

NAT TURNER: A TROUBLESOM PROPERTY

Transcript

The camera moves through the swamp. Sounds of calling birds can be heard. Light creates apparitions and optical illusions as it is filtered through the trees. We hear the voice of NAT TURNER:

NAT TURNER (VO): I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first.

Dissolve to a two-story house seen through the trees in Southampton County. A light can be seen flickering through a downstairs window. After a moment light from a candle is extinguished and all is quiet except for the hooting of owls in the forest nearby. The silhouette of a man is seen looking at the house. When he leaves the frame, the following title is superimposed over the house:

August 21, 1831, Southampton County, Virginia

Inside, the house is completely dark except for faint moonlight that reveals the outline of NAT TURNER slowly making his way down the hallway, hatchet in his hand. He peeks into a room where JOSEPH TRAVIS, and his wife, SALLY are sleeping. TURNER and WILL quickly enter the bedroom. In the faint light, NAT TURNER takes aim and brings the blade of his hatchet down upon the skull of the sleeping JOSEPH TRAVIS. The blade glances off TRAVIS'S head and he leaps from his bed shouting for his wife. WILL lunges forward and kills TRAVIS with one blow of his axe. Blood splatters on SALLY and WILL kills her as well. TURNER and WILL leave the bedroom and they emerge from the house carrying their blood stained weapons, as we hear the voice of NAT TURNER.

NAT TURNER (VO): The murder of this family, five in number, was the work of a moment. There was a little infant sleeping in a cradle, that was forgotten, until we had left the house and gone some distance, when Henry and Will returned and killed it.

We see the sleeping baby in its cradle and then cut to TURNER organizing the slaves into a military formation. All the slaves hold a weapon or two - a musket, a pistol or an axe and farm implement. TURNER leads them back to the woods.

NARRATOR (VO): Over the next twenty-four hours, Nat Turner led a small group of slaves from farm to farm, killing every white man, woman and child they encountered. They gathered guns and more recruits during a brief but bloody revolt that spread terror throughout the slave-holding South.

Dissolve to close up images of legs and hands in chains, words being written on paper and hands writing.

NARRATOR (VO): Nat Turner was captured and hanged. In the days before his execution, he agreed to tell his story. But after his death, his words became the property of others, as his body was during his life.

Dissolve to shots from literary representations of Nat Turner from William Wells Brown, Randolph Edmonds, William Styron and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

NARRATOR (VO): His story has been continually retold since 1831. He has been depicted as a great and inspiring hero and vilified as an insane fanatic. Each author possesses Nat Turner, transforming his identity and the meaning of his revolt.

Dissolve to silhouette of Nat Turner looking back at the Travis farm, cut to wide shot as he departs and then dissolve to the face of Nat Turner slowly emerging from the waters of Cabin Pond.

NARRATOR (VO): Although today we cannot clearly make out the face of the man, he continues to provoke a bitter debate over the violence that he inspired. For a nation unable to come to terms with the legacy of slavery, Nat Turner remains a troublesome property.

We superimpose the title and then fade to black.

NAT TURNER A TROUBLESOME PROPERTY

The screen is black. As the sounds of the hunters seem to come closer, we see quick images of the white militia (10 in number), searching the tangled terrain with their dogs for the slave rebels or any black person. We crosscut between the two perspectives - the hunter and the hunted - creating an impressionistic recreation of the massive manhunt.

NARRATOR (VO): Nat Turner's slave rebellion triggered a massive mobilization of local militia and vigilante units in Virginia and neighboring North Carolina. As many as 3,000 armed men were called into action to fight what turned out to be 60 to 80 rebels.

ERIC FONER (VO): The balance of sheer military power was weighted tremendously against the slaves in this country.

ERIC FONER (OC): Slaves don't have the organization, the access to arms, the military tradition to be able to mobilize a successful insurrection.

MARY KEMP DAVIS (OC): Slavery itself was such an abomination that I could see how it would drive men and women to do desperate things. A slave revolt by its nature, to me is a pretty desperate act.

NARRATOR (VO): Outraged by the sight of the victims of the revolt - including many badly mutilated women and children, the militia and vigilante units engaged in a slaughter of their own.

