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Carolina Hagemann Bubenick

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE SOUTHERN AMERICAN GOTHIC IN SEASON ONE OF
TRUE DETECTIVE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF NARRATOLOGY**

Porto Alegre

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BANCA EXAMINADORA:

Profª. Dra. Elaine Barros Indrusiak
(UFRGS)

Dda. Eduarda de Carli
(UFRGS)

Prof. Dr. Claudio Vescia Zanini
(UFRGS)

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“The fear: that nothing survives. The greater fear: that something does.”

Richard Siken in *The Language of the Birds*

“You’re looking at it wrong, the sky thing.”

Rust Cohle in the episode *Form and Void* of the first season of *True Detective*

RESUMO

O gótico do sul dos Estados Unidos conta com um extenso cânone literário, composto por autores como William Faulkner e Flannery O'Connor. Recentemente, este subgênero tem se tornado cada vez mais recorrente nas telas de TV também, presente em séries como *Sharp Objects* e *American Horror Story: Coven*, por exemplo. O presente trabalho visa analisar a representação do gótico do sul dos Estados Unidos na primeira temporada de *True Detective*, série de antologia criada por Nic Pizzolatto. Com base nas definições estabelecidas por Verstraten (2006) e Bal (2009), a primeira temporada da série será analisada com ênfase em elementos narratológicos, bem como de sua cinematografia e de *mise-en-scène*. O gênero Gótico é definido com base em Botting (1996), sendo sua vertente sul-estadunidense descrita de acordo com Crow e Street (2016). Ao fim da pesquisa, foi possível perceber que elementos como figurino, adereços, cenário, ângulos de câmera e focalização têm, de fato, um impacto na maneira como o gótico sulista é apresentado e, por consequência, percebido pelo espectador.

Palavras-chave: *True Detective*. Gótico sulista. Narratologia.

ABSTRACT

The Southern American Gothic has an extensive literary canon, composed by authors such as William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. Recently, this subgenre has become more and more recurrent on the TV screens, too, appearing in series such as *Sharp Objects* and *American Horror Story: Coven*, for example. This research aims at analyzing the representation of the Southern American Gothic in the first season of *True Detective*, an anthology series created by Nic Pizzolatto. Based on the definitions established by Verstraten (2006) and Bal (2009), the first season of the series will be analyzed with emphasis on its narratological elements, as well as its cinematography and *mise-en-scène*. The definition for Gothic as a literary genre is based on Botting (1996), being the Southern American Gothic described according to *The Palgrave Handbook of Southern Gothic* by Crow and Street (2016). By the end of the research, it became clear that elements such as costumes, props, setting, camera angles and focalization have, indeed, an impact on how the Southern American Gothic is presented and, consequently, perceived by the viewer.

Keywords: *True Detective*. Southern American Gothic. Narratology.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Southern American Gothic is a subgenre of Gothic fiction set in the south of the United States – the Deep South and the Ozarks, for example. According to Crow (2017), it is possible to track the origins of Southern Gothic back to William Byrd’s *History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*, written in 1728, in which the author “provides a first look at enduring Southern archetypes” (CROW, 2017, p. 142), such as swamps, poverty and racial issues. The genre gained further momentum in the nineteenth century, fueled by the Civil War and the decadent society that was a consequence of it, and in the twentieth century, with the innovative works of writers such as William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor and Tennessee Williams. But the Southern Gothic can be found even in contemporary works.

Created by Nic Pizzolatto and aired by HBO since 2014, *True Detective* is regarded by many as one of the greatest television series of all time, with a score of 9 out of 10 stars according to the IMDb website. *True Detective* is an anthology series, which means that each of its three seasons has different casts, characters, settings and storylines, all of them centered around a crime. In our study object (season one), detectives Martin Hart and Rust Cohle – played by Woody Harrelson and Matthew McConaughey, respectively – investigate the murder of a prostitute named Dora Lange. With a nonlinear narrative that alternates between the years of 1995 and 2012, the first season of *True Detective* presents varied themes such as pessimism, masculinity, and religion.

In addition, the opening season of the series is deeply rooted in the Southern Gothic. Set in Louisiana, the storyline of *True Detective* brings forth some characteristics that are common to other works that also take place in the deep south, such as Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Flannery O’Connor’s short stories *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and *Good Country People*, and William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*. Decayed settings, deeply flawed characters and grotesque situations, for example, are all present in Pizzolatto’s work, and are recurrent in Southern fiction literature which has conventionally been referred to as the Southern American Gothic. These elements are presented to the viewer through moving-image media resources, such as camera choices and photography that enhance the

atmosphere needed for the story. In addition, there are three main points that are important for the manifestation of the Southern Gothic tropes in *True Detective*: the plot, the location, and the aesthetic.

Therefore, this research aims at analyzing how these three topics are connected to one another. In addition, a second objective of this research is to analyze the adaptation of the Southern American Gothic tropes in *True Detective* through the use of visual elements such as choice of actors, costumes and lighting, for example, and discuss their importance to the narrative of the series. In order to do so, ten scenes from the opening episode of the first season of *True Detective*, “Long Red Dark”, will be analysed from the perspective of narratology, according to the definitions of Verstraten (2006) and Bal (2009). Lastly, the choice to focus on the first episode was based on its importance as an introductory piece to the whole storyline of the season.

This research will be divided in four chapters. The first chapter will focus on the Gothic as a literary genre, based on Botting (1996) and Sencindiver (2010), and on the Southern American Gothic, according to the *Palgrave Handbook of Southern Gothic* by Street and Crow (2016), and the *Cambridge Companion to American Gothic*, by Weinstock (2017). The second chapter will focus on narratological elements such as focalization, *mise-en-scène*, and cinematography, according to the definitions established by Verstraten (2006) and Bal (2009). The third chapter will be composed by the analysis of these narratological elements on the first episode of the series. Finally, this research intends to prove the importance of film narratology to the Southern American Gothic tropes present on the series.

THE GOTHIC

2.1. general Gothic

According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, one of the definitions of the term Gothic is “of or relating to an architectural style reflecting the influence of the medieval Gothic”. Associated with the Goths, Germanic people who were involved in the fall of the Roman Empire and subsequent consolidation of Orthodox Catholicism in Europe, ‘Gothic’ can, indeed, be used to describe a variety of things, ranging from art to architecture to

literature. In architecture, this aesthetic was very popular from the 12th to the 16th century, and was characterized by high arches, verticality and imposing structures. In the 18th century, however, stylistic changes brought forward by the Age of Enlightenment, such as uniformity, proportionality, and order,

produced a national past that was distinct from the cultivation, rationality and maturity of an enlightened age. This past was called ‘Gothic’, a general and derogatory term for the Middle Ages which conjured up ideas of barbarous customs and practices, of superstition, ignorance, extravagant fancies and natural wildness. (BOTTING, 1996, p. 15)

Figure 1 – Salisbury Cathedral



Figure 1: The spire and west façade of the Salisbury Cathedral, in Salisbury, England. Built between 1220 and 1320, it is possible to see traces of Gothic architecture in its structure (photo by Minnie Bannister, 2017)

Figure 2 – Architectural details of the Salisbury Cathedral



Figure 2: A picture of the interior of the Salisbury Cathedral (photo by Diego Delso¹, 2014).

