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A Visit to the Imaginary Landscape of Harrison, Texas: The Filmed Stories of Horton Foote

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HORTON FOOTE'S FILM CAREER
COMEDY

Woody Allen, Chaplin, Langdon
The Musicality of the Film Script
Gertrude Stein's Film Scenarios
Desire in Film Noir
Love in Vertigo
Lumet's Pawnbroker

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A Visit to the Imaginary Landscape of Harrison, Texas: Sketching the Film Career of Horton Foote

The past decade has shown an enormous growth in regional theatre. Why not a similar growth in regional films? At the moment . . . American films are polarized; they are made in Los Angeles or New York, with perhaps a brief stop-over in Chicago . . . A story indigenous to Texas, made by Texans, can be shown and understood in Northern Michigan. A story rooted in northern Michigan . . . might possibly be better made by indigenous Michiganders than by a team from Hollywood that moved into the area with its pre-formed script and preconceptions. What I'm arguing is a film that recognizes the multiplicity of this vast country . . . (Knight 340).

In brief hindsight, it is clear that Arthur Knight was sensing an important undercurrent in American moviemaking when he first composed the above conclusion to the second edition of his one-volume history of the movies, *The Liveliest Art*. For more than a decade, the Hollywood establishment has continued a trend of on-location shooting throughout North America and overseas to a point where three out of every four American movies are now made outside the confines of southern California. Although this progressive move towards "runaway production" over the past fifteen years is a growing drain on the localized economy of the golden state, the mainstream movie business in general has benefited both financially and stylistically by its increasing willingness to go elsewhere to shoot its motion pictures. The most important consequence of this development, however, is a corresponding upswing in independent film and video work across America.

Encouraged by this influx of on-location production activity and capital, the growing

number of qualified support personnel in every region of the country, and the relative success of a few early role models, indigenous filmmakers are now flourishing throughout America in such reborn or newfound film and video centers as Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, Miami, Minneapolis, Nashville, New York, Pittsburgh, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Seattle, and Washington, D.C. A vast array of independent moviemakers, such as Lizzie Borden, Joel and Ethan Coen, Joyce Chopra, John Hanson and Rob Nilsson, Jim Jarmusch, Spike Lee, Gregory Nava, Victor Nunez, George Romero, John Sayles, Joan Micklin Silver, Wayne Wang, John Waters, and Claudia Weill, just to name a few of the more prominent and successful so far, are fueling a resurgence in America's narrative cinema that is just now gaining momentum and starting to be recognized and properly understood.

In many ways, the most intriguing and remarkable member of this renaissance is Horton Foote. Born on March 14, 1916, he is the movement's elder statesman, and along with John Sayles, its most prolific and accomplished practitioner. Where all the other American independents working today are part of the so-called "film culture" generation that first came of age during the 1960s and 1970s, Horton Foote has been a celebrated writer of stageplays, teleplays, a novel (*The Chase*), and screenplays for nearly five decades. In contrast, his contemporaries are either a vital part of the Hollywood establishment, or are no longer making motion pictures. The independent nature of Foote's films is, therefore, unique when considering his age and generational perspective; his work also exhibits a richness and integrity that is a vivid indication of how much can be achieved when a talented film artist is attuned to his instincts and can focus his intentions and resolve.

The Early Years: On Becoming a Writer

Agnes De Mille took me aside quite casually, "Did you ever think about writing?" And that was the furthest thing from my mind so I said, "No, I never did." And she said, "Well I really think you have an instinct and a sense of place," which is a phrase I never heard before I started writing, but I've heard it often since.

- Horton Foote¹

The sanctification of the local landscape is a fundamental function of mythology. . . .

This is a place where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be. This is the place of creative incubation (Campbell 91-92).

Horton Foote has set nearly every one of his original plays, teleplays, and screenplays during his 48-year career as a writer in the fictional town of Harrison, Texas, not unlike his hometown of Wharton, Texas, a small community situated 55 miles southwest of Houston in the cotton country bordering the Gulf of Mexico. During the throes of the Depression, he left home at the age of 17 "to pursue a call to become an actor," journeying first to Dallas and then soon afterwards to California where he studied acting at the Pasadena Playhouse Theatre from 1933 to 1935. By 1937, Foote had traveled to New York where he studied under "Tamara Daykarhonova, the distinguished protegee of Konstantin Stanislavski, the founder of 'the Method' for tapping inner psychological and emotional resources in developing roles" ("Horton Foote" 10). Like many actors and dramatists of his generation, Foote was keenly influenced by techniques that

worked at the ideas behind the script and also the structure of the script. . . . Looking back, I think it was much more valuable to me as a writer than the more conventional training like going to Yale. . . . I escaped all that and I went right into working on very fine plays and trying to find out from an acting point-of-view, what made them work. . . . I had no intention of being a writer. . . . I never in my wildest dreams ever thought I'd ever be a writer.

