ABSTRACT

WILLIAM FELKER. Nothing Compares: The Reel Carolina. (Under the direction of Professor Devin Orgeron.)

Although North Carolina film production has increased significantly over the past forty years, representations of the state on film remain inadequate, with the majority of these films exploiting the diverse landscapes of the Old North State by employing them as a cinematic stand-in for other locations. By adapting the form of a cinematic essay that examines the (re)presentation of North Carolina’s locational “look” and utilizes footage from its many fictional depictions, Nothing Compares: The Reel Carolina attempts to shed the state’s reputation on film as a generic and placeless space and reclaim the Tar Heel State, arguing that North Carolina has a more multifaceted identity beyond the indistinctive locale that is rendered by the way that its picturesque vistas, rural economies, and “Southern” charms are cinematically depicted. Through an application of Giles Deleuze’s theory of the “virtual image” to the landscapes displayed within fiction films, this cine-essay examines myriad Hollywood films that have been shot in North Carolina over the past forty years, from Being There and The Last of the Mohicans to Weekend at Bernie’s and the film adaptations of Nicholas Sparks’s novels, and unveils their overall misrepresentation of the state, especially in their re-appropriation of Tar Heel landmarks, amalgamation of North Carolina geography, and extensive substitution of the state for other places.

Furthermore, this film-essay provides an alternative to Hollywood’s frequent misrepresentation of North Carolina: the independently produced, North Carolina-based films of David Gordon Green, Phil Morrison, and Ramin Bahrani. By focusing their
narratives on the communities and citizens of North Carolina rather than just its natural beauty, this cinematic essay argues that these films promote the real Carolina and demonstrate that representations of North Carolina can move beyond mere exploitation of the state’s landscape and carry on an enriching part of Tar Heel culture: its storytelling.