

The Iconicity of Chainsaws from the Backyard to the BBQ

by Christopher Curry

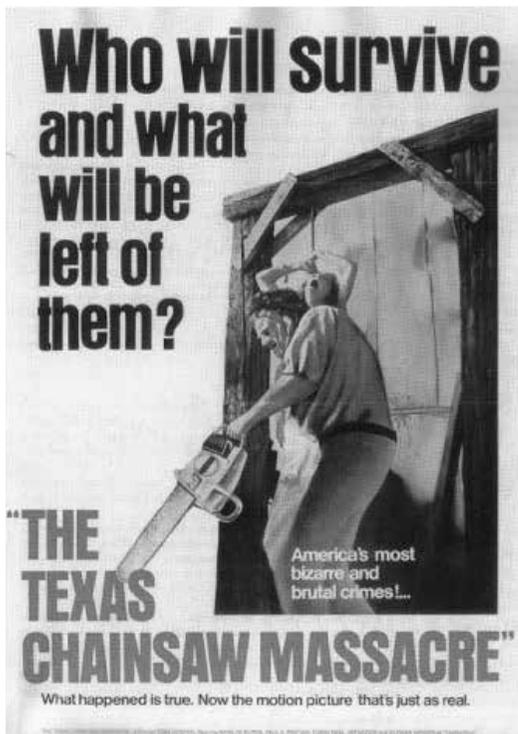


Photo from Atwan 319

The sound is unmistakable.

A summer day, ice melting in tall glasses of tea and flies hovering round the patio door, and everyone is in a lazy, BBQ mood. And then—without warning—there it is: from beyond the fence, from across the backyard, a startling mechanized growl that hiccups to life, and takes a few moments to find its sputtering guttural rhythm before careening angrily to work. The sound cuts the air like tires skidding through loose gravel. Birds take wing; squirrels scatter.

The source of arguably the most recognizable sound in the tool shed, the chainsaw has a place in American cultural iconography due to two sets of associations. One set of associations derives from the chainsaw as a time saving tool: the mechanical versus the organic, and the logic of efficiency which propels technological advancement. These associations are especially important in that they suggest a relationship to several

notions basic to American national identity. The second set of associations derives from the chainsaw as a weapon, and in considering these associations we shall move directly to their origin: a film, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Each of the sets of associations seems superficially distinct, but both in fact stem from a single idea. In both of these sets of associations, the chainsaw embodies the idea of consumption.

Two years, 1950 and 1974, are vital in understanding the iconicity of the petrol-powered, hand-held single operator chainsaw. 1950 was the year in which the tool was introduced to the American market. It was a backyard revolution. Men were empowered with a remarkable new technology for clearing undergrowth, trimming branches, and felling trees. Men were given a leg up in their struggle with nature. This is not a case of gender insensitivity in employing the masculine pronoun; stop and think for one moment how often you have imagined chainsaws being operated by women. It is likely not to be very often at all. The chainsaw, obviously phallic, is explicitly a masculine object. It is an object of masculine power—loud, relentless, and ruthlessly effective.

The chainsaw had been invented by a Swiss boiler plate manufacturer named Andreas Stihl over two decades earlier, but it was not until 1950 that Stihl perfected the single operator model. The new chainsaw was immediately popular, thanks in no small part to the booming post-WWII economy and the concomitant middle class exodus to suburbia. The chainsaw is a specialized product. Specialized products were natural developments of the post-war consumer culture and economy; the superfluity of many of these products was often disguised behind a veil of advertising rhetoric which proclaimed them as “necessity” and “convenience” items. The confusion of necessity and convenience was often an important component in these products’ success. In the case of the chainsaws, it mattered little that individuals didn’t have to chop down trees in order to clear land for homes; the chainsaw was still very successful.

D. Cook, in the suggestively titled book *Keeping Warm With An Ax*, argues that the chainsaw was, from its beginning, always purely a status item: “If you want to be fashionable, buy a chainsaw. They are in. The chainsaw is the delight of the suburban putterer . . . [t]o fit with the riding-lawnmower set, you must have a chainsaw” (12).