In 1938, Horton Foote became a charter member of the American Actors Theatre, which was organized by the director, Mary Hunter. It was in this repertory troupe

that he “went out and played a lot of parts, and got acting out of [his] system,” as well as where he first began to develop his talent as a storyteller. Not surprisingly, the formative influences of this period are crucial when considering Foote’s later works. Even moreso than the independent cinema of today, New York’s theatrical world of the 1930s, along with much of the rest of the era’s domestic art and culture for that matter, consciously celebrated regional diversity; explored local traditions, manners, and beliefs; and emphasized how immense social forces were profoundly affecting the personal lives of common men and women, frequently with respect to the American family. This thematic preoccupation and a corresponding indigenous style still inform all of Foote’s work in the 1980s.

We (the American Actors Theatre) decided that we came from all parts of America and that it would be interesting to . . . investigate different writers from different regions in America. For instance, E.P. Conkle, who was an Iowa writer, rather well known at the time, and Paul Green from North Carolina, and Lynn Riggs from Oklahoma, and Thornton Wilder, and early on, young Tennessee Williams came down with a play. . . . In preparing all these works we would improvise . . . someone from Minnesota would do an improvisation from Minnesota, so we would get to know what that region was like, and I was always doing Texas.

Horton Foote’s hometown of Wharton is geographically positioned on the furthest, southwestern reaches of the old South. Foote and his wife, Lillian, in fact, still divide their time today between his boyhood home in Wharton, presently a town of 9000, and an apartment that they keep in New York City. Beginning in the 1940s, Foote’s creation in his writings of the fictional—Harrison out of Wharton, Texas—is yet another way in which he used his imagination as a means of remaining connected to his birthplace and his cultural roots. This process even continues in the 1980s through the discernible relationship between Horton Foote’s “sense of place” and the stories he continues to weave on film, such as *Tender Mercies* (1983), *The Trip to Bountiful* (1985), and especially the series of works in the Orphan’s Home Cycle, including *1918* (1985), *On Valentine’s Day* (1986), and *Courtship* (1987). In his own words, Foote remembers that “in the South there is a strong oral tradition and I just took it all in.” In this sense, he shares in a much broader generational mythos where writers, and other American artists who were shaped during the Depression era, typically used their homegrown knowledge of folkways and traditional American lore and customs as a source of continuing inspiration.

Concerning his first years as a writer, Foote recalls

I got in touch with material that was . . . for lack of a better word, regional material. . . . I really believe this material chose me more than I chose it. . . . I’ve been told and I really agree, that by the time one is ten years old, at least for a certain brand of writer who writes like I write, that their themes have been set. You can take them out and put them in different periods at different times . . . but it is amazing to me how many of these themes keep repeating themselves, or attitudes, or approaches to character. I don’t know if I ever consciously worked on this, but I think I worked at whatever instincts I had matured, and I hope they got better and stonger.

Horton Foote completed his first written work in 1939, which was a play he describes today as “a very literal thing called *Wharton Dance*.” From that point on, he was writing regularly, and his stageplays were consistently being produced Off-Broadway. His first Broadway production, *Texas Town*, came in 1943; and by 1944, he decided to move to Washington, D.C. in order to start his own independent repertory theatre company with Vincent Donehue, where “no one knew who I was and I could make all my mistakes.” Foote remained in Washington for the remainder of the decade, and continued to mature as a writer and a director.

During the 1950s, Horton Foote was accorded his first opportunities to write scripts for television and motion pictures. Although he had several plays produced on Broadway and began his film career with a short stay in Hollywood during this decade, the major focus of Foote’s career throughout most of the 1950s was clearly “live” television.