A small group of the militia emerges from the woods into a clearing on the edge of a stream. They drag behind them a bleeding, black man (FLEEING SLAVE - the face we saw earlier) and tie him to a tree. One of the men takes aim with his musket and shoots the man to death.

ERIC FONER (VO): The violent, brutal reaction is meant as a warning.

ERIC FONER (OC): It is meant to frighten those who might be contemplating acts like this in the future. It is meant to demonstrate the power of white society.

The men begin to mutilate the dead man's body. Two militiamen drag another CAPTURED SLAVE into the clearing. The captive is horrified to see the other militiamen raise high a severed head of the dead slave.

NARRATOR (VO): At least 50 and perhaps many more slaves and Free Blacks were summarily executed in the days after the suppression of the rebellion.

PETER WOOD (VO): There's no question that there's a cult of violence that surrounds the tension between black and white during slavery times and after.

PETER WOOD (OC): It's hard for us to fathom cutting off peoples' heads and putting them on poles, parading them around. Hanging bodies up in chains. dismembering the body. Taking home souvenirs.

ERIC FONER (OC): We know all about the victims, the white victims of Turner's rebellion, who they were, where they were killed, what their names were, what their families were. Nobody knows the names of even all the participants in the Turner rebellion, and certainly all the innocent blacks who were killed or imprisoned or beaten afterwards. This is not part of our official historical memory. That piece of the story is just forgotten or suppressed and probably can never really be completely recovered.

EKEWUEME MICHAEL THELWELL (OC): If a lot of those black people were not the property of white people, a lot more of them would be killed. Wasn't it Virginia law that said, if you kill someone's slave, the state had to reimburse them for the cost of the slave or something like that?

Inside a crowded rural courtroom in 1831, JEREMIAH COBB and four other white JUSTICES preside over the trial of several black men and one woman. The courtroom is crowded with townspeople (but not as much as we will see later at the trial of Nat Turner). GUARDS, the JAILER, the CLERK and the PROSECUTOR are present. The procedure seems rushed. The judge calls a witness. The justices, JEREMIAH COBB and JAMES TREZEVANT gavel their verdicts:

NARRATOR (VO): Every rebel, except Nat Turner, was quickly killed or captured. During the month of September and on into October, nearly 50 accused rebels stood trial in Southampton County.

JEREMIAH COBB AND JAMES TREZEVANT (FRAGMENTS): Stand up... Guilty as charged...You shall be hanged by the neck until you are dead...The prisoner is guilty...The Court doth value the said slave to the sum of four hundred and twenty-five dollars...

NARRATOR (VO): Ultimately, 19 were hanged while others were transported and sold outside the boundaries of the state.

JEREMIAH COBB AND JAMES TRAZEVANT (FRAGMENTS): The Court recommends to the Governor that the punishment be commuted to transportation.

The sound of the judge's voice and the pounding of his gavel echo through the woods and swamps around Cabin Pond.

The camera appears to be searching for someone.

NARRATOR (VO): And still Nat Turner remained at large. On September 17, 1831, Virginia Governor John Floyd issued a proclamation offering a \$500 reward for the capture of Nat Turner.

As we hear the words of Governor Floyd (read by an actor), image of the Governor's reward notice appears.

GOVERNOR JOHN FLOYD: Nat is between 30 and 35 years old, 5 feet 6 or 8 inches high, weighs between 150 and 160 lbs., rather bright complexion, but not a mulatto, broad-shouldered, large flat nose, large eyes, broad flat feet.

NARRATOR (VO): Governor Floyd's description of Nat Turner is the closest thing we have to a portrait of the man. But it is nothing more than a wanted poster, created to help white men capture a fugitive.

The sounds of hunting dogs bay as the camera explores possible hiding places in the woods around Cabin Pond - fallen trees, thick underbrush, depressions in the terrain, and shallow caves.

NARRATOR (VO): We do not know exactly what happened at the capture of Nat Turner, but a nineteenth-century engraving offers one possible image of the moment.

Dissolve to a nineteenth-century lithograph of the capture of Nat Turner by Benjamin Phipps. Dissolve to BENJAMIN PHIPPS walking with his dog in the woods near Cabin Pond.