American culture, from its beginning, has been a culture of consumption; for example, the early European settlers’ concept of the New World as a place of (supposedly) limitless natural resources as well as a prime site for economic expansion are both made possible by a consumer-based ideology. America was always a commodity to its European colonizers, a commodity whose function was to provide more commodities; therefore, the culture here was always one in which consumption played an instrumental role. One specific and highly important object of consumption in America has always been lumber.

Cutting down trees is an especially significant part of American history. Obviously, since much of the North American continent was virgin wilderness when the Europeans arrived, trees had to be cut immediately just to make space. But of course the trees weren’t simply chopped down and discarded; in the era before steel, concrete, and plastic, it was wood that provided the primary source of building materials. So chopping down trees not only cleared space but also provided the necessary commodity to then fill that space back up again with human constructions, such as “houses, bridges, fences, furniture, ships, and a host of other artifacts which included even roads!” (Williams 146).

But trees were not only a building material. Michael Williams explains: “[t]he abundant timber was a ready source of domestic fuel without which life in the northern two-thirds of the country during the winter months would have been impossible. Wood was the source of fuel [not only domestically but also] for industry and transportation” (146, emphasis mine). Williams concludes, “[w]ood and wooden products were central to and thoroughly permeated American life” (146); so much so, in fact, that in 1836 one commentator stated, “Well may ours be called a *wooden country*” (146; Hall quoted in Williams 146, emphasis in original). This basic relationship to cutting

down trees necessarily imbricates chainsaws in a web of socio-historic connections with ideas fundamental to American national identity. Such a radical technological transformation of the basic means to cut down trees sidles up alongside such intrinsically American notions as self-determination, Manifest Destiny, the logging industry, and the myth of frontier.

The TAB Handbook of Hand & Power Tools describes chainsaws as “important helpers to today’s suburban homeowner, farmer, and camper” (373). Certainly the chainsaw has real use value: as *The TAB Handbook* claims, “[a]rmed with a chainsaw, any adult can fell a tree, limb it, ‘buck’ the tree into fireplace-size logs, and quarter the logs into easy-burning firewood in just a fraction of the time and with far less work than would be needed with a hand ax and saw” (373). The basic presupposition which underlies this claim’s logic is that it is important for a single person to be able to appropriate the labor of many; furthermore, it is important for this person to perform this labor more quickly. This presupposition is essentially assembly line mentality transposed upon the domestic domain.

It is hardly viable to claim that the consumers buying chainsaws think through the presuppositions and logic of their purchase. Nevertheless, such a purchase implicates the consumer in ideological relationships: first of all, in a relationship between himself and his labor, which, in this case, his labor has been technologically modified to fit more smoothly into the dominant discourse’s model of individual labor; second, in a relationship with his immediate social group, that is, his local socio-economic peers, a relationship that can be defined as an economy of symbolic capital (this relationship could colloquially be called “keeping up with the Joneses”); and finally, as we’ve already stated, in a socio-historic relationship with American national identity.

Chainsaws were iconic from their mid-century entry into the American marketplace due to the associative resonances within each of these overlapping, indeed concentric, relationships: the technological modification of an individual’s labor power; the economy of symbolic value within the individual’s immediate social peer group; finally, the history of the American project of cutting down trees and its multiple connections with fundamental American ideals.

A little more than twenty years after the chainsaw’s appearance, in 1974, a low budget American horror movie transformed the chainsaw’s place in the landscape of American imagination. The film featured a chainsaw wielded against human beings. The chainsaw now became an icon of horror.