In 1950, Foote accepted an offer from the influential and innovative television producer, Fred Coe, to write original dramas for NBC. During what is now referred to as television's "Golden Age," Foote wrote 26 scripts that were produced for such programs as *Philco-Goodyear Playhouse*, *Studio One*, and *Playhouse 90*. Horton Foote's television experience throughout the 1950s led him to collaborate with producers, such as Coe and Alan Pakula; directors, such as Arthur Penn, Delbert Mann, Robert Mulligan, and Daniel Petrie; and a long list of first-rate American actors and actresses, including Geraldine Page, Julie Harris, Helen Hayes, E.G. Marshall, Lillian Gish, Eva Marie Saint, and Kim Stanley. Many of these talented people would later play meaningful roles in Foote's subsequent motion picture career as well.

Horton Foote's association with Fred Coe was particularly significant. He completed more than a dozen teleplays for Coe, including the first version of *The Trip to Bountiful* which was produced on the *Philco-Goodyear Playhouse* in March 1953.

Concerning their relationship, Foote remembers

We had a remarkable man, who was a producer named Fred Coe. He was from Alligator, Mississippi, and he encouraged us all to explore our own material. In other words, he didn't want us to copy and try to find formulas. He used to say who are you as a writer, and what can you write that no one else can write? So that was an enormous sense of freedom for my life. That we were encouraged as writers not to find formulas that would please many people, but just to very deeply please ourselves. So that was an enormous lesson for me and a great gift. . . . I have never known quite why I have any instinct or desire to explore this material . . . this town, which has become a mythical town for me because I changed the name (from Wharton to Harrison).

In 1956, Horton Foote published a collection of his original teleplays in a book entitled, *Harrison, Texas: Eight Television Plays*; the transformation from Wharton to a mythical though palpable "sense of place" was now complete by mid-decade. All of Foote's original work would subsequently be set in the fictional domain of Harrison, Texas, while several of his feature-length motion pictures would, in fact, be shot in and around Wharton itself, including *Baby, the Rain Must Fall* (1965), *Tender Mercies*, 1918, *On Valentine's Day*, and *Courtship*.

The Hollywood Years

Now to get to that other side of my life which is the film side, again I was very fortunate in the sense that because of *Philco-Goodyear*, my identity as a writer was fairly established, so that consequently, Hollywood, being the copycat that it often is, any time there was a third-rate, or fourth-rate, or a fifth-rate Southern novel, they'd call me up and everyone thought I was a Southern specialist.

Horton Foote

He might as well be singing psalms over a dead horse as trying to make a seller out of that boy.

old Texas proverb

Horton Foote's motion picture career actually fits into two distinct phases. He received credits on four major feature films that were produced within the Hollywood system between 1956 and 1968. Then beginning in 1972 and especially through the 1980s, Foote has become a forerunner and innovator in the resurgence of American independent filmmaking during the present era. His first experience within the Hollywood establishment began in a two year period between 1954 and 1955 when he worked as a staff writer for Warner Brothers. This was a point of rapid transition for the movie colony as the changeover from the old studio system to the new Hollywood was well underway.

I knew a little bit about the old Hollywood, but when I arrived, it was just ending. I was employed by Warners and I was the only writer of what they called theatrical films on the lot. My secretary, that day, took me into all these empty offices and said Isherwood wrote here, Faulkner wrote here, this one here. They were all gone, and here I was all by myself. I had to punch a time-clock when I came in, and I had

to stay there for eight hours, and everything I wrote belonged to Warner Brothers. I had to punch a time-clock to go out, and the myth was that Jack Warner peeked in every now and then in your window to see if you were working. I never caught him doing that, but I believed it though.

Although most of the assignments that he was accorded by Warner Brothers were to adapt the work of Southern writers, most notably Erskine Caldwell, his only credit during this period actually resulted from a project for United Artists, entitled *Storm Fear* (1956). This version of Clinton Seely's novel, which was produced, directed and starred in by Cornell Wilde, is a departure for Foote in that the setting is transplanted from New York State in the book to the Rocky Mountain region, and the plotline is an action-adventure. This ineffective effort was a learning experience which encouraged Foote to return to Texas in 1955 to rediscover his roots, and to write his own original work; it was during this stay in Wharton that he expanded his 1952 Broadway play, *The Chase*, into his one and only novel which was published in 1956.

After successfully resuming his television career in 1956, writing for *Omnibus*, *Studio One* and *Playhouse 90*, Horton Foote's next encounter with Hollywood lasted nearly seven years. In 1961, he reluctantly returned to motion picture work by agreeing to adapt Harper Lee's popular and Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *To Kill A Mockingbird*. He was encouraged to participate in this project because of his sympathy for the book, his genial interactions with its author, and the fact that the film was to be produced and directed by two of his favorite television colleagues, Alan Pakula and Robert Mulligan. The subsequent collaboration resulted in Horton Foote winning his first two major film awards in 1962: an Oscar for Best Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium, and a Writer's Guild of America Screen Award for Best-Written American Drama.

