation. We all kill what we love."

Friday: "But you don't love me."

Cordier: "And one more thing. No, don't tire yourself getting up now. Better the blind man who pisses out of the window than the joker who told him it was a urinal. Know who the joker is? All the bastards who look away when you're in shit, who wallow in their cash praying through their assholes that nothing happens. If it's true they were made in God's image, I wouldn't like to get him in a dark alley. You kissed too much white ass. And now you're getting fucked, and you asked for it. So now this is what I do with friends like you."

He shoots Friday dead.

In *Coup de Torchon* only the sheriff and the new schoolteacher are represented as having a conscience but where hers is clean, his is

warped and embittered. Cordier's is the voice of irony worn down by cynicism and the film's critique of colonialism is fashioned by his dilemma.²⁸ The 'clean slate' is an impossible paradox. As the priest cannot prevent termites from eating through each cross he erects, so the sheriff repeatedly dreams of his mother dying because he is the "vile little monster" whose birth killed her and for which he can never atone. The sheriff dreams of his father, the victim of racist delusions, beating him while blaming Jews and Freemasons for his bad luck and for the violence he inflicts on his son. In this way, Tavernier retains and, through allusion, enhances Thompson's depiction of a southern cycle of violence and guilt. Corey/Cordier is a misfit in the way of Flannery O'Connor's Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (1955), believing his serial killing is a message from God to a Godless world.

Tavernier had never been to the U.S. South but in 1984 he went to Mississippi and discovered a very different South to Thompson's. *Mississippi Blues*, co-directed with southerner Robert Parrish, is the result. It is a self-reflexive documentary exploration of southern myth and memory, much of it based on conversations, with Parrish about his childhood memories, and with Tavernier who is on a journey to explore a southern place that existed in his imagination, in books and in the cinema. As Tavernier says in his role as narrator "*Il était pays que l'on a déjà tellement exploré dans ses rêves, à travers des films et des livres, que s'y rendre il y a tout autant le pèlerinage que de la découverte. Le sud des Etats-Unis.*" [It's a place that is so familiar from dreams, from films and books, that going there is more like a pilgrimage than a journey of discovery: the U.S. South.] This idea is underlined in each of the short voiceovers when Tavernier comments on what he discovers. For example, while visiting Faulkner's grave, the caretaker of the cemetery appears and is described as walking straight out of a parable or a war story: "*L'homme qui vient surgir à l'improviste, c'est le gardien du cimetière. On dirait qu'il sort de parabole, ou des nouvelles de guerre.*" Later, the film crew sets off down Route 61 and, again, Tavernier invests in the romance of an iconic southern highway: "*C'est la route qu'ont prise des milliers de noirs, paysans-ramasseurs de coton attirés par les zones industrielles du nord. On note avec eux leurs espoirs et leur musique. La route soixante-et-une, c'est celui du déracinement et des mirages ; la route du jazz et du blues.*" [It is the road that was taken by thousands of migrant black workers, cotton-pickers attracted to the industrial centres of the north. We take note of their hopes and their music. Route 61 is a place of uprooting and mirages; the jazz and blues road.]

In yet another voiceover, he talks of Coca Cola with a certain reverence in elevated tones: “*C’est aussi là ou l’on mit pour la première fois dans l’histoire de l’humanité, à Vicksburg pour être plus précis, le Coca-Cola en bouteille au lieu de le vendre en sirop.*” [It is here too that, for the first time in the history of humanity, Coca Cola was bottled, instead of being sold in dilutable form.] A lyrical South is emphasized when, instead of using the *passé composé* as would be usual in speech, Tavernier changes to the more literary *passé simple* when he relates the circumstances of Bessie Smith’s death in 1937.²⁹

In *Mississippi Blues*, filmmakers Tavernier and Parrish are invested in the South but the form that the attachment takes is very different.³⁰ The young director learns from the old – Parrish was John Ford’s editor and the director of films set in France as well as the U.S. When they talk about how one might best capture the South in cinema, Parrish says that he most reveres *The Southerner* (1945) made by another Frenchman, Jean Renoir, whose knowledge of the region was scant but who famously declared that he knew his real subject – the peasantry whether located in India, as in a previous picture *The River*, or in the U.S. South.³¹ While Renoir had consulted with Faulkner, still in Hollywood in 1945, *The Southerner* was banned in Tennessee and while James Agee admired it, with reservations about inaccuracies of accent and “unconscious patronage,” it was reviled by other southern reviewers.³² Tavernier, therefore, may have Renoir in mind when he tries to film a Mississippi bayou but Parrish gets angry at the idea that they should reproduce an image of “Winds across the Everglades,” a traditional cinematic image. This scene indicates the extent to which Parrish finds himself monitoring Tavernier’s picturing of the South even as they collaborate: “I got angry because I loved those trees when they were Flaherty’s or Ray’s. But I don’t want them to be the only thing in our picture.”