Much like architecture and art, Gothic literature was classified as barbaric and trashy, having its origins conventionally associated to the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. Gothic literature can be defined, according to Botting (1996), as excessive, and a haunting figure for the newfound rationality and morality of the 18th century. Since Gothic literature "signified a trend towards an aesthetic based on feeling" (BOTTING, 1996, p. 2), the sublime can be found in anything that produces excessive emotion on the

¹ Diego Delso, delso.photo, License CC-BY-SA.

mind of the reader. For the purposes of this work, sublime means “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror” (BURKE, 1839, p. 82). Sublimity is generally associated with images of grandeur, which, in turn, create powerful sensations of wonder and terror. It can manifest itself in the form of skeletons in the closet; that is, secrets that haunt the main characters, and are usually of incestuous, macabre, or violent nature, for example.

These infamous skeletons, once they are dragged out of the closet, often signal another recurring trope in Gothic fiction, namely, the return of the past. Botting (1996) highlights that Gothic fictional works “and their disturbing ambivalence can [...] be seen as effects of fear and anxiety, as attempts to account for or deal with the uncertainty of these shifts” (p. 15). It is possible to say that this return, therefore, is nothing more than a reflection of the anxieties of the 18th-century society in regards to the economical and philosophical changes that were happening during the century. In addition to that, Sencindiver (2010) states that “sinful secrets within secret localities constitute the major *locus* of most Gothic plots” (p. 16)

Therefore, the location in which these narratives take place is another defining characteristic of the Gothic fiction. Defined as alienating and desolate, the main setting of Gothic literature of the 18th century was the castle, which

was gloomily predominant in early Gothic fiction. Decaying, bleak and full of hidden passageways, the castle was linked to other medieval edifices—abbeys, churches and graveyards especially—that, in their generally ruinous states, harked back to a feudal past associated with barbarity, superstition and fear. (BOTTING, 1996, p. 2)

Not only a synonym of the past, the architecture of the castle also signified a strong sense of sublimity, with its endless corridors, high arches and verticality.

In the 19th century, the castle gave way to the old house, which, according to Botting, “as both building and family line, [...] became the site where fears and anxieties returned in the present” (p. 2), as exemplified by Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. These anxieties are a reflection of processes such as urbanization and scientific development, and of cultural shifts

concerning sexuality and the domestic life. Last, but not least, the *locus* of 20th century Gothic literature shifts once again, and

the modern city, industrial, gloomy and labyrinthine, is the locus of horror, violence and corruption. Scientific discoveries provide the instruments of terror, and crime and the criminal mind present new threatening figures of social and individual disintegration. The traces of Gothic and Romantic forms, however, appear as signs of loss and nostalgia, projections of a culture possessed of an increasingly disturbing sense of deteriorating identity, order and spirit. (BOTTING, 1996, p. 74)

An example of that is Robert Louis Stevenson's Gothic novel *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, published for the first time in 1886, in which the city acts as the *locus* to the horrific acts committed by Mr. Hyde. Furthermore, science is used to explain the transformation that Dr. Jekyll goes through, further emphasizing Botting's point of scientific progress being used as an instrument for the sublime. In addition to that, it is important to notice that although the *locus horribilis* of Gothic literature has changed throughout the centuries, these settings are characterized by similar attributes, such as decay, gloom, despair, abandonment, and violence. Furthermore, this genre is characterized by a strong sense of sublimity, the return of the past, and a *locus horribilis*, in which the grotesque actions related to the negative aesthetics of this genre take place. The haunted castles and cemeteries typical from the Victorian Gothic meet decadent communities in the Southern American Gothic, with narratives taking place in locations such as the Quartier Latin in late 40s New Orleans in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the fictional Wind Gap, Missouri, in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*, and Erath, Louisiana, in the first season of *True Detective*.

Furthermore, Gothic fiction relies heavily on grotesque imagery and characterization, creating a negative aesthetic that has a direct influence on the *locus horribilis* of the narrative. Decayed settings become the stage for acts of unprecedented violence, brutal murders and intricate sacrifices, incestuous relationships, and villains' delusions of grandeur. The grotesque is a transgression, found in everything that is out of the curve, that crosses the line of reason and morality. The following section will focus on how these characteristics, mainly the grotesque and the negative aesthetic, appear in the Southern American Gothic.

2.2 The Southern American Gothic

In her essay *Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction*, Flannery O'Connor, one of the most prominent writers of the genre, argues that an author who writes according to what can be defined as modern romance tradition has to "present something that is alive, however eccentric that life may seem" (O'CONNOR, 1969, p. 39). One of these traces of eccentricity is the grotesque which, often described in a pejorative sense, signals a brutal kind of realism common to that geographical region, more than anything else. In addition, O'Connor states that in these works,

we find that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life. *We find that connections which we would expect in the customary kind of realism have been ignored, that there are strange skips and gaps which anyone trying to describe manners and customs would certainly not have left.* Yet the characters have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework. Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns, towards mystery and the unexpected. (O'CONNOR, 1969, p. 40, *emphasis added*)

This type of narrative, therefore, is much more interested in what Freud defines as uncanny², in what sits outside the realm of what can be explained. In order to do so, the writer has to connect the reality and the surreal, often by distorting what is known, which results in a piece of fiction that, according to O'Connor (1969), is wild and violent due to the differences that it aims to bridge, such is the case for Flannery O'Connor's own short stories *Good Country People* and *Everything That Rises Must Converge*.

The Southern American Gothic movement reached its peak in the 20th century, with authors such as William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty, and Lillian Hellman, besides Flannery O'Connor herself. However, it is possible to identify some elements of the genre in the works of another author, one that does not exactly fall in the category of Southern writing: Edgar Allan Poe. *The Fall of the House of Usher*, published for the first time in 1839³, that is, before the American Civil War (1861-1865), avoiding the post-bellum aesthetic that

² "The "uncanny" is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar." (FREUD, 1919, p. 2)

³ 1837, according to the *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic* by Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow (eds.)

heavily influenced the Southern Gothic narratives from that point onwards, is regarded by some people as Poe's most Southern work, since

it has all the elements that would later come to characterise the Southern Gothic: great house and family falling into decay and ruin; a feverish morbid introspective hero; an ethereal heroine; *implications of incest; a pervading sense of guilt propelled from the past*. As Lewis P. Simpson has argued, Poe's story amounts to a recognisably 'Southern landscape of nightmare, homeland of a decadent aristocracy of slave holders, and of their descendants, prone to neurotic terrors and violence'. (WRIGHT, 2016, p. 13, emphasis added)

However, one of the difficulties in pinning Poe's works among the Southern narratives is the fact that most of them, *The Fall of the House of Usher* included, take place in unnamed landscapes which, although adding to the mystery and general feelings of displacement, cannot be traced to the American South.