The next thing that happened was *Mockingbird* and that was in one way a wonderful thing and in another way it spoiled me for a long time because I was working with people, a director I worked with before in television, Robert Mulligan, who was brilliant, and then a wonderful producer, Alan Pakula, and Gregory Peck, of course, was in the lead. It was just a very creative time, and I wrote it in Nyack, New York . . . we never had any interference at all. This team was very much involved in the whole project. It wasn't always that way. As a matter of fact, as far as *Mockingbird* was concerned, Gregory had the wisdom and confidence to see that Mulligan and Pakula had the final cut. It was in the contract that they had final cut, Universal did not, which was unheard of, particularly for a young director and a young producer. Universal did not like the picture very much, and if they had got their hands on it, God knows what they would have done, but they couldn't.

With *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), Foote was solidly back on familiar territory. The setting of the story is not only uniquely Southern, but the particular theme of racial prejudice and the tragedy it causes, points to a more general preoccupation in all of his films: Change is the one dramatic certainty in Horton Foote's fictional world, as his characters are consistently forced to cope and adjust to the knowledge and experience that time is continually at work eroding their traditions, their family bonds, and their social and personal identities. Although *To Kill a Mockingbird* is literally a story that presents a new South evolving out of the old, this metaphoric transformation in terms of race relations was something the entire mass audience understood in 1962. Despite Universal's initial hesitations with the movie, the picture proved to be a major critical and commercial success, and Horton Foote's reputation as a screenwriter was established in Hollywood for the remainder of the decade.

During the next five years, Foote worked on all or parts of four more motion pictures, three of which were also indigenously Southern in origin. The informal, oral tradition of this region permeates the understated style and local traditions that populate and enliven most of Horton Foote's film work. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, he alludes to two scenes he created where the children are listening in their bedroom to adult conversations out on the porch. Like *Mockingbird's* narrator, Scout, "I used to stay

awake half the night listening to my parents out there talking" ("Dialogue on Film" 14). You might say "I'm a social writer in the sense that I want to record, but not in the sense of trying to change people's minds" (Freedman 61).

Horton Foote's next film credit was an adaptation and expansion of his own 1954 Broadway play, *The Traveling Lady*. Columbia, in fact, sent a crew on-location to Waxahatchee, Texas, near Wharton, to shoot, *Baby, the Rain Must Fall*, a story of dislocation, failed dreams, and family dissolution, starring Steve McQueen and Lee Remick. Foote remembers the production as "a happy affair, because that was again with Pakula and Mulligan, and we shot in my hometown." The movie's stark and authentic mise-en-scene, especially, benefits from having been created at a time when Hollywood was experimenting more and more with runaway production. Foote's experiences on his remaining studio films, however, were less than satisfying, and eventually forced him to leave the Hollywood system in disillusionment.

In 1965, Sam Spiegel optioned Foote's novel, *The Chase*, to be produced through his company, Horizon, and distributed through Columbia Pictures. From the beginning, *The Chase* (1966) was designed as a prestige product, budgeted high and starring Marlon Brando, Angie Dickinson, Jane Fonda, Robert Redford, E.G. Marshall, and Robert Duvall. Horton Foote had previously worked in "live" television with the film's director, Arthur Penn, but this time, he disagreed with the "Peyton Place" melodramatics that were added to his story. Although he was hired briefly to do an edit of the script, Foote states emphatically that

I did not incidentally write the screenplay for *The Chase*. Lillian Hellman did the screenplay. She said that she used my novel and my play as a departure, and then she departed. So that was another Hollywood lesson to realize—what can happen to material that's turned over to somebody else. I wasn't too happy with her.

After *The Chase*, Foote was approached by film producer and director, Otto Preminger, "who [he] liked a lot," to adapt K.B. Gilden's best-selling novel, *Hurry Sundown*, to the screen. This story, like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, deals with racial prejudice as well as the debilitating effects of rural, Southern poverty. Jane Fonda and Michael Caine were cast in the lead roles. Before shooting even began, Foote and Preminger disagreed at length about the script's style and approach. Preminger then hired Thomas C. Ryan to completely overhaul the screenplay, although he also insisted that Foote retain a co-writing credit. Horton Foote today maintains he had little to do with the final conception and assembly of *Hurry Sundown* (1967). Besides doing an uncredited revision of the western, *The Stalking Moon* (1968), for old friends Robert Mulligan and Gregory Peck, Horton Foote decided it was time to seriously reevaluate his career goals, and to begin working on his own original, material again.