In representing the South, or its imaginative rendition in *Mississippi Blues*, Parrish is acutely aware of the images that sustain Southern stereotypes, that contribute to traditional images of the South in cinema – or that may serve to defamiliarize the South. However, Tavernier’s emphasis on trees may also be an allusion to his own adaptation of a ‘Southern’: *Coup de Torchon* is framed by the same image of trees in a rural (Senegalese) landscape. Cordier hiding beneath the trees is watching black children, orphans it is assumed, who live on the edge of Bourkassa. As the film opens they sit in the cold, shivering in the dark of the sun’s eclipse. It is an apocalyptic image with which to

begin the film. The brightness of day is followed by sudden wipe of black across the screen, symbolic of a nocturnal world and reminiscent of the warning that the good sheriff Bob Maples issues to Jim Thompson's Lou Ford when he expresses his anxiety about Ford's moral ambiguity: it is always lightest just before the dark.³³ In the final frames of *Coup de Torchon*, Cordier watches from the same place, this time training his gun on a lone African child until he is joined by other children. Cordier lowers the gun and holds it in visible anguish, as if unsure whether to turn it on himself. The mental bewilderment that actor Philippe Noiret conveys, together with his isolation, shows that Cordier is now estranged from the town and even from his sympathy for the disenfranchised children who are also estranged in their own land. Thompson's Nick Corey has changed; Cordier is as nihilistic but more conflicted than his counterpart when trapped in the French colonial dilemma and filtered through Tavernier's cinematic lens.

The Southern sheriff as a trope was often situated at the heart of Southern gothic narratives of the twentieth century. Leslie Fiedler was unequivocal in his belief that the "Dark Sublime" or southern gothic mode "somehow will not do for the western" because the West "contains no horrors which correspond to the Southerner's deep nightmare terrors."³⁴ However, the topological shifts in Thompson's story from the American West to the American South, to French North Africa (and back to the South in *Mississippi Blues*) signifies not only certain equivalences in Tavernier's transnational adaptation of the segregated South to colonial Africa in the 1930s, but the resilience of certain images of the South in the popular imagination. In Cormac McCarthy's aptly titled *No Country For Old Men* (2005), the sheriff character returns to Texas, and to Thompson's initial setting. That novel provides a coda to this essay because McCarthy succeeds in drawing together a number of the issues raised and remanding them to the past.

McCarthy's novel is set in 1980, the year that *Coup de Torchon* was made, and the setting is the Texas-Mexican border and the lower Rio Grande, a setting that recalls the "frontier psychology" and "murderous violence" that informed Slotkin's thesis of American mythogenesis.³⁵ In Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*, Sheriff Bob Maples confides in Deputy Lou Ford that he feels "behind the times," too old for the job.³⁶ McCarthy's Sheriff Bell lives out that fear: a Southerner by ancestry he has moved West but in the late twentieth century he has found that – to borrow Thad Sitton's terms in his social history of the

sheriff – he is no longer the undisputed “turf master” or “lord of the county line.” Bell’s has become “an obsolete mode of law enforcement.”³⁷ Bell recalls the good small-town sheriff insofar as he demonstrates neither corruption nor cruelty; he has none of the psychopathic Janus-faced characteristics of the lawmen characters this essay has examined. But, it is for this reason as much as any other that he fails to combat the evil and the horror around him. The idea of regeneration through violence has underpinned each phase of the mobilisation of Jim Thompson’s original story into comparative cultural contexts but old Sheriff Bell retiring from law enforcement, beaten down and bitter to the death, is finally out of time. In McCarthy’s dark novel, he cannot be incorporated into Thompson and Tavernier’s intertextual continuum. In the twenty-first century, he is an ironic homage to a self-consciously presented figure of generational change. When Bell dreams of his father, he is “fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark.”³⁸ It is this image with which Tavernier frames *Coup de Torchon* and it ruptures any nostalgic remaking of Thompson’s sheriff as a twisted vigilante-style folk hero. ‘Good’ and ‘evil’ are no longer patterned according to Thompson or Tavernier’s critique of the segregated South or of French complicity in colonial Africa. The ‘darkness’ is ‘Mammon’ and the sheriff cannot recognize it: “Is it the devil? I don’t know. I’m going to look it up. I got a feelin I ought to know who it is.”³⁹

Notes

- ¹ W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971) 302-03.
- ² Jim Thompson, *Pop. 1280* (London: Orion, 2003) 8. All further references are to this edition and will be included in the essay.
- ³ Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (New York: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1995) 238.
- ⁴ Jim Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me* (London: Orion, 2002) 4.
- ⁵ Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me* 73.
- ⁶ Fred C. Hobson, “The Savage South: An Inquiry into the Origins, Endurance, and Presumed Demise of an Image,” (1985) *Myth and Southern History: Vol. 2 The New South*, ed. Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989) 146.
- ⁷ Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me* 87.
- ⁸ For some reason, the French translation changes the population to 1275. In the original story, sheriff Ken Lacey asks his deputy, Buck, to explain to Nick why Potts County is not inhabited by twelve hundred and eighty souls. He answers in the following terms: “That twelve hundred and eighty would be countin’ niggers