It is important to notice that the portion of land referred to as Southern United States, or simply the South with a capital S, does not match the geographical south of the country, which would include states such as Arizona, New Mexico, and at least part of California. The South is a cultural region located in the southeast of the country, composed namely either by the states that were originally part of the Confederate States of America during the Civil War, were pro-confederacy to some extent, or permitted slavery throughout the war but fought for the Union. The former is exemplified by Missouri, a state where Confederate support was rather strong during the conflict, while the latter is depicted by Maryland and Delaware, which remained in the Union and were, later on, much more aligned with the interests of Northern states. The map below illustrates a historical division of the Southern United States during the war and prior to the division of Virginia. The states that were part of the Confederacy during the Civil War are represented in red, whereas the stripes indicate Missouri, Kentucky, Delaware and Maryland. In addition to that, Oklahoma was still a territory then, and therefore was not included in this division.

Figure 3 – Southern United States prior to the division of Virginia

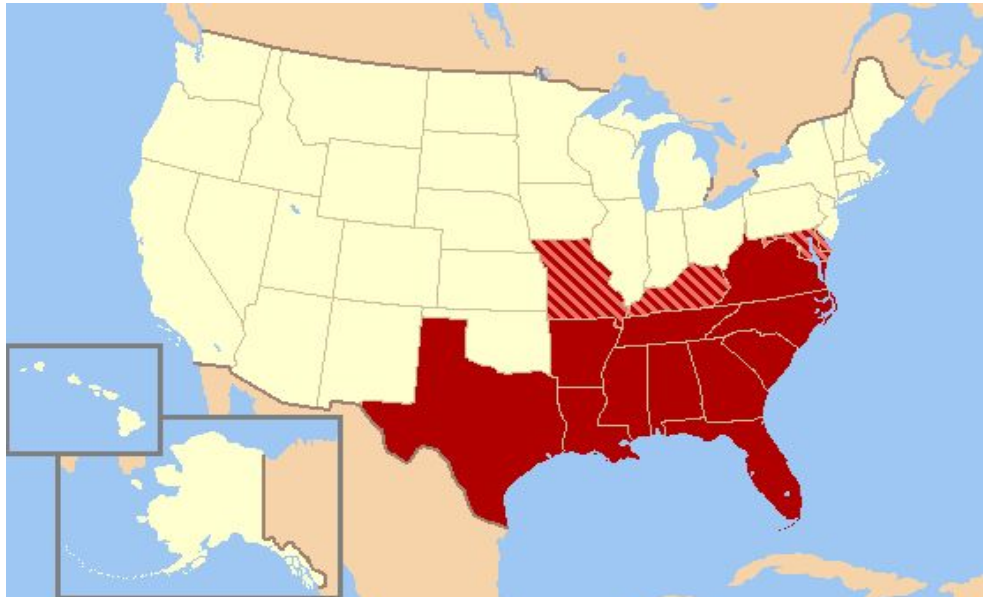


Figure 3: A historical division of the Southern United States, prior to the division of Virginia (source: Wikipedia).

Currently, however, the United States Census Bureau refers to such states as part of the South, as illustrated by the map below.

Figure 4 – Southern United States currently

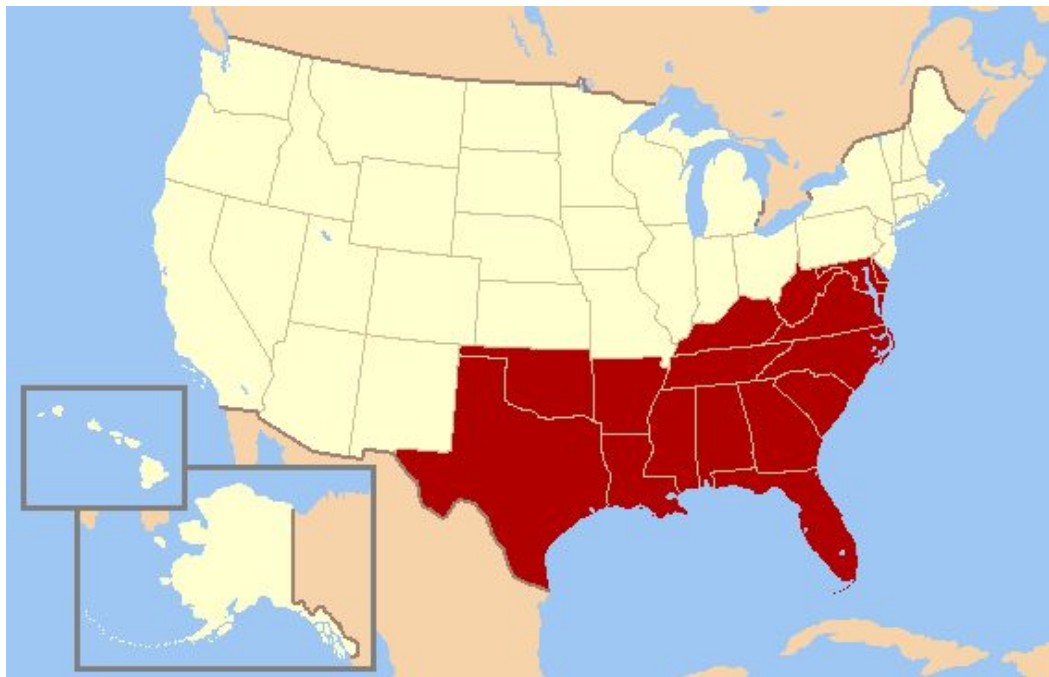


Figure 4: Current division of the South, according to the United States Census Bureau. (source: Wikipedia⁴).

⁴ Link: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=15055407>

The southern states relied on slave labor, which was the main workforce for the plantations. Slavery had a long lasting social and cultural impact on southern society, even after it was outlawed by the 13th amendment. Racism was rampant and practically institutionalized in the aftermath of the Civil War and during the Reconstruction period, enforced by disenfranchisement and by acts of segregation such as the Jim Crow laws, which lasted until the 1960s. Furthermore, the impact caused by years of slavery is also noticeable in Southern Gothic literature, where slavery and racism have been recurrent themes since the antebellum years, be it in the shape of narratives that reassured white people of their racial privileges, or in the narratives written by escaped slaves – which, according to Crow (2017), were propelled by events such as the Haitian Revolution and by slave revolts in the South itself.