We do know it was not until October 30th, 70 days after the outbreak of the rebellion that Benjamin Phipps stumbled onto Nat Turner's hiding place. The slave had never wandered further than a few miles from his home farm.

NAT TURNER slowly emerges from under a covering of leaves beneath a fallen log. We cannot see his face. PHIPPS confronts TURNER with a musket. TURNER surrenders his sword. PHIPPS leads TURNER away.

PHIPPS: Come on out of there...you come on out of there now... (As Turner appears with his sword) Put it down, I said put it down.

NARRATOR (VO): The next morning he was taken to the Southampton County jail in Jerusalem to await trial.

Dissolve to the interior of the jail (Gray's Jail cell). A thirty-year old attorney, THOMAS R. GRAY, his clothes clean but frayed, speaks to the JAILER. Through the open cell door, we see the barely visible features of NAT TURNER covered in chains in the small jail cell.

NARRATOR (VO): It was there in a jail cell that Nat Turner first encountered a local lawyer, Thomas R. Gray. Over the next three days, Gray interviewed Turner and then published his version of Turner's story, which later became the main source for all future interpretations of the man.

Gray turns and addresses the camera.

THOMAS R. GRAY: The late insurrection in Southampton has greatly excited the public mind and led to a thousand idle, exaggerated and mischievous reports. Everything connected with the sad affair was wrapped in mystery, until Nat Turner, the leader of this ferocious band, whose name resounded throughout our widely extended empire, was captured. Since his confinement, by permission of the jailer, I have had ready access to him and determined for the gratification of public curiosity to commit his statements to writing and publish them with little or no variation from his own words.

THOMAS PARRAMORE (OC): Nobody can, I think, say precisely why Thomas R. Gray went into the jail cell on November the first, 1831. It could be that he just wanted the public to know. He felt the public had a right to know what Nat Turner had done from Nat Turner's own point of view. It could be that he sought prestige after a great drop in his own reputability by going in and making himself as famous as he could by being Nat Turner's amanuensis, taking down what he said. He could've been thinking of the income he might derive.

Dissolve to a small wooden jail cell. Except for diffused rays of sunlight entering the room from a small window, a candle on the floor is the principal source of light. NAT TURNER is shackled from head to foot. A short chain allows him very limited movement. He sits on a straw bed on the floor. THOMAS R. GRAY sits on a stool opposite him, discreetly taking notes in the candlelight. When TURNER speaks, he mostly speaks to GRAY. When GRAY speaks to TURNER we see GRAY from an angle that is TURNER'S point of view. This will be the setting throughout the reenactment of The Confessions of Nat Turner.

NAT TURNER (OC): You have asked me to give you a history of the motives, which induced me to undertake the late insurrection, as you call it. To do so, I must go back to the days of my infancy, and even before I was born. I was thirty-one years of age on the 2nd of October last, born the property of Benjamin Turner, of this county.

NAT TURNER (OC): Being at play with other children, when three or four years old, I was telling them something, which my mother overhearing, said it had happened before I was born. I stuck to my story, however, and related some things, which went in her opinion to confirm it. Others being called on were greatly astonished, knowing that these things had happened, and caused them to say in my hearing, I surely would be a prophet, as the Lord had shewn me things that had happened before my birth.

NARRATOR (VO): Many historians are not convinced that all or even most of the words Gray attributes to Turner were actually spoken by him.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR. (OC): There is no Nat Turner back there, whole, to be retrieved. You would have to go and create Nat Turner. We have a very fragmented, disjointed narrative, which purports to be the confessions, and there is the question of whose voice is there.

MARY KEMP DAVIS (OC): I do not believe, for a moment, that Nat Turner talked that way.

VINCENT HARDING (OC): It is very clear by now that we cannot take Nat Turner's confessions at face value, but it is also very clear that we cannot cast it aside.

Cut to Turner in his cell as Gray writes down his words.

NARRATOR (VO): Gray's Confessions of Nat Turner creates a definite image of the man, but we can never be sure the face we see is that of Nat Turner.

NAT TURNER (OC): I was praying one day at my plough, the spirit spoke to me, saying: "Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you."

THOMAS R. GRAY (OC): What do you mean by the Spirit?

NAT TURNER (OC): The Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days.