While the earlier associations didn’t go away (that’s the funny thing about associations—they don’t displace, they accrete and modify), they were pushed from the foreground by a new set of associations: revulsion, outright panic, dread and disgust. These associations may seem very different from the earlier associations, but the difference is superficial. Obviously, there is still a situation of the mechanical versus the organic, and, as we shall see, the logic of efficiency is also still present. A thematic consistency binds the iconicity of the chainsaw as masculine instrument of suburban labor and the chainsaw as instrument of mayhem. There is a relationship between the two sets of associations, a relationship defined by identity. When we uncover the source of identity, the ideal that forms the basis of this consistency, we will see that the distance from deforesting American wilderness to dismembering American teenagers is not, after all, very far.

That a horror film would figure in a discussion of a contemporary cultural icon is *a propos*, considering Paul Wells’s claim that, “more than any other genre, [horror] has interrogated the deep-seated effects of change and responded to the newly determined grand narratives of social, scientific, and philosophical thought” (3). Furthermore,

he claims, “horror . . . essentially [provides] a history of anxiety in the twentieth century” (3). Icons, understood as “a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol; especially of a culture or movement” (*OED*), are more or less a twentieth century development; the same can be said of the horror genre. Icons are characterized by associations. The horror genre functions by manipulation of symbols that are especially resonant in the cultural imagination at a particular moment; therefore, it is proper to claim horror works by association. Thus iconicity and horror logically complement one another.

Tobe Hooper made his feature film debut, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, for only \$125,000. The money reportedly came from the mob. Hooper’s friends and other locals from Austin, TX, made up the cast and crew. The chainsaw, for the American film-going public at least, was the star of the picture. The plot was sparse, and although startlingly new for the time, the basic premise has since been copied into hackneyed cliché: a group of teenagers on a road trip encounter peril at the hands of a family of maniacs out in the middle of nowhere. The maniacal family, made up exclusively of men, slaughters people in order to make barbecue. They not only eat their victims, but also sell their BBQ in a roadside store. You see, other than the fact that the family members are deranged bloodthirsty cannibals, they are actually admirable exemplars of the American Dream: entrepreneurs, relying upon their own initiative, imagination, and their chainsaws in order to survive hostile market conditions by carving out their own niche.

Initial domestic reaction to the film, which premiered October 11, 1974, was dismal; for instance, “*Harper’s Magazine* called it a ‘vile piece of sick crap with literally nothing to recommend it’” (Phillips 101, 102). Nevertheless, the film has become one of the most influential American movies of the previous three decades; in fact, it has been called “the greatest of all modern horror movies” (Jones, quoted in Phillips 106). Today, many film critics give *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* a prominent place in the development of the contemporary horror film, as a crucial link between the psychic damage of Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and the visceral carnage of Carpenter’s *Halloween*.

But *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*’s lasting appeal isn’t due to its privileged place in schematized histories of horror; instead, its appeal is due to the jolting effect it has upon audiences. From the legends of filmgoers “stumbl[ing] out of *Texas Chainsaw* in a state of psychological shock,” to numerous instances of it being banned, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* has startled and affected audiences like few other films (Phillips 102). Recalling Young’s claim that horror functions as a “history of anxiety,” and considering the film’s enduring appeal, it seems likely the film strikes an anxious nerve in the American cultural psyche; Christopher Sharret claims as much when he observes, “*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1973) [sic] represents a crucial moment . . . [it] develops a specific relationship to the historical and cultural trends[s] . . . and to a distinct period of discontent in American society” (256). The particular period—post-1960s, post-Manson, post-Vietnam, in the wake of Watergate (Nixon resigned two months and three days before the film opened)—is well known as a period of cultural depression, political disillusionment, and widespread despair. Faith in traditional American values and institutions was at a nadir; optimism waned before a withering hopelessness.