Another cultural aspect of Southern states is how deeply religious the vast majority of them are. Most of the South is encompassed by the Bible Belt, a region where conservative Protestantism is the main form of Christianity, with the Southern Baptist Convention as one of its main churches. In addition, not only do the southern churches have higher attendances than the ones in the northern parts of the country, but religion also plays a huge role in southern society and politics. As in slavery and racism, this impact is reflected in literature too, since “the South’s dominant evangelical Protestantism, with its several variants and cults, provides the background for much Southern Gothic” (CROW, 2017, p. 151). An example of that is Flannery O’Connor’s short story *Good Country People*, published for the first time in 1955. Set in rural Georgia, the narrative centers around Mrs. Hopewell and her daughter Joy/Hulga, who are conned by a Bible salesman. Mrs. Hopewell is fooled by him acting as a good Christian, whereas Hulga is charmed by his wit. The man leads both women on and then steals Hulga’s prosthetic leg and her glasses, ultimately proving that looks can be deceiving, and that there are no good country people.

Religion features heavily in the first season of *True Detective* too, both Christian and non-Christian. A festival with elements of Voodoo and Santería is mentioned by Rust in the seventh episode of the series, for example. Santería is a syncretic religion, created during the sixteenth century by slaves who were brought from what now is Nigeria and Benin, that mixes “various Yoruba religious beliefs and practices with the Roman Catholic system of the

Spanish plantation owners” (IRELE; JEYIFO, 2010, p. 305), whereas Voodoo is a set of spiritual beliefs that was brought to the state of Louisiana by West African slaves. The artifacts found in the crime scenes bear some resemblance to *gris-gris*, charms of Muslim origin that are quite common in Louisiana Voodoo, according to Van Young (2014). In addition, *True Detective* criticizes Christianity too, with Matthew McConaughey’s character referring to it as “the ontological fallacy of expecting a light at the end of the tunnel” (S01E03, minute 13:22), and exposing “the ruined evangelicalism of the Tuttle-Ledoux clan” (VAN YOUNG, 2014).

Furthermore, not only does Southern Gothic literature rely on themes that are a direct consequence of the formation of the South, some aesthetics of the genre are also related to its history. The old house and the plantation, for example, appear in many Southern narratives. In William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*, the house is described as “a gutted ruin rising gaunt and stark out of a grove of unpruned cedar trees. It was a landmark, known as the Old Frenchman place, built before the Civil War; a plantation house set in the middle of a tract of land; of cottonfields and gardens and lawns long since gone back to jungle.” (FAULKNER, 1985, p. 8). Further on, the description given by Temple on the house adds to the notion of it as the *locus horribilis* of the narrative, as it happens later on the story, since she describes it as

set in a ruined lawn, surrounded by abandoned grounds and fallen outbuildings. But nowhere was any sign of husbandry - plough or tool; in no direction was a planted field in sight - only a gaunt weather-stained ruin in a sombre groove through which the breeze drew with a sad, murmurous sound. Temple stopped. (FAULKNER, 1985, p. 35)

Other notable old houses in Southern literature are *Belle Reve*, in Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*, although only mentioned. In addition, a more recent example of the house in Southern Gothic is Adora’s house in Gillian Flynn’s *Sharp Objects* and its television counterpart. The house often symbolizes a return of the past, the place where grotesque actions take shape, or both – which is the case for *Sharp Objects* and *Sanctuary*. The picture below depicts a Southern old house, albeit in the years before the Civil War.

Figure 5 – Southern old house in the Antebellum years



Figure 5: Chromolithograph of the Woodland Plantation in West Pointe à la Hache, Louisiana, United States, by Currier and Ives, 1871 (Source: Library of Congress).

The old house is an element of the Southern American Gothic that is present in *True Detective* as well. Albeit only appearing in the last episode of the series, “Form and Void”, the house works as a *locus horribilis* for the conclusion of the story. Errol Childress, one of the bastards of the powerful Tuttle family, lives there with his half-sister, who was sexually abused by their grandfather and with whom Errol has an incestuous relationship – tropes that are somewhat common in Southern Gothic fiction. Childress is also the killer behind the murders of Dora Lange, and of a dozen of other women and children along the coast of Louisiana, having often used his jobs at schools funded by the charity driven by the higher branch of his family, the Tuttle Ministries Wellsprings Program, to find his victims. In addition to that, the property is where Rust finds Carcosa, the mystically elusive temple where Childress worshipped the Yellow King. The outside of the house in *True Detective* bears some resemblance to the one that was illustrated above, although with an added aura of decay, as it is possible to see in the picture that follows:

Figure 6 – The Childress’ house on the outside



Figure 6: The outside of the old house in *True Detective*. The fact that the house seems to be slowly disappearing among the vegetation adds to the atmosphere of decay (source: *True Detective* (2014-) dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, season one, episode eight, “Form and Void”, distributed by HBO).

Another important aspect of Southern Gothic literature is the location, city or nature-wise. Southern narratives often describe its towns as dirty, muggy and decayed, such is the case in the stage directions of the first act of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which describes

the exterior of a two-story corner building on a street in New Orleans which is named Elysian Fields and runs between the L&N tracks and the river. The section is *poor* but, unlike corresponding sections in other American cities, it has a raffish charm. [...] The sky that shows around the dim white building is peculiarly tender blue, almost a turquoise, which invests the scene with a kind of lyricism and gracefully attenuates the *atmosphere of decay*. (WILLIAMS, 1990, p. 243, emphasis added)

In *Sharp Objects*, the fictional Wind Gap is described in a similar manner by Camille, who says that “this part of Missouri is ominously flat miles of unmajestic trees broken only by the thin strip of highway” (FLYNN, 2014, p. 10). In addition, she drives by “a lonely cul-de-sac of old houses, meant to be part of a development that never happened” (FLYNN, 2014, p. 10) just before she reaches the small town, holding her breath as she passes the sign welcoming her to the city in “the way that kids do when they drive by cemeteries” (FLYNN, 2014, p. 11). The images created by Gillian Flynn’s narrative add to this idea that these Southern cities and

its inhabitants are stuck, unable to move forward and perpetually going through a cycle, time and time again.

When it comes to natural landscapes, the topography of the South is perhaps where the states differ from one another the most. Southern geography varies from mountainous landscapes such as the Ozarks – namely in parts of Missouri and in Arkansas – and the Southern Appalachia on the southeast portion of the country, to the Gulf Coast, where bayous and swamps are a frequent environment. In literature, Sivils (2016) believes that, even though Southern Gothic landscapes “are often designated by its non-human characteristics, the concept of the landscape (literary or otherwise) cannot be understood without appreciating the fact that humanity through our actions, our perceptions and our imaginings – shares in virtually every aspect of its being” (p. 84). An example of that is Laura McRaven’s description of the vegetation alongside the Mississippi Delta in Eudora Welty’s *Delta Wedding*, “sometimes in the cotton were trees with one, two, or three arms – she could draw better trees than those were.” (WELTY, 1991, p. 3)

Finally, although the first season of *True Detective* does not explicitly deal with the topic of racism and the long-lasting impact of slavery in Southern society, other themes and aspects of the Southern American Gothic are present in the series. Religion, incest, rape, for example, are all present in Nic Pizzolatto’s work. The Southern Gothic aesthetic of the old house, the return of the past, the landscape as the *locus horribilis*, too, are all part of the narrative of *True Detective*. The following chapter focuses on the notions of cinematography and *mise-en-scène*, and how they affect the way these elements are perceived.

