CHAPTER 11

Ghosts of American Gothic in HBO's *True Detective* Season One: Intertextual Media, Cartography and American Photographs

Conor Lauesen

> This place is like somebody's memory of a town and the memory is fading. It's like there was never anything here but jungle.
>
> "The Long Bright Dark"

The narrative conventions of Nic Pizzolatto's gothic crime noir story *True Detective* (Season 1) appear familiar enough. Two male detectives catch a deleterious "419" murder case in an abandoned rural Louisiana marshland. In an atmospheric opening scene we learn the identity of the victim: Dora Lang, a young, impoverished white woman. However, *True Detective*'s penchant for the uncanny emerges soon thereafter when we are exposed to the ritualized pagan landscape of a deranged crime scene. The victim's corpse is positioned beneath an oak tree. In what appears to be some kind of comprehensive sacrificial tableau, the killer presents the young woman's dead body as a necrophiliac lust object: bound, gagged, crowned and bent over. "This is going to happen again. Or it's happened before. Both," says the main protagonist, Rust Cohle. "It's fantasy enactment. Ritual. Fetishization. Iconography. This is his vision. Her body is a paraphilic love map." ("The Long Bright Dark"). In this first scene, a gamut of interpersonal drama ensues. Character typologies quickly emerge, and this primal scene of fright reveals the gothic sensibilities and terrestrial horror at the center of the HBO program.

In this chapter, I show how a dense trove of obfuscated visual iconography informs the inner-psychological matrix of the series' first season: the absent archive reveals an aesthetic tradition of the American gothic within the film reels of the 2014 HBO program. Reaching beyond the Americana literary domain of Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft, Shirley Jackson and Thomas Ligotti, or the palpable cosmic terror of Robert W. Chambers *The King in Yellow*,

 | DOI:10.1163/9789004746381_013

my essay, instead, evokes a gothic history of pictorial art latently permeating the visual text of *True Detective*. Most relevant, I follow the work of Sarah Burns in her text *Painting the Dark Side* to trace how the gothic imagination and its haunting specters of otherness inform the mood and content of *True Detective*. Burns suggests that "the gothic is a mode of pictorial expression that critiques the Enlightenment vision of the rational American Republic as a place of liberty, balance, harmony, and progress. Gothic pictures are meditations on haunting and being haunted" (8). More than merely unique psychological crime noir adumbrated with gothic elements, I suggest that the visual archive of *True Detective* is a complex rhizome of art historical narrative, myth, and iconography. Kindred conceptual themes and poetic literary devices reveal an eco-gothic vision. Neo-realism and long-take, wide-angle shots deepen this atmosphere and haunt the cinematic text. Optical encounters, ghoulish visual motifs, and a ticklish plot-noir mystery dovetail to offer us an acerbic cultural critique.

I argue that imminent disaster of human, land, and planet alike are a trio of catastrophes metonymically inscribed within the ontological fabric of the HBO series. Media scholar Jonathan Elmore suggests ecological ruins are fundamental to the ethos of *True Detective*. He writes, "intertwining hurricanes and flooding alongside industry and pollution into the background and negative space of the setting, the series implicates the urgent material reality of climate change and environmental collapse into the setting" (31). A singular American sense of decay percolates across the screen: interconnected scenes of postindustrial ruin, visions of community fracture, and biochemical monstrosities propel the crime plot forward. Elmore likewise situates terrestrial horror in the decaying present, "unlike the traditional uses of the gothic setting, which look backward toward repressed cultural fears, and unlike cosmic horror which takes a temporal perspective measured in eons looking both to the impossibly ancient or the impossibly distant future" (ibid.). *True Detective* is part and parcel with this gothic story of terrestrial horror, ghosts and resin. Replete with degeneracy of societal relationships and collapsed infrastructural ecosystems, the terrestrial horror of *True Detective* is ubiquitous. In the vast wasteland of contemporary America, the accumulating scars of the past lie asleep, until they don't.

First, an archaeological uncovering of what I call *media intertextuality*: I think through the post-cinematic territory of both composite and moving images: the material life of mixed media (on and off camera) exposes issues of recursion and pause, abbreviation, hyperbole and narratological fissure in *True Detective*. Next, I uncover the uncanny pathos of American places—most especially a sense of ethereal mental mapping—that viewers witness through

Rust Cohle, the main protagonist. Cohle's personal cartography tells the story: his own private historical record, intuition, synesthesia, symbolist temperament and introverted disposition are interfolded with the gothic chemical backwater of Southern Louisiana. Cohle's tragically brutal insight evokes the cerebral nature of horror and contemplative sensuousness embedded in our contemporary world on fire. Last, I conclude by investigating the visual history and constitutive pathos of American art historical iconography—both apparitional objects and thickets of place—within the wider landscape of the show.

While the genre of crime fiction—sleuthing detective work, archetypal hardboiled characters, police chasing archaeologies—formally structures the narrative, my project examines the gothic as it also relates to extra-diegetic interfacing, what film scholar Mary Ann Doane calls 'the logic of film-editing' (145). Modes of montage, rhetorical visual tools, and vernacular relics converge to operate as interrogative media, functions themselves able to generate meaning. In this way, *True Detective* applies pressure to fixed views of genre and storyline, artifice, and mimetic fiction: legible thresholds of singular psychopathic rape rituals, masculine detective work, and cinematic poesis blur. The program is a chronicle of disaster. Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* summarizes the imminence and illegibility of disaster as a momentous force that "ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact." He continues, "disaster obliterates our relation to the world as presence or as absence," and in doing so exposes us to a "certain level of passivity." Amidst this kind of all-encompassing tragedy, disaster imprints itself, an affective insignia: we are "passive with respect to the disaster" (1,3). It is precisely this kind of terrifying flux that constitutes the subtext of *True Detective.*

1 Intertextual Media: Animate Photographs, Living Bogs and Collapsed Lungs

The narrative of Episode 1, "The Long Bright Dark" formally commences with Cohle and his partner Marty Hart approaching the murder victim as local law enforcement and state police cordon off the parameters of the crime scene. Detective Rust Cohle probes the scene with a disquieting sense of awe and deference (Figure 11.1): he smells the wind, gingerly traces the steps of the murderer's path, and breathes in the delta air as he nears the body, at last crouching down besides Dora Lang. He grasps his oversized ledger notebook. Nicknamed "The Taxman," Cohle's idiosyncratic record-keeping archive is a first of many material-ciphers the audience comes to identify with the main protagonist.

FIGURE 11.1 "The Long Bright Dark." *True Detective*, created by Nic Pizzolatto, Season 1, episode 1, HBO, January 12, 2014

The setting then leaves the ghostly azure sky of Erath, LA. Shifting away from evidentiary traces, spectators are transported into police quarters, a holding room. This quintessential example of parallel editing, defamiliarizing viewers from the scenes, is a filmic tool imported continually throughout the program. Doane defines parallel editing "as cutting alternatively between two scenes that are assumed to have some form of relation with each other … Filmic time no longer matches, in a one-to-one correspondence, diegetic time" (193). The subsequent interrogation scene begins with an extreme close-up shot of a camera adjusting its own shutter speed and lens. Front and center, the medium specificity of *film* is on display: some clicking twitch and invisible hand surreptitiously rotates the apparatus. In the mesmeric alacrity of the camera's shuttered eye, questions of fiction and fracture, media and narrative arise. The passing speed of this hyper-aware technological instrument is followed by a discorrelated shot of three red analog letters: "REC." Recording.