I knew that this was not working for me. This ten million dollars and what are the distributors going to think, and can we get this star and that star. It was just driving me nuts. So I left. I never lived out there [Hollywood] but I just never did take any more jobs . . . my wife and I moved our family up to New Hampshire [in 1966], and I began to write . . . All I could do was write what I thought about and hope somebody will want to watch it again someday.

Chancing the Independent Route

I learned a great deal with *Tomorrow* (1972). I was on the set all the time. I was in the editing room. I learned that film really should be like theatre in the sense that in theatre, the writer is, of course, very dominant to be quite frank. I mean we are sought after. We are at the rehearsals. If we don't like something, we can speak up our minds. We help with the casting. It is always a collaborative effort, and I am not one who believes in antagonism with the director—that it's the writer against the producer—I really think that it should be an enormous cooperation with everybody to achieve a final work of art. But in Hollywood, that wasn't so. A writer there has in his contract that you are a writer for hire, which means that you write a script, then it belongs to them. Then they can do what they want to, shoot it the way they want. God forbid that you should ever try to get on the set. They don't want you.

But here I was and I felt a part of it, and I felt very creative about film again.

Horton Foote

If anyone has a chance of reclaiming the word "auteur" for authors—after years of seeing it used as a synonym for movie directors—it's certainly this soft-spoken Southerner, who's never afraid to reject the Hollywood rule book in favor of his own insights and instincts (Sterritt 1).

I can't see my way of doing a film for under one million dollars, but look at John Sayles, he simply got some actors together, and he got \$400,000 together, and he did a film. And the best thing is to do it, you see. Not wait for a big studio or a big agent, but find the passion to get it done.

Horton Foote

There is little coincidence to the recurring pattern in Horton Foote's independent films where a number of key characters ultimately find peace and contentment by following their own way; and correspondingly, a series of others find themselves unhappy and regretful in hindsight for having ignored their better judgments. Carrie Watts, the central character in *The Trip to Bountiful* (1985), is in many ways the prototype of this preoccupation and motif in Foote's cinema because she embodies both impulses in one skin, having suffered for marrying a man she never loved, but then following her resolve to visit her family homestead in Bountiful, as her way of situating herself both psychologically and spiritually in the face of impending old age.

In the early 1970s, Horton Foote was clearly at a point in his career where the validation of individual choice was understandably an obsession. He was still receiving occasional offers from Hollywood, and was more than able to make a good living from this venue if he chose to do so. On the other hand, the mainstream motion picture industry was no longer a satisfying outlet for the kind of storytelling that Foote most wanted to create.

During this period, and continuing through the remainder of the 1970s, Horton Foote composed his nine play, *Orphan's Home Cycle*, a series of interwoven narratives that are loosely-based on the lives of his parents and maternal grandparents in the first two decades of this century. As mentioned earlier, three of these stories, *1918*, *On Valentines Day*, and *Courtship*, have already been adapted to film, while four more are presently in various stages of preparation and pre-production, including *Roots in a Parched Ground*; *Convicts* with Robert Duvall; *Lily Dale* with Mary Stuart Masterson; and *The Widow Claire* with Hallie Foote.

Hallie Foote, Horton's daughter, has been playing the heroine in the first three motion pictures, Elizabeth Robedaux. She is a character who displays the courage to follow her own instincts and marry the man she loves, despite his lower social standing and her family's adamant rejection and disapproval. In contrast, she interacts with a number of other characters, an aunt and her husband's uncle, who were pressured by manners and expediency to make the socially acceptable choice. Throughout the 1970s, therefore, Horton Foote populated his fictional world of Harrison with people who were faced with the decision to fulfill their own purposes, or opt instead for motives that were put upon them. Although these conflicts are never easily resolved in this cycle of films, characters, such as Elizabeth, affirm life in Foote's cosmology by following their own designs, while characters who betray themselves end their days bitter and rueful.