NARRATOLOGY

3.1 general notes on narratology

According to Bal (2009), narratology can be defined as a group of theories that can be applied to the analysis and understanding of everything that tells a story – texts, images, so on and so forth. It is important to notice that narrative texts do not necessarily have to take the shape in written form, and Bal defines them as “a finite, structured whole composed of signs. These can be linguistic units such as words and sentences, but they can also be different signs,

such as cinematic shots and sequences, or painted dots, lines and blots” (BAL, 2009, p. 4). Furthermore, she adds to that definition by stating that the narrative is composed by three layers that do not exist without one another: *text*, *story*, and *fabula*. Firstly, the *text* is where an agent conveys the story to the reader through a particular medium – from language to image to sound, for example. Secondly, the *story* is the content of that text, and “the way in which the events are presented” (BAL, 2009, p. 6). Lastly, the *fabula* is the “sequence of events as they ‘occur’ in the imaginative world” (BAL, 2009, p. 6), a chronological sequence of the events that are experienced by the agents.

Another important distinction is the difference between narrator and focalizer. The narrator of a text is an “agent which utters the (linguistic or other) signs which constitute the text” (BAL, 2009, p. 18). The narrator can be external or character-bound, the former never referring to itself as a character, while the latter does. While the narrator is the subject of the actions, the focalizer is the subject of perception, “the point from which the elements are viewed” (BAL, 2009, p. 135). In addition, according to Herman and Vervaeck (2005), focalization is responsible for providing psychological depth and an inside look on the emotions of the characters.

An example of this distinction between narrator and focalizer happens in the first episode of *True Detective*, “Long Red Dark”, when the older versions of the main characters are being interviewed in 2012. The narrators are character-bound and constituted by detectives Rust Cohle and Marty Hart, who are there to give their recollection on the murder of Dora Lange, a 1995 case they worked in. Their depositions are being recorded by a camera, the angle from which the audience can see things that the narrative does not explicitly tell – how the characters became haunted by a case they were not able to solve, reflected especially on Rust’s appearance. This is an early introduction to some of the ghosts of the past that have followed the character to the present, a common theme of the Southern American Gothic fiction, in the shape of focalization movements.

Lastly, Bal (2009) highlights that narratology can easily be applied to visual stories as well. The concept of focalization, for example, is represented through visual signs such as composition instead of linguistic signs, even though they have the same function in both media. In addition, adapting a novel into a movie is “not a one-on-one transposition of story

elements into images, but a visual working through of the novel's most important aspects and their meanings" (BAL, 2009, p. 167), meaning that these adaptations must be addressed according to what the type of media requires, and criticized accordingly, too. Furthermore, Bal states that there is a need for more research into film narratology, since "attention to visuality is tremendously enriching for the analysis of literary narratives" (BAL, 2009, p. 166). The following section will focus on *mise-en-scène* and cinematography as defined by Verstraten (2006), two concepts of visuality that are important for film narratology.

3.2 Film Narratology

In his book *Film Narratology*, Verstraten (2006) states that *mise-en-scène* and cinematography are two techniques that are applied to the first level of narration, which is the framed image. This first level encompasses everything that is visually relevant to the composition a single shot, with *mise-en-scène* being defined as "who or what is being shown" (VERSTRATEN, 2006, p. 56, emphasis added), whereas the concern of cinematography is how these elements are being shown. Verstraten adds that, since "what we see can never be detached from how we see it" (VERSTRATEN, 2006, p. 56), these two techniques are closely linked.

In very simple terms, *mise-en-scène* refers to everything that is captured by the camera and composes a filmic shot. The actors that are casted, their acting styles, the clothes worn by the characters and the props they use, the scenery and location, as well as lighting and coloring are all examples of *mise-en-scène*. The author starts by explaining the importance of choosing the right actors. According to Verstraten (2006), the casting of an actor can impact the narrative either as a tool for cultural commentary – the 90s trend of casting a well-known star like Gary Oldman in Coppola's *Dracula* for the role of a monster, for example, presenting him as sexually attractive and therefore blurring the lines between good and evil –, or simply because the physical features of the actor match the ones of the character they are playing.

The case for Matthew McConaughey being cast as Rust Cohle in *True Detective*, however, is neither. Director Cary Fukunaga revealed that McConaughey was initially set to play Hart, but convinced the producers to give him the role of Cohle. In an interview for

Variety Magazine, the actor said that he wanted to get inside the character's mind – “the obsession, the island of a man – I'm always looking for a guy who monologues”, he added. Creator Nic Pizzolatto also stated “in the hands of a lesser actor, many of these lines would sound ridiculous”, and that no other actor would make Detective Rust Cohle work as well as McConaughey does. It is possible to say, therefore, that McConaughey got the role of Rust because of his acting style, which is, according to Verstraten (2006), another important characteristic of *mise-en-scène* to achieve what the narrative is aiming for.

In addition, costumes and props are elements that are constantly used for narrative purposes. Props are objects, other than costumes and furniture, that are present on screen – or on stage in the case of plays being performed – and play a part on the development of the narrative. Verstraten (2006) adds that props are, sometimes, “an unmistakable part of a character”. In addition, he states that certain props are characterized as “stubborn objects” (VERSTRATEN, 2006, p. 62), and that their repetitive apparition often helps in the solution of a problem.

Verstraten states that while clothes can be extremely noticeable and describe some aspects of the character's personality, they “can also be noteworthy because of their strategic inconspicuousness” (VERSTRATEN, 2006, p. 60). Furthermore, costumes are historically used to represent and differentiate good guys from bad ones, when “the man with the smooth-shaven face and handsome suit is automatically positioned as a morally just character; and the scruffy, hairy man can only be up to no good. (...) *Altering this code by giving the villain saintly looks would thus always be a narratively meaningful modification.*” (VERSTRATEN, 2006, p. 61, emphasis added). This switch is noticeable in *True Detective*, for example, when we are introduced to Reverend Tuttle in the first episode, “Long Red Dark”.