In this purported meta reveal of sorts—a performative act of media confession and disclosure—the artistic directors of *True Detective* avowedly offer viewers direct and transparent access to the diegetic worldscape of the program. In parallel, the subtext of these shots in unison positions viewers inside not only the emotive domain of character and setting, but also within the ulterior network of the camera's skin. It is the modernist impulse to both reveal

and revel in the plasticity of medium specificity (here 35mm film) that augurs the palimpsest aesthetics of the show. In this first section I sketch a variety of interconnected examples that import a logic of inter-saturated media.

The logic of this media affect is not merely gratuitous visual saturation (think unwarranted violence; pornographic excess), but an effusively interactive mode of viewer interfacing. Media theorist Shane Denson's *Discorrelated Images* outlines the transitions from a cinematic to post-cinematic media regime. Denson posits,

> The free-floating camera, like free indirect discourse, makes perception into an object (or quasi-object), disrupting the subjectively perceptual correlation of suture. These are subtle but significant affronts to conventional moving-image forms, focusing our attention on visual mediation itself and questioning the correlation of eyes, visors [in Alfonso Cuaron's 2013 film *Gravity*], and cameras with the objects of vision—the mediated images—that present themselves to us in a post-cinematic landscape. (10)

Rupturing previous discursive codes of associative vision, *discorrelated images* engage in the ongoing "transaction between human and machinic agencies" (2). Following Denson, I likewise foreground the perceptual functions of the camera.

The sequential progression of shots in Episode Two, "Seeing Things," further demonstrates this *media intertextuality*. In an instance of visual fracture—and (significantly) amidst the drama of Rust's ongoing interrogation—the camera acts as incarnate machine, performing an alarming gesture. Just before the 4-minute mark, we are telescopically guided from overhead into Marty and Rust's Louisiana office. This technically shifty optical move was unprecedented in either television or cinema before *True Detective.* While visually approaching the gumshoe montage from 1995, the aural narration is discorrelated with the authorial voice of present-day Cohle, 17 years on: the obsessive introvert now a sinewy drunkard with maniacal penchants. As chief verbal interlocutor for the scene, Cohle's neurotically ranting character further complicates any legible narrative structure. All the while, dismayed viewers are urged to float betwixt realities. The camera—like Cohle himself—operates here as some proxy intractable trickster: suspicious interlopers gliding together along the edges of this unsolved detective tableau. In this disjuncture of *media intertextuality,* the gothic gaps of narrative legibility are overtly dramatized.

Next, an uncanny camera flourish rhetorically collapses diachronic space and time (1995 and 2012): a free-floating drone camera unhurriedly zooms

into an aerial tableaux-like view of Cohle's desk. Like a tornado of descending leaves, viewers are placed abruptly into the '95 setting. With a kind of absorptive motion, the glitchy image crystallizes into the devil-nested-Cajun-birdcage standing erect on Cohle's bureau table (Figure11.2). The recognizable talisman is now situated as a fetish object for all parties involved: detectives and killers, viewers and interrogators.

Another subtle motif appears in the compositional make-up of the frame: the analog video recorder, carefully positioned on a small tripod between the two contemporary detectives, is ceremoniously framed as *the* fetishized object of focus. An inversion of perceptual tactics, truth and fiction slide across gossamer strings of the Tall Man's devilish spirals. Production designer Alex DiGerlando explains the artistic origin of these gnarly gothic contraptions, created in the workshop of local artist Joshua Walsh. "Walsh is the son of a family that ran a funeral home, and he's an avid hunter and taxidermist—basically, the perfect dude for the job" (qtd. Martin n.p.). The horror of these affected votive objects accrues even greater pathos as we learn of this vernacular history. Funereal dust and petrified animal hides mesmerically weave into Walsh's unhinged traps.

Following immediately the aforenoted police questioning, the audience briefly meet Dora Lang's mother. Sitting disheveled inside the garbled detritus

FIGURE 11.2 "Seeing Things." *True Detective*, created by Nic Pizzolatto, Season 1, episode 2, HBO, January 19, 2014.

of her own home, it is as if some chemical poisons live across the swath of this rustic atmosphere. Alone, destitute and tormented, her damaged hands shake as a result of liquid toxicity: "I worked in dry-cleaning for twenty years," she says in passing. Most apt for our conversation, however, is the picture atop the mantle: the photograph shows a little girl in the woods surrounded by masked men on horses. Viewers only see the picture askance in quick panning (Figure 11.3).

Here, time and place are condensed into a deathly image: the *punctum* of the photograph is the sole child, a girl at center in line with a tree and between a band of costuming horses. Roland Barthes "return of the dead" is apposite here: "I wanted to explore it [photographs, photography] not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think" (21). Contingency is paramount. More than mere archival record, pictures embalm time; symbolic codes break down. If "film is a series of sequential singularities … the conceptualization of the instantaneous photograph as *point* opens up possibilities. It allows for thinking the image as a critical specification of time—the exact moment" (Donae 217). Appearing within the diegetic *mise-en-scene*, the solitary photograph is a Benjaminian "shock," an ontological rupture witnessed both in camera by Cohle and belatedly by watchers.

FIGURE 11.3 "Seeing Things." *True Detective*, created by Nic Pizzolatto, Season 1, episode 2, HBO, January 19, 2014

Three eyeline match cut shots with Rust expose the interior domestic scene. Embedded in the scope of those three virtual projections, a trio of totem figures tell a deep backstory to the Lang family: one, an icon statue of the Virgin Mary; two, an over-flowing bowl of pills; and three, a couple of strange family photographs. This last picture is one of few evidentiary emblems, a smoking-gun of proof throughout the investigation. It is as if this forgotten domestic photograph casually stationed as the central heirloom piece inside our principal victim's home (Dora Lang) is a possessed necromantic object; the unique possession at once also possesses, casting a thick spell. The sardonic media code-shifting imbues the "men-on-horses" and little girl image with broader metonymic pathos: within the scene of motherly questioning and household naivety, the portentous picture transforms into an icon taboo of the real—a crime in the trees living as a ghost, a decaying rural home entombed in the woods. Terrestrial horror, gothic affect and melancholia drift converge in this quilt of liquid vision.

Let us move to a different hidden case, a church equally vanished underground. Episode Three, "The Locked Room," begins with a slow tracking shot (an anticipatory filmic gesture for the brilliant five-minute tracking shot that concludes Episode 4) overhead the alienated marshlands that envelop a fallen rural church. Slowly, this ramshackle house of worship unfolds: the revivalist church's interiority and shadow crevices configuring a thick gothic chamber replete with supernaturalism, crumbling plaster, and fecund scars of time.

Next, the sleuthing omniscience of the camera acts as magnified portal: a medium length shot shows us the interiority of this abandoned tent revival church (Figure 11.4). Perhaps an askance evocation in our deepest collective unconscious of the cave drawings at Lascaux, the antler-man imprinted into the wall of the tent revival church is a heretical uber-symbol of man's fall. This makeshift religious site now abounds with shadows and vines, drawings and silhouettes; the resin of a cave wall doubling as a contemporary noir crime scene.

In this phenomenological interchange, viewers are situated in a privileged discursive vantage: inside the structure and blended within the narratological frame, we feel at once behind the stage and within the diegetic screen—second, third, and fourth. With the nominal curtain suspended for all to see, pulleys and levers, lights and camera expose the stories' frames within frames.