- them Yankee lawmakers force us to count ‘em – and niggers ain’t got no souls.” He goes on to say that “Niggers ain’t got no souls because they ain’t really people” (21).
- ⁹ Leslie A. Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American* (London: Paladin, 1972) 15-16.
- ¹⁰ Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American* 133-35.
- ¹¹ Larry McMurtry as quoted in Charles D. Peavy, *Larry McMurtry* (Boston: Twayne, 1977) 106.
- ¹² William L. Van DeBerg, *Hoodlums: Black Villains and Social Bandits in American Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 5.
- ¹³ Robert Polito, *Savage Art: A Biography of Jim Thompson* (London: Serpents Tail, 1995) 497-98.
- ¹⁴ Polito, *Savage Art* 506.
- ¹⁵ Vincent Canby’s review in *The New York Times* assesses it as a film that “takes itself much too seriously, as is the way with humorless French adapters of American fiction of this sort.” Vincent Canby, “Serie Noir: French Version of American Yarn,” *The New York Times* 25 June 1982.
- ¹⁶ See Polito, *Savage Art* 434.
- ¹⁷ See Stephen Hay, *Bertrand Tavernier: The Film-maker of Lyon* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000) 102, n. 2. The film the audience watches as the main event is Léo Joannon’s *Alerte en Méditerranée* (1938).
- ¹⁸ Bertrand Tavernier interview on the Studio Canal DVD of *Coup de Torchon*, 2001.
- ¹⁹ Bertrand Tavernier on Joseph Losey’s *Time Without Pity*, *Positif*, July 1960.
- ²⁰ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973) 4-5.
- ²¹ Tavernier interview on DVD.
- ²² ‘Jubilation’ is the term Tavernier uses in describing the effect he wanted to create, Tavernier interview on DVD.
- ²³ Norman Mailer, “Real Life Versus Plot Life,” *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing* (New York: Random House, 2003) 95.
- ²⁴ Bertrand Tavernier, “I Wake Up Dreaming: A Journal of 1992,” *Projections: A Forum for Filmmakers No. 2*, ed. John Boorman and Walter Donohue (London: Faber and Faber, 1993) 273. Tavernier talks to Stephen Hay about his use of the steadicam in *Bertrand Tavernier* 98 and discusses it in the DVD interview. He points out that he wanted to be self-conscious in his use of the steadicam, to create the opposite effect to Kubrick in *The Shining* where he believes the director hides its use. It is interesting to note that Kubrick had intended to film *The Killer Inside Me* though this project too was aborted.
- ²⁵ Hay, *Bertrand Tavernier* 35.
- ²⁶ Tavernier interview on DVD.
- ²⁷ James Joyce quoted by Ian Watt, *Myths of Modern Individualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 171.
- ²⁸ In another scene that has no counterpart in the novel, she lends him a book by the French aviator and writer, unnamed in the film but more than likely Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, a pioneer who established mail routes across North Africa in the 1920s and 1930s and whose novel *Courrier Sud* (1929) translated as *Southern*

Mail (1933) describes this. He would leave for the US in 1940 when France fell to the Nazis. It may be that in the film, the book she loans is the new and award-winning *Terre des Hommes* (1939 trans. *Wind, Sand and Stars*, 1939) and that in drawing de Saint-Exupéry into the orbit of his protagonist, Tavernier alludes to the pessimism that finally characterized both his later life and writings and that underlines any interpretation of Lucien Cordier's progress through *Coup de Torchon*.

- ²⁹ Instead of saying “Bessie Smith est morte” (passé composé), he says “Bessie Smith mourut” (passé simple). My thanks to Sinéad Moynihan for pointing out this important shift and for her help with the translations.
- ³⁰ Hay makes a similar point in a discussion of Tavernier as a ‘humanist’ filmmaker in *Bertrand Tavernier* 34. More than half of *The Southerner* was filmed on location in California, rather than its Texas setting, something of an irony since Renoir had persuaded Darryl Zanuck at Twentieth Century-Fox that he should shoot the 1941 film *Swamp Water* on location in Georgia but as a by-product of the war, the same would not be the case for *The Southerner*.
- ³¹ Jean Renoir, *My Life and My Films*, trans. Norman Denny (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974) 194, 237.
- ³² See, for example, Raymond Durgnat, *Jean Renoir* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974) 244, 251.
- ³³ Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me* 74.
- ³⁴ Fiedler, *Return of the Vanishing American* 133, 135.
- ³⁵ Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* 4-7.
- ³⁶ Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me* 71.
- ³⁷ Thad Sitton, *The Texas Sheriff: Lord of the County Line* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000) xi.
- ³⁸ Cormac McCarthy, *No Country For Old Men* (London: Picador, 2005) 309.
- ³⁹ McCarthy, *No Country* 298.