Tuttle is a man of God, and a very powerful one at that, since his cousin is the Governor of Louisiana. Not only that, but he is also wearing a dark, nice suit; his hair is impeccable, and he runs a charity. This is a stark comparison to Rust's disheveled looks whenever the storyline shifts back to 2012, which give him the air of a man who is slightly unhinged, but by the end of the season we learn that the people behind the murders along the

Louisiana coast are the ones who are part of the morally flawless, deeply religious Tuttle family.

Figure 7 – Reverend Tuttle and Rust



Figure 7: Reverend Tuttle (left) and Rust Cohle (right) in 1995. (source: *True Detective* (2014-) dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, season one, episode one, “Long Red Dark”, distributed by HBO).

Figure 8 – Rust in 2012



Figure 8: Rust’s appearance in 2012. (source: *True Detective* (2014-) dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, season one, episode one, “Long Red Dark”, distributed by HBO).

Figures 7 and 8 illustrate the difference between the way Reverend Tuttle and the 2012 version of Rust dress themselves. That contrast is highlighted by the use of editing, a

technique that will not be explored in depth in this research, but that allows the creation of a montage – that is, more than one shot put together – in which is possible to see how much Rust’s appearance has changed through the course of seventeen years.

Concerning the location, Verstraten states that “certain genres demand certain locations” (VERSTATEN, 2006, p. 63), as is the case for Gothic fiction, for example. He adds that the choice for a specific kind of location can be influenced by its aesthetic values as well. Southern American Gothic literature is naturally set in the South, but in the case of *True Detective*, the fictional Erath, Louisiana, presents some interesting imagery of swamps and bayous, which are a naturally ambiguous mix between land and water, plus an industrial, dusty background at some points, as pictured by the frame below:

Figure 9 – Swamp



Figure 7: This shot encapsulates both the industrial background and the swamp. In addition, the trees being bare of leaves and white as bones, and the dry vegetation alongside the road add to the negative aesthetic. Nothing grows. (source: *True Detective* (2014-) dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, season one, episode eight, “Form and Void”, distributed by HBO).

All of those characteristics are aesthetical, and are responsible for creating a feeling of isolation, and desolation for the narrative to take place, with Rust himself mentioning that the people living along these places act like they “don’t even know that the outside world exists” (S01E01). In addition, on the first and last episodes, Rust says that the place gives him a bad taste in his mouth, something like aluminum, or ash, which also contributes to the idea that

something bad is unfolding in front of their eyes, something that is being propelled by the environment of the place.

Lighting and coloring are, perhaps, the *mise-en-scène* elements that are most closely related to cinematography. According to Verstraten (2006), lighting is used to typify the characters according to their morals. In a shot, we could have a conversation where one of the characters is bathed by light, whereas the other one could have half of his face shadowed, indicating that one of the characters is hiding something, for example. Furthermore, the colors belong to the *mise-en-scène* category because everything naturally *has* color, and these colors do not exist without meaning. In addition, “colour cannot be disconnected from the setting as well” (VERSTRATEN, 2006, p. 65), which takes us back to the dusty, industrial background of *True Detective* – the scenes where Rust and Hart are driving, for example, are full of brown and grey tones, which make everything around look sort of heavy, like the contrast is on low. When the colors are edited through the use of tints or effects, however, that is when cinematography is in motion.

According to Verstraten (2006), cinematography is responsible for how the framed image is shown to the audience. This *how* encompasses the way the scene is recorded – material and speed-wise –, from which angle the shot is filmed, the lenses that are used, and so forth. Some cinematographic choices include coloring – again, when “colour is the result of a manipulation of the image” (VERSTRATEN, 2006, p. 68) – and framing, that is, what fits inside the image, what is being left out. In addition, depth, iris, and background projections, which are usually accomplished through the use of different camera lenses, are also defined as cinematographic processes by Verstraten. An example of that occurs in the second episode of *True Detective*, “Seeing Things”, as we can see below:

Figure 10 – Background focalization



Figure 10: The wall to Rust’s bedroom. (source: *True Detective* (2014-) dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, season one, episode two, “Seeing Things”, distributed by HBO).

Figure 11 – Background focalization (cont.)



Figure 11: The timeframe between these two shots is 0.5 seconds. (source: *True Detective* (2014-) dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, season one, episode two, “Seeing Things”, distributed by HBO).

What happens here is that initial shot (figure 10) is showing us the wall of Cohle’s bedroom – where just a single cross is hanging – before Rust sits up, which is depicted on the second shot (figure 11). The camera takes a few seconds to focus *on Rust*, still focusing on the white wall

behind him. By this point the audience knows that Rust has trouble falling asleep, and the director uses the technique of background projection to provide the idea of disorientation to the scene.

4 CLOSE WATCHING

This chapter will focus on the analysis of “Long Red Dark”, the opening episode of *True Detective*. After a brief summary of the first season of the series, ten shots from the first episode will be analyzed according to the elements of *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, and narratology that are present on it. Their presence on screen and their influence on the Southern American Gothic tropes will be discussed according to the definitions of Verstraten (2006) and Bal (2009).

4.1 A brief summary of the first season of *True Detective*

Set in Louisiana, the first season of *True Detective* follows Rust Cohle and Martin Hart as they investigate the murder of Dora Lange. The narrative of the series is nonlinear, shifting between 1995 and 2012 throughout most of the episodes except for the last one, which is all set in the present. In 1995, Dora Lange’s body was found under unusual circumstances on a cane field in the fictional city of Erath – she was kneeling under a large tree, with multiple stab marks on her midsection. Her eyes blindfolded and her hands were tied in front of her in a praying position. In addition to that, Dora was wearing a crown made of deer antlers and twigs, and there were multiple handmade sculptures that resembled bird traps scattered around her. Due to the strangeness of the scene, the crime was often described as having a relation to anti-Christian practices and occult motivations. After months of relentless investigation along the coast of Louisiana, Rust and Hart manage to catch the men that were responsible not only for Dora’s murder, but also for the unreported disappearance of other women and children.

Or so they thought they had.

In 2012, Rust and Hart are no longer working for the Crime Investigation Division of the Louisiana State Police. Having quit the force in 2002, Rust now works at a bar; Marty worked for a few more years, then quit to become a private investigator. In addition, they have not spoken since, a consequence of a falling out they had due to Marty's infidelity to his wife – which leads her into cheating on Marty with Rust. Seventeen years after the murder of Dora Lange, the two men are called by detectives Papania and Gilbough of the CID to give their recollection on the case. By the end of the first episode, Rust and Hart learn that the real reason behind the need for their depositions is much more somber than a simple case of a file lost because of a hurricane. The body of a woman was found, in similar manner to Dora's, tied to a bridge over Lake Charles, a sign that they did not catch the right men back in '95 – at least not all of them, which is something that Rust has known for a while now, but Hart does not.