VINCENT HARDING (OC): Nat Turner must have eaten up the Christian and Hebrew scriptures and must have begun to feel and see and sense himself as the embodiment of these.

As Turner begins to describe his visions, he turns from Gray and addresses the viewer, assuming more and more the role of a preacher.

NAT TURNER (OC): The thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams and I heard a voice saying, "Such is your luck, such you are called, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bare it." While laboring in the field, I discovered drops of blood on the corn as though it were dew from heaven and I communicated it to many, both white and black in the neighborhood. And I then found on the leaves in the woods hieroglyphic characters and numbers with the forms of men in different attitudes portrayed in blood, and representing figures I had seen before in the heavens.

NAT TURNER (OC): And on the 12th of May 1828, I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and that Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first.

THOMAS R. GRAY (OC): Do you not find yourself mistaken now?

NAT TURNER (OC): Was not Christ crucified?

HERBERT APTHEKER (OC): Was not Christ crucified? That's an astonishing statement by a man who's chained to a wall and going to be hanged the next day, and he's told that all your comrades are hanged. That your wife has been sold south and that you will be hanged tomorrow. And he stands up from the cot and he says, "Was not Christ crucified?" Can you imagine that? It's one of the great moments in human history, isn't it?

WILLIAM STYRON (OC): Any intelligent reader coming upon the confessions, the original confessions of Nat Turner and then reflects on those confessions for a while, would have to say to himself "This guy is a crazy lunatic." There's something really strange the moment when he says to Mr. Gray, "Was not Christ not crucified?"

PETER WOOD (OC): The myths contradict each other and they grow up, "He's a saint," "He's a crazy man." You get conflicting reports. People repeat them. They get carried on, and the historian has to peel back through that onion and try to find the real historical person.

NAT TURNER (OC): And until the first sign appeared, I should conceal it from the knowledge of men. And on the appearance of the sign....

THOMAS R. GRAY (HE SPEAKS TO THE CAMERA.): The eclipse of the sun last February

NAT TURNER (OC): I should arise and prepare myself and slay my enemies with their own weapons. And until we had armed and equipped ourselves and gathered sufficient force, neither age nor sex was to be spared,

THOMAS R. GRAY (HE SPEAKS TO THE CAMERA.): Which was invariably adhered to.

KITTY FUTRELL (OC): When people bring that argument to me that in war you kill people in war. But that's declared. You give people the chance to know that I'm going to fight you or that I might kill you. These people were not given that opportunity.

EUGENE GENOVESE (OC): Revolutions have to be thorough. You spare the kids - they run off and warn your enemies. If you're going to take that road, you'd better make up your mind to take it to the end. That is the horror of the thing. It's all well and good to say that these killings came out of rage. I don't doubt that to a certain extent they did, but the real horror is that even if they hadn't, matters would have probably taken the same course. A revolution is either thorough or it's doomed. Real revolutionaries know that, which is why they have to proceed in cold blood.

NAT TURNER (OC): The murder of this family, five in number, was the work of a moment. There was a little infant sleeping in a cradle, that was forgotten, until we had left the house and gone some distance, when Henry and Will returned and killed it.

RICK FRANCIS (OC): The killing of the women and children sticks in my craw more than anything else. He would certainly be remembered better by history if he had limited the killing to adult males or just white adults.

BRUCE TURNER (OC): The evil that he saw was what was needed to be destroyed and the only way to force the destruction of that evil was to make the price so high, that those who was practicing slavery would eventually sue for peace and says we cannot keep slavery because it will cost us too much.

KITTY FUTRELL (OC): The only thing I'll say is that slavery was so wrong, but murder is wrong, too.

NAT TURNER (OC): We started for Mrs. Reese's. Where finding the door unlocked, we entered and murdered Mrs. Reese in her bed, while sleeping. Her son awoke, but he had only time to say who is that and he was no more.

MARTHA MINOW (OC): I think that for many people, many white people, they identify with the innocence. They identify with innocent children. It's a position that's much more comfortable than identifying with slaveholders. And because that's a feature of the story, it makes it seem safe for people who know that they have to stand morally against slavery to say, nonetheless, that there was something morally wrong in the uprising.