Horton Foote was evidently shadowed with similar concerns. He eventually decided to develop his next motion picture project outside the purview of mainstream Hollywood. The result was *Tomorrow* (1972), an adaptation of a Faulkner short story that he had successfully scripted for *Playhouse 90* in 1960, and later rewrote and produced Off-Broadway in 1968 with Robert Duvall. Duvall again joined Foote in this newest reincarnation on film, at a "cost of \$400,000, which was unheard of in those days." Concerning his frequent and continuing professional relationship with Robert Duvall, Foote recalls

It began, I had a play of mine called *The Midnight Caller* which was done at the Neighborhood Playhouse, which is an acting school. Gregory Peck went there, many wonderful actors went there. Duvall was in his last year when they do a group of plays and invite agents and directors, and they had chosen this play of mine, and Sanford Meisner, who was a teacher and director, asked me if I would like to come and see it. I brought Kim Stanley, and my wife, and Robert Mulligan, and this story is of an alcoholic, not like this one [in *Tender Mercies*], a young man who committed suicide at the end of the play. Duvall just knocked us out of our seats. He was just this young talent. We were working on *Mockingbird* at the time, and it came time to cast *Mockingbird*, and we couldn't think of anyone for Boo Radley, and my wife said, what about that young man at the Neighborhood Playhouse? Mulligan had seen him, and I thought he was wonderful, and he did too. That began his career and we became friends, and we've done many projects since. That's how it evolved. I think he's one of our great actors, and I feel very privileged to work with him.

Tomorrow is a lovely and understated effort, with a tour de force performance by Duvall in the central role as a poor, lonely, and inarticulate Mississippi farmer, who finds love in his relationship with the child of an abandoned and dying woman. The movie was neither a commercial nor an outright critical success, although critics for *New York Magazine*, the *Newhouse* papers, the *L.A. Times*, and *NBC-TV* did include the film on their year-end, ten-best lists, which at the time was highly unusual for an independent offering. Significantly, though, the nature of independent filmmaking was now according Horton Foote more artistic control than ever before.

Beginning with *Tender Mercies*, and also beginning with *Tomorrow* really, I've had a lot [of influence on these productions]. I'm in the editing room all the time. In *1918*, *On Valentine's Day*, and *Courtship* I'm really the co-director. I don't ask for credit because I don't really want it, but I directed. I took all the rehearsals with the actors. And I'm in the editing room as much as I can get, basically, and that's very important to me.

Throughout the rest of the 1970s, Foote continued writing and directing on stage and for television, where he adapted *The Displaced Person* (1976) by Flannery O'Connor for *PBS Anthology*, and *Barn Burning* (1978) by William Faulkner for *PBS's American Short Story* series. His primary attention, however, was creating his own scripts, such as *Keeping On* (1983) for *PBS's American Playhouse*, which was produced and directed by Barbara Kopple. His first full-length, original screenplay was produced as *Tender Mercies* (1983), a work that garnered Foote both his second Oscar and Writers Guild Award, and a film that catapulted Horton Foote into the most active professional period in his life at the unlikely age of 67. As friend Alan Pakula observes

He has a specific voice, a specific style, and he has never abandoned it, even though it has cost him. He has never cut his talent to the fashion of the time. And because he wrote his works, whether they were going to be produced or not, he got what most American writers don't get—a second act. You are seeing continuity and fruition now, because he has never wavered from his vision (Freedman 50).

The success of *Tender Mercies* was followed by *The Trip to Bountiful* (1985), a motion picture in which Geraldine Page became the third lead actor to win an Academy Award with a Horton Foote screenplay, along with Gregory Peck (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) and Robert Duvall (*Tender Mercies*). On working with such first-rate performers, Horton Foote comments

I value the actor. I was talking earlier about *Bountiful* and Geraldine Page, and one of the lessons I learned because it was originally done in the theatre with Lillian Gish, and you can't imagine two different actresses as Lillian Gish and Geraldine Page, and I would be hard put to choose which actress I like better because I love them both. But you soon realize the great value an actor can bring to something because it's like two great instrumentalists taking a piece of music, you know, somehow it's the same and somehow it's very different . . . actors take this very, very seriously

[creating the regional flavor of his films]. They match the writer's intensity and the director's intensity. [Duvall] went down to Texas about five months before we started filming [*Tender Mercies*] and he looked all over for the kind of accent that he thought was correct. He finally found it in East Texas. . . . Now he is extreme. Not that many actors have that kind of ear or affinity or devotion. He also by the way went out with a string band, a country-western band, every weekend, and he sang in little honky-tonks. They didn't know who he was. That's the kind of preparation he does. I mean that's an extreme, because he is extreme about finding, he gets in a fury if he feels people are condescending towards the material as some actors are. They think they are a bunch of hicks, you know, but most actors take it very seriously.