By the end of the sixth episode, "Haunted Houses", Rust and Hart talk for the first time since 2002, and Rust convinces Hart into listening to his theory on the murders. In "After You've Gone", the second-to-last episode of the series, Rust provides Hart with compelling visual evidence that the Tuttlés, a powerful and deeply religious family from Erath, are involved in a cult that is responsible for the disappearance of dozens of children along the coast of Louisiana. Hart, shocked by what Rust shows him, agrees to join Rust's investigation, which becomes a two-men mission into exposing the rotten truth behind the cult and the unreported disappearances of children.

On the last episode of the series, "Form and Void", Rust and Marty finally manage to find and ultimately kill Errol Childress, the man behind the murder of Dora Lange – and dozens of others. Son of an illegitimate half-brother of the Tuttlés, Childress lives in squalor at his dad's old house with one of his sisters, with whom he has an incestuous relationship. On the property, the man leads Rust through a labyrinth which he calls Carcosa, where his temple of worship to the Yellow King is situated. Errol tries to kill Rust, who is saved by Hart. Albeit severely wounded, the two of them kill Errol. With the evidence provided by Rust's one-man investigation, and after finding dozens of bodies in Childress' backyard, Papania and Gilbough, the two detectives who were responsible for the Lake Charles investigation, manage to connect Errol to dozens of missing-person cases and murders. The Tuttlés,

however, escape prosecution. After months in the hospital, Rust decides that he cannot be bothered with it anymore, and the episode ends with Rust clutching to Marty's shoulder as they limp away into the night, discussing the endless fight between light and dark as the screen fades to black.

4.2 Season one, episode one, "Long Red Dark"

Focalization is a process that happens in different movements throughout the first episode of the series. Depicted by figure 12, the audience is first introduced to Rust in a shot where the focalization is external – that is, Rust is not being seen through the eyes of any character in particular. Despite the voiceover of the 2012 version of Marty saying that "Rust would pick a fight with the sky if he didn't like its shade of blue" (S01E01, minute 03:12) working as the narrator here, we the audience are *not* being shown that side of Rust. What the external focalization shows is Rust sitting alone in his car, clearly in some stage of distress – which is highlighted by his disheveled hair, and the fact that he is drinking and smoking a cigarette.

Figure 12 – External focalization on Rust



Figure 12: Focalization on Rust being done by an external focalizer. (Source: *True Detective* (2014-) dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, season one, episode one, "Long Red Dark", distributed by HBO).

The second focalization movement that is relevant for the development of the episode is ambiguous, once it shifts from internal to external in the same scene. In the shot depicted by figure 13 (below), the focalization on Rust happens through the camera that is recording him while he gives his recollections on the murder of Dora Lange, which would classify the focalization as external. There are, however, two cops asking him questions from behind the camera, which makes the focalization internal and character-based, since they are a non-neutral part of the narrative. The audience cannot see the two cops yet, but we are aware that they are there. By using the camera as a point for perspective, this shot highlights the use of focalization through the use of a prop – the camera that is being used by the two detectives rather than the one shooting the scene.

Figure 13 – Focalization through prop on Rust



Figure 13: Focalization on this shot happens both external (the camera recording Rust) and internally (the cops who are sitting there, watching Rust and asking him questions). (Source: *True Detective* (2014-) dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, season one, episode one, “Long Red Dark”, distributed by HBO).

In the shots analyzed above, focalization is being used to create a certain amount of suspense in the narrative. Based on the definition of suspense as “the effect of the procedures by which the reader or the character is made to ask questions which are only answered later” (BAL, 2009, p. 163), it is possible to say that by providing these visual elements to the

audience, *True Detective* wants the viewer to question the information being given. Why is Rust so upset by the prospect of having dinner with Marty’s family? What happened with Rust during these seventeen years and why did it take such a toll in his physical appearance? All these questions are answered either later on in this episode, or throughout the season.

In the shot depicted by figure 14 below, however, the audience gets some insight on Rust’s personality. Through what Bal (2009) defines as character focalization – that is, one that occurs from the point of view of someone who is placed inside the narrative –, the audience gets to see some details of the place where Rust lives through Marty’s eyes. By focusing his gaze on the books, all serial killer-themed, the viewer learns from Marty that Rust is very meticulous on his research for the work. Bal (2009) adds that the use of this type of focalization often leads to certain aspects of the narrative being manipulated into something that they are not, which makes this shot especially valuable if we consider that, further along the series, the two detectives who are investigating the Lake Charles case in 2012 try to imply that Rust is somehow involved with the killings.

Figure 14 – Books on Rust’s apartment



Figure 14: Internal focalization through Marty’s character. (Source: *True Detective* (2014-) dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, season one, episode one, “Long Red Dark”, distributed by HBO).

In addition to the use of focalization to provide emotional and psychological depth to the characters, *True Detective* relies on elements of *mise-en-scène* and cinematography. These techniques are used mostly to highlight the tropes and aesthetics of Southern American Gothic fiction present in the narrative of the series, making them noticeable to the audience. The following shots, depicted in figures 15 and 16, are examples of that.

In the first shot (figure 15, below), the use of props is fundamental to the grotesque aspect of the crime scene. The crown of antlers and the blindfold, for example, are props that are representative of the *ethos* of Carcosa, the place where the rituals and sacrifices were performed by Childress. In addition, they will appear again in the following episodes of *True Detective*, which indicates, according to Verstraten (2006) that they are important to the solving of the problem – the murder, in this case. Furthermore, the way the only thing that is being framed by this shot is her body highlights more closely the details that are important to the narrative, such as how ritualistic the whole process before and after her death seems to have been, for example.

Figure 15 – The crown of antlers and the blindfold



Figure 15: Through props and framing, this shot highlights the grotesque, uncanny aspects of Dora Lange's murder (source: *True Detective* (2014-), dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, season one, episode one, "Long Red Dark", distributed by HBO).

Moreover, the shot below (figure 16) uses cinematography in order to focus on the religious aspect of the scene. Using the technique of *iris-in*, an optical effect “in which the focus moves in from the edges of the frame to leave only a small image in the centre” (VERSTRATEN, 2006, p. 73), the camera focuses specifically on Dora’s joined hands, while the rest of the shot gets progressively out of focus. The use of this technique emphasizes to the characters - and, to an extent, the audience – that this crime might be religiously motivated, further highlighting religion as one of the Southern Gothic elements present in the narrative of the first season of *True Detective*.

Figure 16 – Use of cinematography to focus on the religious aspects present on the crime scene where Dora’s body was found



Figure 16: This shot uses the cinematography technique of *iris-in* to focus on religious imagery in the narrative of the series. (Source: *True Detective* (2014-), dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, season one, episode one, “Long Red Dark”, distributed by HBO).