RAY WINBUSH (OC): I don't think his goal was to kill white children. His goal was to get freedom for his people, way before Malcolm even said, "by any means necessary." If that meant the killing of white children, so be it. It was an uncompromising position, and I think it was based on something that he had seen around him - the killing of black children, the selling of black children. It was reprehensible, but I understand why he did it.

As GRAY speaks to us, TURNER struggles with his chains and slowly lifts himself from the stool and with great difficulty hobbles to the window. He stares out at the moon, which is a sickly green color.

THOMAS R. GRAY (OC): The calm, deliberate composure with which he spoke of his late deeds and intentions, the expression of his fiend-like face when excited by enthusiasm, still bearing the stains of the blood of helpless innocence about him; clothed with rags and wrapped in chains; yet daring to raise his manacled hands to heaven, with a spirit soaring above the attributes of man; I looked on him and my blood curdled in my veins. He is a complete fanatic or plays his part most admirably.

MARY KEMP DAVIS (OC): I was struck with the tug that Nat Turner had over him. So, I remember thinking, even as he was trying to present him as this figure, this misguided fanatic, as he called him, he was still fascinated with him, impressed by him, in some way.

Dissolve to the jail cell. As GRAY leaves TURNER alone in his cell, the camera slowly moves to frame his silhouetted image against the moonlit window.

NARRATOR (VO): Over and over again, those who search for the meaning of Nat Turner begin their inquiry with a search for the meaning of The Confessions.

VINCENT HARDING (OC): And I see Turner's confessions as, our confessions of not really being quite sure who we are in relationship to each other, black and white in this country.

The EXECUTIONER places a noose around TURNER'S neck. The cart is moved away. He dies by slow strangulation. Dissolve to a long shot of the crowd of bystanders surrounding the silhouette of a body hanging from the tree.

NARRATOR (VO): We know very little about the hanging of Nat Turner. The only contemporary account appeared in a local newspaper. And, as with all Nat Turner stories, we are left with more questions than facts.

PETER WOOD (OC): The record about Nat Turner is so ambiguous. We have so few facts, and yet he's at the center of such an enormous controversy that there's room for lots of different interpretations.

Dissolve to illustrations of scenes from Uncle Tom's Cabin. Dissolve to a photograph of Harriet Beecher Stowe and then to the cover of Dred: A Tale of the Dismal Swamp, concluding with illustrations from the novel.

NARRATOR (VO): In 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe created a national debate on the morality of slavery with her novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin. When she published Dred: A Tale of the Dismal Swamp in 1856, with the title character closely based on the historical Nat Turner, she confronted the question of ending slavery by violent means. But she could not embrace an uncompromising black man who was devoted to the death of all white people. And so she softened him considerably.

The camera discovers a different actor playing NAT TURNER as he is described by the voice of HARRIET BEECHER STOWE (read by an actor).

THE VOICE OF HARRIET BEECHER STOWE: He was a tall black man of magnificent stature and proportions. He wore a fantastic turban. There were elements in him, which might, under other circumstances, have made him a poet. There was in him a vein of that gentleness, which softens the heart towards children and the inferior animals. But there also burned in him, like tongues of flame in a black pool of naphtha, a subtle and restless fire.

NAT TURNER is feeding a squirrel, when the approaching sounds of men in search of him force him to slip into the swamp water and make his way further into the tangled woods.

WILLIAM STYRON (VO): Everyone possesses Nat Turner because he fits into the role each creator wants to make him fit into. The amazing thing about Nat Turner is the fact that so little is known about him.

WILLIAM STYRON (OC): We have those confessions and virtually nothing else. There are almost no accounts of what he was like, seen through the eyes of anyone else, black or white. So, this is, as I say, an astounding boon and a gift, to anyone who wanted to use him as a metaphor, symbol for anything having to do with slavery, having to do with freedom, having to do with rebellion. He fits no mold and fits every mold, all at once; and that's what has made him so intriguing to so many people over the years.

Photos and/or lithos of Frederick Douglass.

NARRATOR (VO): In the years leading up to the Civil War, Frederick Douglass and other black abolitionists repeatedly voiced admiration for Nat Turner and other slave rebels.

ERIC FONER (OC): What Douglass said was that the Nat Turner's were actually more legitimately the heirs of the American Revolution than the whites who celebrated July 4th every year in the 1840's and '50's but owned slaves and deprived millions of Americans of their freedom.