Meanwhile, lights expose operational scaffolding—an assemblage of police cameramen and recording media apparatuses perform a careful excavation of the ruinous evidential setting. Its own charade version of ritual enactment, the HBO film set of writers, actors and stage designers seem to interfold with

FIGURE 11.4 "The Locked Room." *True Detective*, created by Nic Pizzolatto, Season 1, episode 3, HBO, January 26, 2014

the territory of the crime scene: a performative simulacrum, both the furtive ontology of picture-taking and recursive nature of filmmaking interweave. It seems that for Fukunaga and Pizzolatto, the dramaturgical and inscriptive impulses of film—a medium of movement historically fluent in ghost-writing, mark-making, and liquid-etching—crystallizes in the revival church tent.

In the next instances, I want to push this idea of media intertext to a final equivocating edge. In Episode 2, "Seeing Things," Cohle and Hart are tipped off (after a brutal fight) about a covert brothel operating at Spanish Lake. After performing their perfunctory policework to no major avail, we learn about an ostensibly dubious fragment of evidence: Dora Lange's hodgepodge journal (Figure 11.5) (cf. Borrebye-Bjering and Holm).

Replete with an array of psychedelic pictures and prophetic sentiments, this lost-and-found paper object reveals the young women in phantasmatic anguish and erotic torment. "It reads more like fantasy Marty," notes Cohle as he pages through the labyrinthine book ("Seeing Things"). For the two detectives, it seems Lange's diaristic fantasy introjection—in words, scribbles and sketches—is not only a form of textual data, but also a vital forensic tool for addressing the pedophilic violence and deranged ritualized enactments of criminals in the bayou. In this way, the ipso-facto rhetorical insertion of a dead woman's forgotten diary into the central diegesis of the program intensifies

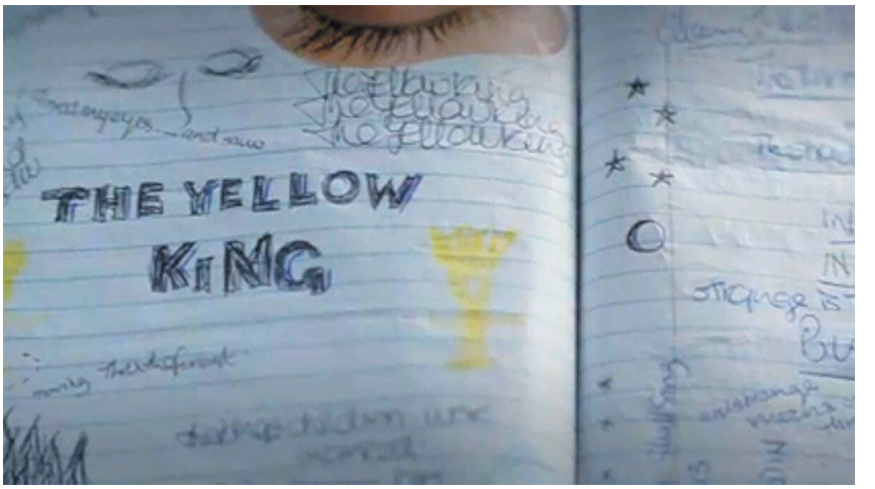

FIGURE 11.5 "Seeing Things." *True Detective*, created by Nic Pizzolatto, Season 1, episode 2, HBO, January 19, 2014

the quixotic relationships between materiality and embodiment, veracity and words, evidentiary external facts and one's own imaginary private cosmos. As we can see from the image of the journal at hand, Lange's hallucinatory worldview had become a jumbled matrix of reality and myth. For viewers, it is the subtle presence of this relic-like object, its visual brevity on camera and camp aesthetic makeup that instill the pages with gothic allure and life-like vitalism. In other words, the ontology of cinema as motion and movement are inextricably bound up in a book: the printed hand of Lange, page-turning of Cohle, and participation of viewers triangulate to portend the diary as a materialized—yet still otherworldly—document that hovers across the mental landscape of *True Detective*.

Jump forward now to the conclusion of Episode 3, "The Locked Room." At this crucial juncture—in effect the narrative midpoint of the series—we are, at last, offered an intimate view of the swamp predator. The monster in human disguise is Reginald Ladeaux. Lumbering alone and enveloped in the marsh woods, the body of Ladeaux's animalic self is the apotheosis of terrestrial horror. "The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence … The monster exists only to be read," posits film scholar Jeffrey Cohen (199). Revealed in silence, the "monster's body exists to be read," an

independent surface enlivened only with its own taboo darkness. The epidermis of horror *is* the primary node of meaning. Elmore writes "the monster's body is nothing but text; it exists only to convey" (34). With a Chernobyl-esque mask protruding from his fabled blond hair and gruff chin, Ladeaux manifests precisely this kind of keyless map. His tall-framed body is an illegible atlas wherein tattooed skin, a joltingly aggressive gait, and a trio of dangling armories perform their own terror.

This first grotesquerie—a gas mask for cooking crystal-meth—swings like some deformed pig's snout. Encapsulated and alone, the monster's straggly body conveys and contains its own macabre vessel. Beside this vitriolic mask, Ladeaux's lanky arm clutches the second weapon in hand: a machete, the agrarian tool of ecological slaying. The last prosthetic of violence is more subtle: a raggedy, soiled loincloth. This quintessential male jockstrap provides the only obfuscation, a barrier to his most private sphere of masculinity and introjected violence. Mossy cover encapsulates this solitary cosmos of drug-addiction and messianic concoction—hieroglyphs of hopelessness and loss at the core of *True Detective*'s pathos. Evacuated of all other societal presence or human signifiers, Ladeaux is a deranged king in the bayou site of horror.

At the second crucial juncture—a window leading into the final eigth chapter—viewers, alas, get a fully unveiled picturing of Errol Childress ("Tall Man, scars on his face, green spaghetti monster"). The site of his emergence is nearly the same location as that of Ladeaux from Episode 3. After trekking deep into the bayou, the two present day LA. detectives (Papania and Gilbough) reach a murky, isolated crossroads. A cemetery site of overgrown brush, the criminal mastermind emerges; his identity still unbeknownst to the duo. In haste, the two detectives question the parish worker; unsuccessful in their search for a church long gone, they speed away. In response, a deranged Errol Childress proudly announces to the naked sky above: "My family has been here a long, long time" ("After You've Gone"). The episode concludes with this uncanny second incarnation of the monster, albeit here reclining atop his own sadistic tractor-throne. Amidst verdant labyrinthian grasses—the antagonist similarly alone, Ladeaux-like—mows the earth afresh into finely sculpted concentric rings. Whereas Ladeaux's gasmask, machete, and arsenic chemical lab are plush with violence, the tractor is a subtle tool of death. Childress' weapon of choice at first appears a more innocuous iteration of death. However, as we learn, the composite tableau of evil materialized beneath Childress's spinning wheels in fact represents the penultimate epicenter of *True Detective*'s gothic violence.

Cutting through the eerie silence, Childress revs the mower's engine. The camera pans out and rises drone-like into the sky, eventually stopping just above tree level. Amidst this panorama we are offered a birds-eye-view of a feral landscape. The soundscape is similarly vital, as Townes Van Zandt's "Lungs" begins to intertextually texture the air. The terrifying referents of Ladeaux's gasmask and Childress' scarred face mentally mix inside the lyricism of "Lungs."

> Won't you lend your lungs to me? Mine are collapsing
> Plant my feet and bitterly breathe up the time that's passing
> Breath I'll take and breath I'll give, pray the day's not poison
> Stand among the ones that live in lonely indecision.