After his "experiences with *Tender Mercies* and *The Trip to Bountiful*," for which he received his third Academy Award nomination for screenwriting, Horton Foote remembers "I got a lot of courage, and my wife and I decided we could do films for a million or a million and a half." Consequently, in 1985, he began to adapt the parts of his "Orphan's Home Cycle" to film, beginning with *1918* (\$1.7 million), *On Valentine's Day* (\$1.7 million), and *Courtship* (\$800,000). This continuing project is a family affair which is being co-produced by Foote's wife, Lillian, co-starring his daughter, Hallie; while another son, Horton, Jr., and another daughter, Daisy, are also working as crew members and appearing in some of these productions. All of these motion pictures are being shot on-location in Waxahatchee and Wharton, Texas where Foote states

I have had wonderful crews, and I saw a real chance to explore wonderful material that was very personal to me, and I knew I would never be able to do it in Hollywood. . . . I know that this is true [his preoccupation with family life] because so many people have seen that, and I have five generations that lived in one town, so in that sense I'm part of an enormous family. My brother just ran from it all. He couldn't listen to it. He said if anyone boasts again about what happened back then, "I'm just going to go crazy!" But it never bothered me, and I always valued it. I enjoy having a family of my own. That's something that I just enjoy. Now that obviously goes into my work. I don't proselytize because I also know all the negative parts of family life. I know how spiteful they can be sometimes, and how corrupting. I mean I think that's there too I trust. It's certainly a part of it. . . . Yet, I think those things are almost unconsciously felt. . . . I don't think of the [Orphan's Home Cycle] as autobiographical in the sense that they're not about me. I think of them more as biographical in the sense that they are about my family, but I don't ever really appear. Maybe that little baby in the end of *1918* is me, but I'm not sure. But it is true that they are drawn from this avid listening I did as a child.

The nine-parts of the Orphan's Home Cycle are drawn specifically from stories told to Horton by his father about the elder Foote's early life and eventual marriage to Horton's mother. These family fables begin in 1902 with *Roots in a Parched Ground* when the father of young Horace Robedoux dies, his mother remarries, and Horace's new stepfather virtually disowns his new stepson. Horace, who is the surrogate for Horton's real father, then grows up in a difficult and transient manner with relatives in *Convicts*, *Lily Dale*, and *The Widow Claire*, ending up a dislocated, young man who has done his share of drinking, gambling, and carousing, not unlike Henry Thomas in *Baby, the Rain Must Fall*.

Horace's life changes for the better when he finally meets and marries Elizabeth Vaughn, and becomes better connected to the community of Harrison in *Courtship*, *On Valentine's Day*, *1918*, and *Cousins*. Elizabeth's father, Henry Vaughn, is one of the richest and most influential men in Harrison, and he is slow to accept his daughter's choice for a husband, although reconciliation does take place within the backdrop of "the decline of the cotton plantation aristocracy and the rise of the mercantile class on the Gulf coast" ("Horton Foote" 12). Mr. Vaughn passes away in the final installment, *The Death of Papa*, a traumatic experience which signals the end of an era, and leaves the whole family vulnerable, though braced for the future together. As Horton Foote remarks

The event that always struck me, the event I've always been groping toward as a writer, was the day my grandfather died. Until then, life was just magic. I never felt so secure in my life as sitting on the porch swing and knowing I was the grandson of one of the richest families in town and my grandfather was the most respected man in town (Freedman 61).

The Orphan's Home Cycle is, of course, "not literally [his] parent's story," although family legend is the inspiration for the series. This saga is an artistic creation that works on two vital levels simultaneously: The rich lore in these stories enables them to function as folktales which chronicle the cultural transformation of the pre-industrial old South, and the collapse of its social order, into the emerging newer South that exists today. More importantly, however, the Orphan's Home Cycle also operates as traditional mythmaking, reflecting experiences and suggesting meanings about the human life-cycle beyond the pale of one family in southeast Texas at the turn-of-the-century. It is a project that Horton Foote hopes he can fully realize on film, despite his concern that "I won't have enough time to do them all. That's the great enemy, isn't it?" (Pawlyna 5B).