The camera slowly moves into a close-up of a photo of William Wells Brown from the 1860s.

NARRATOR (VO): Continuing in the tradition of Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, an abolitionist leader who had escaped from slavery, invoked a heroic image of Nat Turner in an essay written during the Civil War. In the midst of this essay, he imaginatively constructed the speech Turner might have delivered to his fellow conspirators at Cabin Pond.

The camera explores the nineteenth-century engraving, Nat Turner Talking with His Confederates. Nat Turner is seen pointing off into the woods as four of his followers intensely stare at his determined face, illuminated by a campfire. Dissolve from this image to a scene that almost perfectly matches it in the woods we have seen earlier in the film. A different actor from those who we have seen before portrays NAT TURNER as he speaks.

NAT TURNER: Friends and brothers! We are to commence a great work tonight. Our race is to be delivered from slavery, and God has appointed us as the men to do his bidding; and let us be worthy of our calling.

OSSIE DAVIS (VO/OC): We gloried in these heroes, as children will. Sometimes we would create among ourselves, we boys, in particular, our own version of what Nat did and what we would've done if we had been old Nat and how that would've satisfied us greatly.

NARRATOR (VO): While some African Americans invoked Nat Turner's name as a great black hero and liberator, most Southern whites continued to portray him as a fanatic and villain who attacked an essentially benevolent institution. This became the dominant white view throughout the nation during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Archival film footage of scenes in the rural areas of Virginia during the New Deal is intercut with scenes from WPA projects in the South. Film footage and photographs feature former slaves and the WPA workers who interviewed them.

NARRATOR (VO): Black folk memories of the rebellion surfaced in the WPA interviews of ex-slaves conducted during the 1930s. The WPA undertook the task of finding and questioning black residents of the South who had once been slaves.

Sometimes the interviews produced memories that were obviously passed on by family members who lived at the time of Nat Turner's Revolt. Sometimes these recollections explored the violence in Turner's insurrection.

Dissolve from the photomontage to ALLEN CRAWFORD sitting on a porch talking to a white female WPA WORKER who writes down his words.

NARRATOR (VO): In 1937, the ex-slave, Allen Crawford, spoke about Nat Turner from stories he had heard growing up in Southampton County.

ALLEN CRAWFORD: Fust place he got to was his mistress's house. Said God 'dained him to start the fust war with forty men. Well when he got to his mistress house he commence to grab his missus baby an' slung it back an' fo'th three times. Said it was so hard for him to kill dis baby' cause it had been so playful settin' on his lap. An' dat chile sho' did love him. So third sling he went quick 'bout it, killin' dat baby.

Dissolve into film footage from the 1930s that depicts a nation struggling with economic depression, labor unrest and racial segregation.

NARRATOR (VO): The 1930s were a turbulent time in America. It was an era of segregation, when the seeds of change were beginning to be sown. During this time of racial strife, artists, writers and playwrights were inspired to tell the story of Nat Turner and his revolt, exploring the consequences of using of violence to end oppression in his time - and their own.

Slow zoom into a photograph of Randolph Edmonds, that dissolves into photographs or archival film footage of black theatre companies in the 1930s.

NARRATOR (VO): In 1935, black theatre educator Randolph Edmonds presented the Nat Turner story as a play written to be performed at schools and colleges. In the climactic scene, Edmonds turns his attention to the horrible consequences of the rebellion for the men and women of the slave community.

A different actor portrays NAT TURNER. The scene is obviously set on a theatre stage but it closely resembles the scenes we have seen earlier in the film, set in and around Cabin Pond. NAT TURNER stands over JESSE, one of his rebel followers, who lies wounded at his feet. We hear dialogue from the scene as we see LUCINDA waiting in the wings ready for her entrance. She is a young slave girl dressed in dark clothes.

LUCINDA (SPRINGING UP, SHRIEKING): Yuh killed him! Yuh did hit! Yuh killed him, Ah said. Yuh wid yo' fine notions 'bout slaves should be free. Ah'm gwine tuh tell de white folks whar yuh is. Ah'm gwine tuh tell dem, Ah say! Yuh ain't nothin' but a beast, dat's whut, a beast.