The song plays in its entirety, but it is the first verse of the tune that feels most apropos: lungs and breath, poisonous days long with lonely indecisions. During this final long take, an ordered armada of white graves—immaculate tiny tombstones—appear to festoon the boggy shore. While only conjecture, perhaps this forgotten site is burial grounds for Childress and his Satan-worshipping gang; victims with lungs collapsed, the poison breadth of life rhyming with Van Zandt's southern gothic tune. These two-bookend chapters—Episodes Three and Seven—are recursive rejoinders, two central villains situated diachronically yet urgently in adjacent filmic dialogue.

Consider in parallel *True Detective*'s most concrete example of memory in land: the maniacal den of Errol Childress's "Yellow King" maze. The Carcosa nest lives beneath the lawnmower. Here, the concept of media intertext is infused with historical sensation and the phenomenology of lived experience (see Benjamin; Smith and Sliwinski 9–15). The psychopathological fortress of the "Yellow King" of *True Detective* in the backwater swamps of Louisiana's bayou has its own gothic past in the backstory of the location—a 19th century site known as Fort Macomb. (Figure 11.4).

Erected in the wake of the War of 1812, this place of decay—equally a verdant castle of untroubled tropical growth—was chosen as the ideal site to film the twisted mythopoetic nest of The Yellow King. Originally designed in 1822 as a "third system" seacoast defense plan by architect Simon Bernard, the garrison was first employed to guard the Chef Menteur Pass into Lake Pontchartrain; later during the Civil War, it was occupied by Confederate troops, and only near the war's end was it seized by union forces and renamed Fort Macomb. Sometime in 1867, the land and remaining brick rubble were fully abandoned, only to be rediscovered as an ideal psychospheric site for *True Detective* in 2013.

The intertextual overlay of these two brief scenes are doubly portrayed in the final scenes of Episode 7—collapsed lungs speak into, or seep out of, the

FIGURE 11.6 *Fort Macomb*. Unidentified photograph with inscription: "Interior of Fort Macomb in 1967, before marina developers stripped the landmark of both greenery and much of its masonry."
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE HISTORIC NEW ORLEANS COLLECTION, GIFT OF DR. RALPH B. DRAUGHON JR., 2009.0230.1~CREATOR: BETSY SWANSON, PHOTOGRAPHER ~ DATE: 1967

gothic wreckage of the forgotten brick castle. In this kind of emptying-out of ecology and architecture, cohesive civilization dismantles itself. Specters hauntingly awaken inside the brutal dystopia of today's Anthropocene to "conjure up disturbing spectacles of grotesque bodies in which the monstrous, the animal, and the anomalous threaten the social construction of the normal. They push and occasionally dissolve boundaries designed to segregate social and cultural space" (Burns XIX).

2 Mental Cartography, Eco-chemical Trauma: Rust Cohle in the Diegesis and Beyond

> I know who I am … and after all these years, there's a victory in that.
> "Long Bright Dark"

The still image from Episode 1 is the first of many cartographic analogies between Rust and the land, religiosity and diabolical sentiments, criminality

and police work (Figure 11.7). While here we see only his back, Cohle's telepathic stare feels immersive. In a kind of pathological communion with the land and tree, branches and remains, the spiral nest inserted into the oak tree's base seems to also gaze back. Kindred spirits, the outwardly protrusive eye is an invert, organic personification of the main character. And as we will see, like the analog of woody thickets and organic spaces, Cohle's own heightened detective intuition is regularly prescribed as a symbolic foil for the killer. The inner sanctum of predators and prey, criminals and agents, perpetrators and victims together constitute a map—an imaginary record and revolving site of inscription fundamental to the gothic uncanny of the HBO program.

Contrasting with the bodily intimacy of Rust and the environment, the aerial wide lens shot is also frequently employed throughout *True Detective.* The horizontal scope of the overhead visual—in conjunction with the often-slowed panning pace of Fukunaga's orbicular arcing camera—offer viewers an unadulterated sense of broken landscapes, isolation and geographical vastness (Figure 11.8).

Significantly, however, the wide frame likewise evokes an omniscient eye of lingering disdain. More god-fearing than heavenly, cosmic than terrestrial, the camera's aerial meandering most often is, in fact, an affective generator of apocalyptic dread. Here, the machine is the monster. Logistics of perception are fraught. As Paul Virilio suggests: "Cinema isn't I see, it's I fly" (11). The optical apparatus is an animate gothic instrument of sight (see Crary, *Techniques*

FIGURE 11.7 "The Long Bright Dark." *True Detective*, created by Nic Pizzolatto, Season 1, episode 1, HBO, January 12, 2014

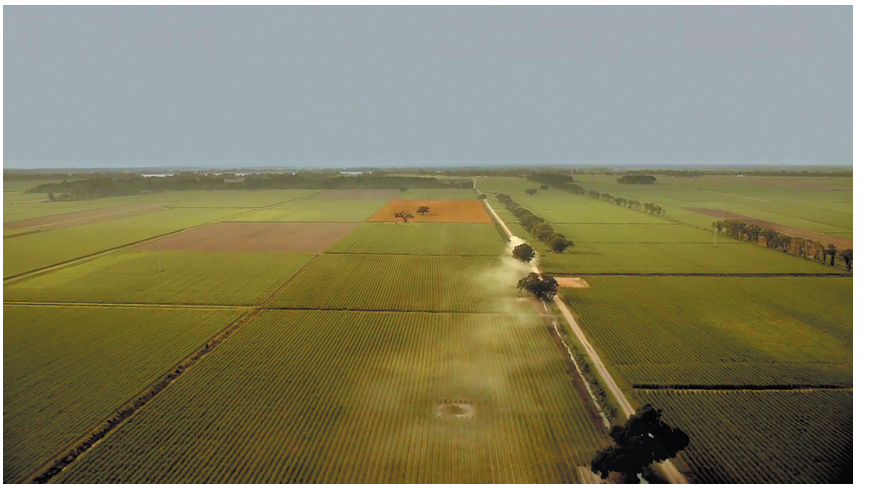

FIGURE 11.8 "The Long Bright Dark." *True Detective*, created by Nic Pizzolatto, Season 1, episode 1, HBO, January 12, 2014

and *Suspensions*). Combined with the medium-length shots of the bayou mangroves and pipelines, the fractured contemporaneity of the American ecosphere is pictured front and center.

American photographer Richard Misrach's devastating chemical pictures of the deep Louisiana delta are the manifest referent for the language of gothic landscape. Below is an unmodified Misrach photograph—the toxic green landscape is a watery blueprint for the overlaid composite intro credits and opening sequence of the series (Figure 11.9) (cf. Flanagan). The slippery thresholds of fiction and reality, mimesis and authenticity are palpable in this understated initial montage. Writing about the American southern gothic, Rebecca McIntyre suggests:

> In America, lacking the long medieval history and architecture onto which writers could map their gothic visions, the swamps helped solve the problem. American writers of the bizarre and macabre, such as Edgar Allan Poe, could utilize the dark fens of the new world–particularly in the South–to create the appropriate symbolic landscape upon which the quintessential gothic tale depends. (39)

Misrach's *Petrochemical America* and the HBO series are analogously constitutive of gothic Americana, terrestrial horror imbued with acute ecological ethics. Misrach describes the atmosphere of "Cancer Alley," a highly industrialized

FIGURE 11.9 Richard Misrach. 'Sugar Cane and Refinery,' *Petrochemical America*, 1998. *Sugar Cane and Refinery, Mississippi River Corridor*, 1998
CREDIT: © RICHARD MISRACH, COURTESY FRAENKEL GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO

area alongside the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans that constitutes the geographic focal point of *True Detective*:

> [A] remarkable corridor of historic, cultural, and natural resources, which in the past decade has been virtually decimated by the introduction of the petrol-chemical industry. Alongside restored and potentially restorable classic antebellum plantations sit over 136 behemoth industrial sites—a bizarre juxtaposition of the charming and the horrific. (n.p.)