The Imaginary Landscape of Harrison, Texas

You can't make too many false moves with his writing. You can't push it. You can't propel it along. You just have to let it lay there. It's like rural Chekov—simple but deep (Freedman 63).

I don't know why we met when we did or why I found you when you was all worn out, and I couldn't save you no matter how bad I wanted to. I don't know why you wanted me to raise this baby . . . but I don't care. I promised you I'd raise him and I will, like he was my own.

- Jackson Fentry in *Tomorrow*

Once I was driving home drunk and swerved to avoid hitting another car. My car turned over four times, but they pulled me out alive when I should have died. I don't know why I lived and my daughter died. I sat up praying last night to know why, but there was no answer to my prayers. I don't know the answer to nothing, not a blessed thing. Is there a reason why all of these things happened? Why did my daughter die? Why, when I was drunk and down, did you take pity on me, and marry me? Why? And Sonny's daddy was killed in the war - why? I tell you Rosa Lee, I don't trust happiness. I never have and never will.

- Mack Sledge in *Tender Mercies*

Why did God take my baby? I asked my preacher that question, but he couldn't answer. He said there must be some reason but that he couldn't find it. Oh, Bessie, I'm not pleased about this baby. I want Jenny back and I don't want this baby . . . Bessie, was it God's will that Jenny died?

- Elizabeth Robedaux in *1918*

The three examples of film dialogue cited above express a similarity of style and concern that is characteristic of Horton Foote. Each case exhibits his preference for portraying the reaction of lead characters to tragic happenings, rather than graphically showing the events themselves. This technique is important because it foregoes plot cliches for deeper resonances. Primary attention is forcefully shifted away from the more immediate, melodramatic potential of presenting a mother dying in childbirth; a newborn stricken with influenza; or a teenaged daughter being killed in a drink-driving accident; to scenes of reflection and understatement which suggest meanings well beyond the simple actions and words on-screen. Foote knowingly acknowledges

This is a style of mine, and I don't know how I arrived at it, but I'm ferocious about it because I think that so many films are so disposable, they voluntarily engross you and entertain you, but they are so literal and there's no real thought how best to tell the material, I don't think. I can't say that my point-of-view is very popular out there. I'm often called crazy, but I get by with it.

There is a psychic turbulence seething beneath the calm and restraint of Horton

Foote's fictional world; characters as different as Jackson Fentry, Mack Sledge, and Elizabeth Robedaux must all face the pain of tragedy and disappointment by learning to accept life on its own terms, and move forward. Filtered through the codes of Southern etiquette and propriety, Foote's impassioned desire to affirm and celebrate life is ever-present, even as the characters of Harrison struggle and generally fail to understand why misfortune and calamities happen.

Horton Foote's unwavering "sense of place" is the one enduring constant that remains immutable from film to film, from teleplay to stageplay. Like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha county, Horton Foote's Harrison, Texas is the natural habitat of his imagination, where he can grapple with the problems of rendering the modern world meaningful on his own terms. In the process, Foote writes, produces, directs, and edits feature films that are out of step with the American mainstream; his motion pictures are gentler in pace, subtler in effect, and designed to disclose those moments of insight and poetry which lie hidden within the ordinary lives of his characters.

Along with literally dozens of other independent filmmakers throughout the country, Foote is helping to establish a kind of filmic equivalent to regional theatre or literature for domestic moviegoers. Critical attention should increasingly focus on Horton Foote and his fellow practitioners in this new idiomatic cinema as they persevere in mirroring the plurality of America's various outlooks and locales on film. It is an exciting development to watch as more and more smaller-budgeted and localized filmmakers with the requisite talent and skills are now able to produce motion pictures with attitudes and styles that are unlike the usual Hollywood formulas. Future research can continue to analyze their relative position with respect to mainstream film entertainment in the United States, as well as evaluate the growing impact that they have collectively had on American film form and perspective over the past two decades.

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Notes

¹ This quotation by Horton Foote and the many that follow are taken from (1.) a lecture-discussion, and (2.) conversations between Mr. Foote and the author on April 21, 1988 at Goucher College.

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BROAD Woody A

In *Radio Days*, the narrator as a boy with "It was like themes: radio as the *genius* heroism, humor, and hope. Allen also reveals that this powers of the *genius* were boyhood persona idolizes, who, like Oz's "wizard" be of illusion; the ideal marriage in sophisticated splendor creatures (a broadcast of C date into leaving her, is a chance to transcend her role by the real world attack, not transcendent, heaven on earth in Woody Allen's works.