The shots depicted by figures 17 and 18 below were taken from two different points of the episode. The first one is from the crime scene, whereas the second one is from a scene by the end of the episode, when the two men are investigating the disappearance of Marie Fontenot, a little girl who went missing circa 1990. While collecting information on the cases, Rust and Marty meet a priest who recognizes the twig sculptures as something that his aunt taught him to do – “some folks call them bird traps,” he says, “old auntie told us that they

were Devil nets; you put them around the bed and it catches the Devil before he gets too close” (S01E01, minute 34:42). In addition, he briefly mentions that these twig sculptures have a connection to Santería practices.

Figure 17 – Use of props: bird trap



Figure 17: Bird trap found in the first crime scene, hanging from the tree under which Dora’s body was found. (Source: *True Detective* (2014-), dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, season one, episode one, “Long Red Dark”, distributed by HBO).

It is possible, then, to classify these bird traps as what Verstraten (2006) defines as ‘stubborn objects’. As these two shots are not the only ones where the twig sculptures are found by Rust and Marty, their repetitive apparition throughout the first season has a meaningful impact to the narrative of the series – the killer is leaving them near the crime scenes as part of his ritual. Additionally, they could work as a nod to the confluence of religions that are common in Louisiana.

Figure 18 – Use of props: bird trap (cont.)



Figure 18: Bird trap found in an old shack at the property of Danny Fontenot, Marie’s uncle, where she used to play before disappearing. (Source: *True Detective* (2014-), dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, season one, episode one, “Long Red Dark”, distributed by HBO).

Another important aspect of *True Detective* is the location. With an abundance of swamps and bayous, the geography along the Louisiana coast provides the perfect setting for the first season of the series. According to Sivils (2016), the landscape has been a fundamental element of Southern Gothic fiction since its beginning – the swamp, for example, has been used by many canonical authors “as a locale for a problematic form of wilderness-linked liberation” (SIVILS, 2016, p. 86), thus reinforcing the notion proposed by Verstraten (2006) that sometimes a literary genre requires a specific location. By choosing Southern Louisiana as a locale, *True Detective* does exactly that: through the gloomy nature, ever-changing quality of the bayous and swamps, the series transforms these stretches of landscapes into the ideal place for the grisly acts of violence that take place throughout the series.

In addition, the gloomy, uncommon atmosphere provided by the swamps are aesthetically important for *True Detective* as well. As it is possible to see in the shot below (figure 19), the image that life alongside these places seems to create is one where nothing grows or changes, thus reinforcing the sense of isolation that Rust so often mentions during

the season. Furthermore, Cherry (2016) states that Southern Gothic televisuality often uses bodies of water, as well as red and orange tones, to create the idea of humidity and heat. Albeit in a subtle way, these elements are also identifiable in the shot below, in which the audience can see a body of water on each side of the frame, plus a very faint shade of red reflected on the swamp on the left.

Figure 19 – The multiple meanings of the landscape in “Long Red Dark”



Figure 19: A shot of Marty and Rust driving on a back road in Erath, Louisiana (source: *True Detective* (2014-), dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, season one, episode one, “Long Red Dark”, distributed by HBO).

Another example of color being used as *mise-en-scène* is the shot below (figure 20). Once again, the different shades of orange and yellow, plus the broad sunlight, are being used to indicate heat.

Moreover, shot 19 is also an example of cinematography in action. According to Verstraten (2006), when a character is being framed on the foreground, “there is a good chance that his or her vision will become known to the viewer” (p. 71), which is exactly what happens – Rust is about to say that he does not sleep, he only dreams. Framing, however, is not the only cinematography technique being used in this scene. On the shot right after the one depicted by figure 19, the focus shifts from the foreground (Rust) to the background

(Marty), in a technique that Verstraten (2006) refers to as *rack focus*. As a consequence, the audience is able to not only get some more information on Rust’s behavior, but also become aware of the way that Marty reacts to what he has to say, thus building a picture of their relationship – at least in the first few months of their partnership – for the understanding of the viewer.

Figure 20 – *Mise-en-scène* and cinematography in action



Figure 20: “I don’t sleep. I just dream,” Rust says, less than two minutes after Marty had asked him to stop saying weird things. (Source: *True Detective* (2014-), dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, season one, episode one, “Long Red Dark”, distributed by HBO).

The final shot to be discussed here is the one depicted by figure 21 (below). Taken from the scene where Rust and Marty are collecting information on the disappearance of Marie Fontenot, who had gone missing five years prior, this shot is, potentially, one of the best from the episode – mainly because every aspect of its composition comes together in a very cohesive, aesthetically pleasing way. In terms of *mise-en-scène*, for example, this shot makes great use of lighting and coloring by using the contrast between light (wall) and dark (the crosses, the shadows on Rust’s face) to highlight the crosses on the wall behind Rust. Additionally, the use of red tones provides, once again, the idea of heat to the shot. The two crosses can be considered an example of the use of props, perhaps for emphasis on the importance of religion down there in the South. Lastly, by opting for using the technique of

deep focus to capture this shot, the director manages to encapsulate all of these elements in a single frame, allowing for the creation of a nice composition.

Figure 21 – The church scene



Figure 21: The use of deep focus on this shot allows the director to capture Rust (foreground) and the two crosses on the background in their entirety. (Source: *True Detective* (2014-), dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, season one, episode one, “Long Red Dark”, distributed by HBO).

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

My initial idea for this research was to analyze how plot, setting and aesthetic influenced one another when it came to the Southern American Gothic in the first season of *True Detective*. In order to do so, the theoretical background for my research would be based on narratology and *film* narratology, namely the elements of *mise-en-scène* and cinematography. After the analysis of “Long Red Dark”, it became clear that narratology has a massive impact on the delivery of Southern American Gothic tropes present in *True Detective* to the viewer.

The best example of the influence that plot, setting and aesthetic have on one another is discussed on figure 19 (page 41), the shot in which Marty and Rust are driving through the Louisiana back roads. The landscape (swamp) depicted on that shot has a connection with both the plot (murder), and the aesthetic (sense of isolation). Nothing in *True Detective*,

therefore, exists in a vacuum. In addition, a good example to the importance of film narratology is depicted in figures 17 and 18 (pages 39 and 40, respectively), when the use of props (*mise-en-scène*) is discussed. The bird traps that are found around Dora's body and where Marie Fontenot used to live not only represent the 'stubborn object' proposed by Verstraten (2006), they also have a connection to Santería, something that is culturally and historically connected to the South, and to the state of Louisiana most of all.

There are, of course, limitations to this research. The biggest of them is, perhaps, the size of the scope that I used for the analysis, which was, unfortunately, limited to one episode. Since I wanted this research to make a minimal amount of sense, I thought the sensible thing to do would be to start from the beginning – and then keep working from there in the future. A more detailed, extensive reading that approaches and discusses all of the episodes is possible – and most likely to be a success, since *True Detective* gets more and more Gothic as the first season progresses –, and something that I intend to do in the future, if I have the chance. Lastly, I would like to think that this research has contributed, albeit minimally, to the studies on film narratology.

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