While the artist himself makes no overt appearance in the visual text, his haunting images (often in juxtaposition with various characters from the show) create a lived experience of decay within the diegesis: Rust Cohle is the primary vessel of this atmospheric transmission.[1]

1 The music instro is The Handsome Family, "Far from Any Road."

On the brooding sequence of images montaging the introductory credits, Director of Media Patrick Clair commented, "we've zoned in on the idea of personal geographies" (qtd. Lanz n.p; cf. Clair, "Pitch" and "*True Detective*"). Amidst this ghostly arrangement (Figure 11.10), *True Detective*'s cosmos of disjointed topography and secluded affect highlight structural tensions in Cohle's personhood.

In this transpositional image we see Cohle immersed in a nightmarish standoff with his illusory self; a composite shrine—some De Chirico-esque fantasy—Cohle's neurological schema floats inside a cloud-ridden horizon: his facial outline brackets a solitary profile standing against a parabolically pooling infinity line. While not a long take, the doubling of Cohle's darkened silhouette and featureless face is situated directly in the zeitgeist of the gothic. Unsettling and enigmatic, the stationary double images are then mobilized by a flame and transition to the next shot. Isolation and the uncanny defamiliarize the purported cohesion of Cohle's identity. Instead, ghosts of a self and celestial memories of the sky become token signifiers, scattered clues to haunted fragments in a story without end.

As we learn, Cohle is the sole character attentive to the cataclysmic tandem currents of cultural and environmental decay. "All of this is going to be under water in thirty years," he laments early in 'Long Bright Dark.' A melancholic prophet of sorts, his keen synesthesia and empathic awareness to both shattered lands and peoples engender his character with a trans-territorial

FIGURE 11.10 Still from opening title sequence. Season 1, *True Detective*, created by Nic Pizzolatto, HBO, 2014

benevolence. Elmore again is helpful as he writes, "repeatedly, even insistently, images of industry [appear]: smokestacks, commercial boats, nondescript industrial buildings silently manifest in the *mise en scene* largely unnoticed by the characters themselves; the audience is often the only witness to these ghostly avatars of industry" (34). Theoretically I think here of environmental historian Brian Black's neologism *sacrificial landscape*. His words about oil fields make sense here. Black writes: "it [sacrificial landscape] must die so that Los Angeles and New York and Iowa City can live … the term describes the very first American oil fields in eastern Pennsylvania. Fossil fuel production and refinement does something to a place, usually something sinister" (34).[2] This sinister eco-element, while not *raison d'etre* for the ceremonious serial murder in *True Detective,* is homologous catastrophe.

Strangely, and in a supernatural turn of the screw, the concept of sacrificial place in *True Detective* has epistemic roots in the elaborate crime scene of Erol Childress in Erath. This elegiac triangulation of ritual—a dead girl immaculately posed, the wider Louisiana landscape foregone to the disastrous wake of petrol industries, and the rote procedural nature of investigative police work—heightens the emotive saturation of place. Read in conjunction, the anonymous industrial tragedy of southern oil fields discreetly collapses into the amorphous, depersonalized violence of single personhoods—simple binaries of victim and killers (predators and prey) dissolve. An elegy to the human-environmental sacrifices in the name of profit—land and development, property and corporations—brackish coastlines and wet Cajun mangroves form the ecological underbelly of terrestrial horror.

The final scene of Episode 2, "Seeing Things," offers further example of this environmental dislocation and human estrangement. Billowing smoke from a distant refinery encases the foreground where a dilapidated white-cedar barn is collapsed; a vaulted stained-glass window remains barely intact; and a midday sun artfully sculpts the roof edges. The eerie silence is broken only by the two men's arrival and car jolting doors. Cohle's incantatory voice, meanwhile, is heard from inside the current confines of the 2012 reopened police interrogation. Parallel editing and extra-diegetic his ghostly self narrates the scene: "Yeah, back then the visions. Yeah, most of the time I was convinced I'd lost it … There were other times, I thought I was mainlining the secret truth of the universe." Rust then looks across the bank of a saltine canal to see a flock of birds take flight: rising in unison, their unified congregation forms a helix in

AQ51

2 Black's concept sacrificial landscape was convincingly evoked in Madrigal.

midflight. One of the recurring grisly symbols from the crime scene, the twirling shape is imprinted in this otherworldly signal. Gothic images, writes Burns, "explore the irrational realm of vision, dream, and nightmare, and they grapple with the terror of annihilation by uncontrollable forces of social conflict and change" (13). An uncanny interrelation that only Cohle can see: an omen, a phantasm, a revelation. It remains unclear. Nonetheless, in this ephemeral apparition we identify our main character with an otherness, some quixotic vibrational plane.

Like any convincing hardboiled crime narrative, one of the primary characters fulfills the archetypal role of introverted outsider; alone and drinking compulsively, the unstable recluse is a paradigmatic disposition deeply imprinted in the psyche of Cohle. A brief enumeration of his fictional past textures the present-day chronicle: four years of unrecorded time spent in Beaumont, Texas working undercover for the HITDA (High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area); a nebulous relationship with Mexico and a bid inside the "outlaw life" of the Iron Crusaders bike gang; his Alaska wilderness upbringing—trapping and fishing with his dad, a Vietnam-era war veteran; time spent in the Lubbock, Texas Psychiatric Ward. Christopher Lirette suggests Rust Cohle and *True Detective* evoke "a type of cartographic character development [that] relies more on the intensities of place" (n.p.). The depth of his personal history is a tenuous membrane composed of traumatized private memory *ad infinitum*; outward projections, manic internal psychosis, and Cohle's compulsively obsessive search for the serial-killing pedophilic ring in Southern Louisiana are residual manifestations of this disjuncture.

Seen here building a meticulous ring of totem figures, Cohle's compulsions and pernickety sensibilities migrate into the metallic statues: Lone Star beer cans (think aforenoted Lubbock, Texas) convert to sinister icons and become the puppet-masters in this unfolding sphere of drama. "I can't say the job made me this way. More like me being this way made me right for the job … You know, you reach a certain age, and you know who you are," bemoans Cohle across the table of the investigation ("The Locked Room"). And all the while—as if performing a blasphemous ritual in mimesis—Cohle's aficionado fingers build a small armada of talismanic cans as his oratorical diatribe accrues tension, guilt and accusatory pathos.

As we quickly learn, Cohle's time spent uncover seems to have left intractable scars in his neural activity. Flashbacks and hallucinogenic probe-lighting highway scenes accentuate these lost private biographical details. Cohle's present-day (2012) solipsism, imaginary traumatic backstory (pre–1995), and seven years on the LA. taskforce correspondingly imbue his diegetic character with

FIGURE 11.11 "The Locked Room." *True Detective*, created by Nic Pizzolatto, Season 1, episode 3, HBO, January 26, 2014

genuine American vernacular. In a hyperbolically fashioned documentary-style personhood, an intimate relationality of transference incites viewers to empathize with the badman hero. Across this extensive trans-topographical diagramming, Cohle becomes more than an individual's internal psychological map; rather, the anachronic geographic coordinates beseech us to viscerally experience his troubled pathos and disjointed past. His decline is similarly part and parcel with the temporal triad—1995, 2012, 2002—of *True Detective*'s narrative arc: temporal manipulation, mental gymnastics, and suspended disbelief establish the framework.[3]

This amorphous constellation of erased time implores viewers to engage in a parallel puzzle of detective work. Form and content again blur here. The surplus of data, input and output work to synchronize a vertiginous reality. Like Marty and Rust, we too are on a hunt for truth. Mind and maps, atlases and information beget their own objecthood of a journey into the unreal.