Hooper set out to make an art film that was also political, but he did not want to make a political film, that is, a film explicitly about politics. Therefore, Hooper chose to make a horror film. This decision is not surprising. The early 1970s were a time of widespread political disillusionment, especially in young people, but it should be added that this feeling was directed more against the institutions of political authority (the office of President, for example) than against the practice of politics *per se*. The

institutions of American politics were corrupt, but not necessarily the political process itself. This distinction is important to keep in mind in order to understand why political expression found its way into so many cultural productions of the time: there was still a belief in the efficacy of personal expression in the democratic process. Politics played a major role in many aesthetic cultural productions of the time, but polemics were often limited to subtext or implication and rarely emerged manifest as such.¹ The horror genre readily lends itself to sub-textual readings; furthermore, the generic conventions constitute an inherent horror politic. Horror politics tend to work in two experiential domains: the personal and the social.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre's politics are concerned with the social, specifically the social consequences of an intrinsic American ideal taken to its logical conclusion. This ideal is consumption. Consumption not run amok, but coldly calculated to its inevitable endpoint. Consumption is the basis for the thematic consistency from which the identity between the chainsaw's two sets of iconic associations derives. In the film, the need to consume, driven by the engine of capitalist logic, arrives at its conclusion in the act of cannibalism: survival is primary; the means of survival are less important than its accomplishment. Other ideals intertwined with capitalist ideology are also present in the film's politics; in fact, a politicized reading of the film finds strongly anti-capitalist rhetoric. Kendall Phillips explains, "the psychotic family [Leatherface and his murderously entrepreneurial clan] is destitute after losing their jobs at the local slaughterhouse as a result of mechanization" (114). Increasing efficiency through mechanization can be characterized as a component in the assembly line mentality transposed from the industrial to the domestic domain. It also contributes to the production of specialized products.

The chainsaw is an example of such a specialized product, and so when the family, dispossessed of their earning power through a process of increasing efficiency, a process dependent upon the technological innovation and mechanization of which the chainsaw itself is emblematic, turns to the chainsaw as a means of realizing their continued survival, we realize—with a shock—that Cook's "suburban putterer" might only be a factory closure or two away from atrocity. In a world increasingly subordinated to capitalist logic in all its domains of experience, the only way in which to survive is to embrace the system's logic. Phillips continues in his explanation of the family's predicament: "[t]hey have fallen through the cracks in the broad network of social security systems [the meager ones that still remain] and become a twisted version of the underlying logic of modern capitalism—the exploitation of others for profit" (114).

The seemingly disparate sets of associations related to the chainsaw in its roles as tool and weapon are in fact multivalent perspectives upon the single basic theme it embodies: consumption. A technological innovation, motivated in the first place by the logic of increasing efficiency, the chainsaw was a successful product in the post-WWII American economy. Furthermore, the chainsaw was always already iconic due to its place in a rich web of connections with ideas fundamental to American national identity. Though a small step as far as creative thinking is concerned (it's a saw, hooked up to a motor!), the chainsaw was a giant technological leap in the American "war of the woods," which is a phrase Michael Williams quotes from one early American settler who used it in order to describe his community's relationship to the wilderness (147).

War is an apt metaphor. War is always war for capital, not limited to the sense of financial capital, but broadly speaking as a term that includes natural resources, means of production, and geography (to name a few). Since the logic of capitalism can be (over-) simply stated as "the end justifies the means" in a process of continued produc-

tion and consumption, to the exclusion of any other concerns, it is not too difficult to suggest this logic can be read as, if not an outright endorsement of war, then certainly an advocacy of war. Production requires consumption; consumption presupposes production. Logic made up only of these processes inevitably resorts to war in order to continue. The mechanical versus the organic, the cruel dictates of efficiency, the movement of expansion and subordination inherent in the capitalist system—when considered closely these ideas result in revulsion, panic, dread and disgust. The two sets of associations responsible for the chainsaw's iconicity intersect here, in the logic of the idea of consumption. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* appropriates both the chainsaw and this logic. The film horrifies because it lays bare the hideousness of this logic. The chainsaw endures as an icon because it not only embodies this logic, but also demonstrates its ambivalence: the agents of production can easily become objects of consumption.

Endnote

1. I'm thinking of numerous American films of the period (*The Wild Bunch*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *Easy Rider*, to name a few).

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