

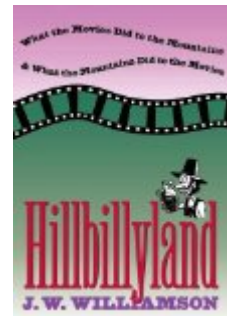
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



J. W. Williamson. *Hillbillyland: What the Movies Did to the Mountains and What the Mountains Did to the Movies*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2195-4; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4503-5.

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Since the mid-1800s, comic or violent rural characters have entertained Americans, thumbing their noses at proprieties and inverting the values of respectable urban society. Gullible, sexually loose, hard drinking, lazy but virile—such characters, J.W. Williamson argues, have served an important psychological function in American culture, allowing the respectable to displace deep seated anxieties over drunkenness, domestic violence, and premarital pregnancy onto a rural “other.” Sometimes playing a rural clown, sometimes a rural rebel, sometimes a monstrous rural alien, the “hillbilly” inhabits the economic and geographic margins of American society, usually, but not exclusively, southern Appalachia or rural Arkansas.

The stereotypes of rural “fools” or “rebels” are old, Williamson shows, dating back in American culture to such antebellum characters as Sut Lovingood and Captain Simon Suggs. But the word itself is relatively new, first appearing in print in the *New York Journal* in 1900. It defined the “Hill-Billie” as a person “who lives in the hills, has no means to speak of, dresses as he can, talks as he pleases, drinks whiskey when he gets it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy takes him” (37).

Early film drew heavily upon this figure. Movie makers released at least 300 films about moonshining, country feuding, and backwoods desperadoes between 1910 and 1916. And while the attractiveness of the rural other receded temporarily, it invariably arose again because it proved to be extraordinarily malleable and because it could serve diverse functions; such figures could personify an older, rougher definition of masculinity; represent premodern rural resistance to the forces of modernity; and challenge rigid bourgeois definitions of womanhood.

Such figures have also been persistently popular, especially among displaced provincials (those whom *Variety* contemptuously dismissed as “hicks in the sticks” even though many resided in cities). “Hillbilly” music first entered mass culture in the 1920s; Andy Griffith brought the figure to TV in the late 1950s. *Crocodile Dundee* and *Thelma and Louise*, Williamson shows, offer updated embodiments of older stereotypes, while contemporary commercial country music represents a direct descendant of older patterns of cultural expression.

One of this fascinating book’s many strengths lies in its success in showing why the hillbilly image has been so durable by delineating the various functions it has performed over time. In film, it has served as a veiled way of attacking sexual respectability; it has offered urban America a screen on which to project its worst impulses; it has offered a way to deal with tensions over masculinity; and it has provided a stage on which women could assume authority and status and cross boundaries, even as such portrayals often repressed the implications of such egalitarianism, reducing it to crude sexual humor or portraying such figures as grotesques.

One of Williamson’s overarching themes is that, for the most part, representations of the hillbilly have been persistently negative and derogatory. The reason is that this figure has remained the symbolic cultural other. Only rarely have filmmakers dared identify with this important, but largely neglected, cultural figure.

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