3 Perhaps this is an example of Pizzolatto's unacknowledged indebtedness to Thomas Ligotti. The chief writer (creator) of *True Detective* eventually tipped his hat to Ligotti's cosmic horror (it appears various issues of copyright and theft have been leveled against Pizzolatto). For a helpful discussion, see Elmore, "More Than Simple Plagiarism."

2 Aesthetic Dislocation and American Art History

Haunted darkness. A smokey apparition in extreme close-up lumbers, and shards of light dart across the horizon line. Some faint silhouette of sweetgrass whistles in the foreground as a cobalt field aflame braces the distant shore. So, begins "The Long Bright Dark," Episode 1 of *True Detective,* Season 1. Cutting away from the exhilarating intro credits and title shot, viewers are confronted with a motley arrangement of noises and images: bristling dry leaves, helix embers of fire, variant insect sounds, and an eerie sonic wind create the diegetic *context*; the phenomenological mise-en-scene. The camera slowly pans at eye level, the muted steps of a hunched-over shadow figure lurking in the tall grass are our lone signal of any human presence. The shot concludes with the spark of a flame. This sense of cryptic atmosphere and ecological decay are personification, the land embodied at once as both supernatural and obliterated.

The proximate strangeness of these aural and visual impressions interweave in tandem to construct a lingering visceral fright within the first landscape setting. Immediately following this first shot—a somewhat extended twenty-second take—the absorptive camera lens shifts. In this abrupt cut, we see a fire spreading across the distant horizon (Figure 11.12).

An extreme long shot. The massive oak tree at far right on the horizon anchors our sightline; the tree, too, is at once a discreetly anthropomorphized character. In order to arrive at the roots of this bushy shadow graphic, we are asked to visually traverse a reflective indigo canal that streams from the

FIGURE 11.12 "The Long Bright Dark." *True Detective*, created by Nic Pizzolatto, Season 1, episode 1, HBO, January 12, 2014

contiguous foreground into the murky depth of the filmic frame. Immersed in the horror of this electrifying blue night sky, a congregation of frogs' ribbit in attunement to some drone chorus. Dual shots, the exaggerated juxtaposition of filmic distance and nearness, visually arrests the spectator. The pathos of place and the ghosts of visual Americana haunt *True Detective*. This arboreal palace of expansive horror is the first crucial site in the show.

Enveloped in the smokiness of this original *primal scene*—an extended panoramic setting—the chiaroscuro of graphic media, landscape history, and American art begin to dissolve. 19th century American painter George Catlin's *Fire in a Missouri Meadow* is our starting point (Figure 11.13). The ravaged colonial domain of phantasmagoric Americana and pastoral specters an alike origin node of environmental trauma. The second, contemporary American-Vietnamese photographer An My Le's *Fragments* series. Both artworks are exemplary.

Although surely unbeknownst to the dynamic gamut of producers and writers, actors and artists involved in the creation of the show, it is these types of pictures that repeatedly seep into (or embryonically emerge from) *True Detective*. Look closely at Catlin's 1871 gestural landscape while imagining Fukunaga's cinematic intro: an orange fire similarly stokes the horizon line,

FIGURE 11.13 George Catlin. *Fire in a Missouri Meadow and a Party of Sioux Indians Escaping from It, Upper Missouri 1832*. 1871

a pinkening sky is stained with painterly smudges. Just adjacent below, wispy charcoal smoke forms a shadow across the plain. The fumes billow, their stained soot a passing cloud one and the same as the team of Sioux Indians on horseback. Riding horizontal, their silhouettes are drenched in prairie grass. Fleeing the scene, Catlin's painting is a quintessential 19th century depiction of American foreboding, native genocide and ecological ferocity. Whereas *True Detective*'s environmental intro is mostly evacuated of humanity, here it is the Sioux Indians that empty out the scene. Nonetheless, and most significantly, the visual parallels are the kind that reach beyond formal content or base duplication. There is something potent in the sensuous experientiality, a phenomenology of disaster and fright wounding the American landscape that erupts most candid in works of art.

Next, consider An My Le's contemporaneous photographic project (a chief site of interest for her is Louisiana), wherein the delta bayou region is revealed to both contain and swallow memory. In the landscape image, a whirlwind of crimson charcoal hues fume upward, while at ground level a muted sugarcane field blazes amidst patchy rings of smoke. A cosmos evacuated of persons and personhood; this neon storm drifts along the earth's gauged surface. The

FIGURE 11.14 An My Le, *Fragments*, 'Sugar Cane, Houma, La,' 2016. Pigment print, image size: 39 ½ × 56 in.
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY ©AN-MY LÊ

photograph is a vernacular token: both the mordant vicissitudes of industrial agronomy and detrital residue of an already drained socio-cultural economy compose Le's picture. It is this mode of otherness—an emptying out and hollowing through—that constellates wounded sites of terrestrial horror, grotesque loss and gothic foreboding in *True Detective.* These are the kinds of absent figurations and anti-corporeal hauntings at stake in the final suppositions of my work.

In this way, contemporary American photographer Gregory Crewdson's *Cathedral of the Pines* explores the fractured landscape of western Massachusetts with his own poetic understanding of place and aesthetic experience (Figure 11.15). A single photograph, 'The Pickup Truck' (2014), is representative.

To see Gregory Crewdson's ceremonial large-scale images is to witness a rural American cosmos in fracture. A discursive and defamiliarized site in the forest hills of Northeastern America, Crewdson's sense of gothic estrangement and introjected melancholia lives in the land, a temperament akin to that of *True Detective*. The current-day crises of isolation and loss, opioid addiction and splintered personhood dissolve any once legible boundaries of historical time or safely-sequestered place. Inside the ghostly stains of landscape, a

FIGURE 11.15 Gregory Crewdson, *The Pickup Truck*, 2014. Digital pigment print, image size: 37.5 × 50 in.
@GREGORY CREWDSON

kind of accruing pathos accumulates—unseen and unheard, submerged and infectious. While the precise locale of *True Detective* is the brackish marshes of Erath, Louisiana, the crimes of Reginald Ladeaux, Erol Childress and others transpire in an analogous vampiric world—an earthly realm underground and unseen. Fissures of narrative and *the real* live most viscerally at these sublimated edges. Outside the frame, inside the land and just beyond the clean-cut vertical lines of timber resides the materiality of this forgotten past. In parallel, *True Detective* and Crewdson's pictures triangulate the residue of traumatic aesthetic experience and ecological obliteration.

Let us return to the primal scene of *True Detective* with related thoughts of capricious narration and visual ecocide. In '\"The Long Bright Dark," Cohle rants: "I get a bad taste in my mouth out here. Aluminum, ash, like you can smell a psychosphere." Although a kind of macrocosmic assessment, the crime scene's dendroid footprint indeed houses a 'psychosphere' both beneath its limbs and above its roots. In a medium-long shot, the same oak tree from the opening set is pictured as lone figural character. Environmentally cut off, this staid monument of arboreal fright is a buried icon central to the art historical ghost archive. The electrical dendrites of vegetal life blossom, horror converging beneath the gothic arboreous cruciform. Trees, trees, and more trees. Although in *True Detective* the underground mucous lair of Childress is the nexus of the show (the spot a portal into murderous madness and derangement), it is the solitary watchman trees that most situate terrestrial horror above ground.

FIGURE 11.16 "The Long Bright Dark." *True Detective*, created by Nic Pizzolatto, Season 1, episode 1, HBO, January 12, 2014

Ensconced in this shaded centrifugal milieu—with aged and weathered bark laid bare—the unseeable *a priori* wounds of photography gather like a thicket. Two 20th century pictures, each singularly auratic and anachronistic, conclude the project.

Anne Brigman's 1908 *The Lone Pine* is a gelatin silver print, a smoky composite landscape of rock and tree, sky, and skin (see Pyne; Brigman). A smooth matrix of mossy desert bristles, and shadow crevice veins anthropomorphize the boulder's massive surface: contusions denote this earth strata as at once both an infinite holding vessel and monstrous surface of flatness, a slippery invitation into the Sierra Nevada topology. Meanwhile, a dissolved horizon line—highly situated and curiously blurred—reconfigures the standard frame of composition: even the picture's topmost edge prickles with pinene leaves. In this way *The Lone Pine* is an all-over picture, a wilderness photograph from the American West that presages future modernist attitudes towards absorption and presence.

It is only eventually at far left that viewers encounter the lone wolf figure: crouching and camouflaged, the brash and radical auteur Brigman—pictured

FIGURE 11.17 Anne Brigman. *The Lone Pine*. 1908. Vintage gelatin silver print. Vintage gelatin silver print. 7 ¾ × 91/2 in.

as a balletic performer—displays her body in a kind of prostrated spiraling prayer. The pine's nimble trunk dips upward to frame her spine; its own curvature trace creating a solitary blank window, a cave-eye-view into the nimbus sky behind. Stretched barren into the valley sky and amidst a web of branches, Brigman's cryptically vegetal aesthetic forecasts the macabre crime scene of Dora Lang. Rather than a deceased, bound and gagged tableaux murder victim, however, the photographer's faceless stance is a sort of sorceress femme gesture. Slithering amongst rock skeins and an enfolded tree stalk, the contorted limbs of Brigman's creaturely-self transform her female body into a rippled arabesque icon. In the fantasy rivets of this trans-arboreal womb, *The Lone Pine* envisions an ulterior cosmology of uteral wounding. The avant-garde artist—notoriously heralded as both ecological enchantress and wizard of the elements—proposes a melancholic yet generative spirit of liquid earth and air. In some sense then, nearly 100 years prior to the gothic sentiments of *True Detective,* Brigman had already envisaged a dark fate that would envelop the American land.

Nonetheless, awash in her photographic network of blurred forces—a pinkish hazy strip of clouds, distant cavernous peaks, and the frontal canyon vista some bouquet of dendroid boughs—the disjunctive American atmosphere breathes with womanly life. More specifically, Brigman's curled shoulders and bent knees transform into an elixir that evokes an askance, still-breathing version of Dora Lang. Hunched over in tandem, it is as if the two women's bent fleshy contours are not only parallel forms but also sentient fetal postures. They both rhyme with the Louisiana serial killer's spiral insignia—his token metaphysical icon an eerie coiled symbol imprinted into the skin of victims. Contemporary horror writer Thomas Ligotti's *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* is the ideal interlocutor. Channeling Ligotti, Rust grieves: "The only honorable thing for our species to do is to deny our programming, stop reproducing, and march hand-in-hand into extinction" ("Long, Bright Dark"). I reimagine this archetypal lament from Cohle through Brigman's language of chiaroscuro liquidity. His vile version of masculinity and nihilistic energy dissipate beside her tonic vision. Although Cohle's self-loathing indeed remains an askance ally to the girl victims, his nubby male imaginarium comes up short. Whereas his solipsism is a dead-end portal into a tunnel of lugubrious vision, Brigman's femme-mystique percolates with a post-Anthropocene vitalism. In this way, the artist's clandestine crouching in *The Lone Pine* is a feminine homage—a testament and prayerful politics—that redeems and rebels even through death.

Nearly a century after Brigman's carefully assembled desert pictures, Sally Mann likewise decided to situate the trunk of a tree as a central object of study.

Mann's *Deep South, Untitled* (*Scarred Tree*) monumentalizes a branded tree stump. The photograph discloses this barren trunk, erecting bark and body as sacred, the solitary figure posed on stage. This nameless tree's phantom masked expression offers a crippling analog to *True Detective's* latent iconography and penultimate narrative ark of redemption.

From behind, it almost appears that some luminous blur of ghostly shutters will envelop the frame: a cyclonic painterly halo of vanishing points, these sheets of clandestine light are fluidly twitching cobweb silhouettes. The tree's bat-winged limbs hover dimly in shade across the smudged horizon; and just afront the scene a faintly rendered fence slices the photograph's deep foggy space—this boundary line of three stubby black posts feigns to merge with the plod of grass below. All the while, and magnetizing this whirlwind landscape at center, is the ripe youthful gash in an old tree: an inscrutable smile in mourning, the mutated bark lips are replete with Eros no more. In this leafy earthen icon, the inexorable stains of American violence, histories of lynchings and eviscerated bodies, and trauma of unresolved memory collide.

FIGURE 11.18 Sally Mann. Deep South, Untitled (Scarred Tree), 1998. Gelatin silver print—tea toned. 40 × 50 inches (101.6 × 127cm)
@SALL MANN. COURTESY OF GAGOSIAN

In this way, Mann's *Deep South, Untitled* (*Scarred Tree*) is a vampiric arboreal ghost. The wounded trunk, a botanically flayed dry iteration of lost human reproduction, is here pregnant with only a sinister mouth of blood lust. Mann's gothic tenor reveals an all too similar pattern of terrestrial grief—the dendroid incision not cut at the root but sliced in the rhizomatic belly of the beastly-tree form. While the miasma of backside clouds appear at once to evaporate, suffocate and infect the sky, the barky skin of the tree refuses any atmospheric inward gathering. Like a steadily flickering candle, the wound darkens the surroundings. The stumped tree stamps Mann's gothic monument. Scarred and resistant, the singular icon makes its own phantom forest: this lone sentinel tree marks a spot. Evacuated of human presence, the psychological dispossession of the Anthropocene breathes in Mann's ensnared matrix of disquietude, aloneness, and horror. There is something uniquely American about the eternal transference of necromantic fantasy rooted in both stealth landscapes and the bestial branches with leaves that populate it.

Destroyed bodies and violated land; penetrated earth with no regard for progeny and health. Here I think also of the gendered aspect of Rust's consciousness: spiritual sensibilities, overly active central nervous system, and arcane synesthetic proclivities. Classic feminized tropes of the prophetic mother, visionary goddess, or oracular seer aside, Cohle's un-realized self cannot be fully adjudicated from his disassociation with the feminine. Most notably, the preventable death of Cohle's daughter, Sophia. This rarely uttered trauma—a kind of PTSD scarring the cerebral flotsam and jetsam synapses of Rust's lived pain—is a concealed psychological *memory landscape* imbricating time and place both present and absent. This repressed stain drifts through the program: from the cane fields of Erath where we first learn of his toddler's death to the cathartic dinner table dialogue with Maggie and the eventual car ride disclosure of his loss with Marty—Rust's character carries (or buries and bares) the embodied loss of a child.

"Rust is haunted by women who aren't there—his ex-wife and his dead daughter" writes Willa Paskin (n.p.). His ultimate lament then: "Women and children are disappearing, nobody hears about it, nobody puts it together," is *the* parasitic patriarchal crime of *True Detective* ("The Locked Room"). While at first a professedly revelatory announcement, Rust's similar pathological detachment from male-female union is, in effect, a performative reenactment of this misplaced Eros: his inability (until the final hospital scene) to bridge that gap is an equivocating nomos persistent and unresolved in the program. "My daughter's birthday … I remember," recounts Rust in the ongoing 2012 interview about the'95 Lang case with two current Louisiana State Police ("Long, Bright Dark").

AQ52

To conclude, let us return to the original *raison d'etre* of *True Detective* and Cohle's own indefatigable searching—a hunt for perpetrators, the Louisiana serial-murderer and some circle of deranged rapists; a pursuit of other victims, girls lost in storms or hurricane floods, missing in the bayou without a trace; and perhaps most inconspicuously, Rust's own empathic quest for the lost love of his life, his daughter. The real ghost of the program—Cohle's deceased toddler—"didn't feel a thing" as she died an "innocent child … [Isn't] there something beautiful in that?" wonders Rust, his rogue self now transformed into an affective loathing figure of regret ("Seeing Things"); a wounded male body on the precipice of sane life. Instead, to get lost, crossing-over into death as a child. Whereas adulthood's extraneous pursuit of redemption or justice, lucidity or salvation is socially inculcated, in the blissful naivety of childhood the rabid search for answers is empty, a blank with few categorical answers or questions.

A child, the depth of her suffering was only ever brief; his young daughter, the mournful nature of her personal pain barely remembered and never viscerally tasted. For Cohle and his idiosyncratic religious cosmology, the ephemerality of pain is essential: the brevity of agony inhibits any need to search, mitigating the desire for grace or closure. In "Seeing Things," Cohle's maniacal temperament spews. He recounts the chain-of-events that ultimately culminated in his psychiatric hospitalization at Northshore. Here, Cohle begins to cite the Bible, Corinthians. "*The body is not one member, but many. Now are they many, but …* […] *of one body.'* […]." The inchoate presentiments reach an apotheosis as law enforcement inquisitively ask: "What's that mean again?" To which Rust sardonically replies, "[Sigh] … I was just trying to stay a part of the body." Along this tottering bridge of conversation, the fleshy dialectics of *True Detective*'s searching form a taut knot: bodies and ghosts, secrecy and truth, a benevolent god, or a disastrous Ethereum of chaos are all equally true. Nested and nodding-off somewhere deep inside the American dream lies History's infinitely haunted well, a composite landscape-past made of splintered gems and missing gothic memories.

AQ53

References

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida.* Hill and Wang, 2010.

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Schocken Books, 1969.

Black, Brian. *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom.* John Hopkins UP, 2003.

Blanchot, Maurice. *The Writing of Disaster.* U of Nebraska P, 1995.

Borrebye-Bjering, Jens Christian, and Isak Winkel Holm. "The Dora Lange Archive: Jacques Derrida Watches *True Detective*." *Journal of Popular Culture,* 49, no. 4, 705–21.

Brigman, Anne. *Anne Brigman: A Visionary in Modern Photography.* Nevada Museum of Art, Reno, 2018–19.

Burleson, Donald R. *Lovecraft: Disturbing the Universe*. UP of Kentucky, 2015.

Burns, Sarah. *Painting the Dark Side: Art and the Gothic Imagination in Nineteenth Century America*. U of California P, 2006.

Chambers, Robert W. *The King in Yellow and Other Horror Stories*. Selected and with an introduction by E. F. Bleiler. Dover Publications, 1970.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. U of Minnesota P, 1996.

Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. MIT Press, 1992.

Crary, Jonathan. *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. MIT Press, 2001.

Denson, Shane. *Discorrelated Images.* Duke UP, 2020.

Doane, Mary Ann. *The Emergence of Cinematic Time.* Harvard UP, 2002.

Elmore, Jonathan. "More Than Simple Plagiarism: Ligotti, Pizzolatto, and *True Detective*'s Terrestrial Horror." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy,* 4, no. 1 (2017), 26–38.

Flanagan, Rosie. "The Aesthetic Sensibility of Ricard Misrach's Documentary Photography." *Ignant*, January 30, 2019. https://www.ignant.com/2019/01/30/the-aesthetic-sensibility-of-richard-misrachs-documentary-photography/.

Lanz, Michelle. "*True Detective*: How the Opening Titles Came Together, What They Mean." *Take Two*, Southern California Public Radio, March 9, 2014. http://www.scpr.org/programs/take-two/2014/03/09/36373/hollywood-jobs-crafting-the-opening-titles-for-tru/.

Ligotti, Thomas. *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race: A Contrivance of Horror*. Hippocampus Press. 2011.

Lirette, Christopher. "Something True about Louisiana: *True Detective* and the Petrochemical America Aesthetic." *Southern Spaces*, August 13, 2014. https://southernspaces.org/2014/something-true-about-louisiana-hbos-true-detective-and-petrochemical-america-aesthetic/.

Madrigal, Alexis C. "The Sacrificial Landscape of *True Detective*: We Can't Restore but We Can Offer Refuge." *Atlantic*, March 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/03/the-sacrificial-landscape-of-em-true-detective-em/284302/.

Martin, Denise. "Devil's Nests and Beer-Can Men: The Origins of 13 *True Detective* Set Pieces" *Vulture*, March 6, 2014, https://www.vulture.com/2014/03/true-detective-alex-digerlando-set-design-props-interview.html.

Misrach, Richard. *Petrochemical America*. https://orthoslogos.fr/photographie/petrochemical-america/.

Mcintyre, Rebecca. "Promoting the Gothic South." *Southern Cultures*, 11, no. 2 (2005), 39–51.

"Original Pitch for Title Sequence from *True Detective*." Directed by Patrick Clair. Executive produced by Jennifer Sofio Hall. Available at Scribd, accessed May 10, 2025. https://www.scribd.com/doc/211405775/Original-Pitch-for-Title-Sequence-from-True-Detective.

Paskin, Willa. "The Horrible Things That Men Do to Women." Slate, February 23, 2014. https://slate.com/culture/2014/02/true-detective-the-women-on-the-show-are-treated-badly-but-theres-a-good-reason.html.

Pyne, Kathleen. *Anne Brigman: The Photographer of Enchantment*. Yale UP, 2020.

Smith, Shawn Michelle, and Sharon Sliwinski, eds. *Photography and the Optical Unconscious*. Duke UP, 2017.

The Handsome Family. "Far from Any Road." *Singing Bones*. Carrot Top / Loose Music, 2003.

"*True Detective* (2014)." Directed by Patrick Clair. Executive produced by Jennifer Sofio Hall. Available at *Art of the Title*, accessed May 10, 2025, https://www.artofthetitle.com/title/true-detective/.

Virilio, Paul. *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception.* Translated by Patrick Camiller. Verso Books, 1989.

True Detective *Episodes*

AQ54

"The Long Bright Dark." *True Detective*, created by Nic Pizzolatto, season 1, episode 1, HBO, 12 Jan. 2014.

"Seeing Things." *True Detective*, created by Nic Pizzolatto, season 1, episode 2, HBO, 19 Jan. 2014.

"The Locked Room." *True Detective*, created by Nic Pizzolatto, season 1, episode 3, HBO, 26 Jan. 2014.

"After You've Gone." *True Detective*, created by Nic Pizzolatto, season 1, episode 7, HBO, 2 Mar. 2014.

"Form and Void." *True Detective*, created by Nic Pizzolatto, season 1, episode 8, HBO, 9 Mar. 2014.