She rushes off.

NAT (BURSTING OUT): A beast! She called me a beast! Ef Ah's a beast, who made me one? Ef dey buy and sell me, whip me lak dawgs, and feed me dere leavin's, how can Ah be nothin' else but a beast? (Looking down on Jessee) Jessee's daid. Hark is captured, and dere ain't no army. Whut is Ah gwine tuh do now? Lawd? What is Ah gwine tuh do? (The yellow light of the moon filters down through the trees.) Look at dat moon comin' back tuh light up de worl'. Hit is big and round and yellow. Hit done dripped out all hit's blood. Ma hands is full o' blood, too. Will dey ever be clean? Was Ah wrong, Lawd, tuh fight dat black men mout be free? Show me a vision, Lawd, lak yuh did when de sperits was fightin' in de air. Talk tuh me, Holy Ghost. (He stops suddenly.) Hit mus be de soldiers lookin' 'bout in de woods fuh me. Ah can't let dem catch me. Ah is gut tuh git me a army and fight some mo' fuh freedom. Ah I wants to be free! Ah mus' hab freedom fuh all de black slaves. Show me how tuh git hit, Lawd! (Shouting wildly as he goes out.) Sperit ob Gawd! Show me de way! Guide me! Lead me! Lead me!

He rushes off the stage. Everything is quiet. The yellow rays of the moonlight filter down through the trees, creating apparitions and faint images of ghost-like faces.

NARRATOR (VO): There certainly was a real Nat Turner who lived and died in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831. But the man who lived and died in numerous artistic portrayals since 1831 was re-created over and over again to fit the needs of each of his creators.

Fade to black

Dissolve to a montage of scenes from Civil Rights activity during the 1950s - the Montgomery Bus Boycott, lunchroom sit-ins, and peaceful efforts to end school desegregation. Dissolve to images of violent attacks against protesters engaged in acts of passive resistance - attacks by police dogs, assaults at lunch counters, KKK marches, and the violent break-up of peaceful marches.

NARRATOR (VO): The decade of the 1950s was a watershed in our nation's troubled history of race relations. During these years, the Civil Rights movement began a full- scale assault on the elaborate system of racial segregation in the South. The public was exposed repeatedly to images of violence during these years. It was in this atmosphere that a growing number of frustrated African Americans sought inspiration from Nat Turner and the 1831 Southampton Slave Revolt.

RAY WINBUSH (OC): I had never heard of Nat and I wanted to know more about him. And I started just reading about him and what happened in Southampton County.

DR. ALVIN POUSSAINT (OC): There was a debate going on among the young people in different civil rights organizations about black consciousness vs. integration and what direction they should move in order to keep the movement going and keep liberating black folks.

Dissolve to a montage of images of revolutionary heroes from the 1960s, black and white culminating in an idealized image of Nat Turner speaking to his followers.

AYUKO BABU (VO): Nat symbolized revolt, symbolized resistance. It was a Black man refusing to accept his condition.

AYUKO BABU (OC): So we identified with that brother, and we saw him as a brother, we saw a direct link. We knew exactly what he felt like, because we felt the same way. And we saw ourselves as continuing that struggle.

Dissolve to images and sounds/speeches of Black Panthers in training exercises, marching in the streets of Oakland, dissolving to scenes of Huey Newton, H. Rap Brown and Eldridge Cleaver speaking at demonstrations.

Dissolve to an image from a nineteenth-century engraving of Nat Turner, then dissolve to the orange and black dust jacket cover of the 1967 edition of William Styron's novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.

NARRATOR (VO): Nat Turner returned to the center of the national stage with the publication in 1967 of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. The novel was an instant bestseller and won the Pulitzer Prize.

Montage of images from the 1950s, including a scene from "Father Knows Best."

PETER WOOD (OC): It is hard to reconstruct the bland, ill-informed atmosphere of suburban, white America in the 50s and 60s. It came as a revelation to, really, almost a whole generation that they should even be thinking about these things.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR. (OC): It was through the Book-of-the-Month Club that I got this novel called *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. I remember when it arrived, and I started reading it that evening after I got home from school and I stayed up all night and read it in one sitting.

WILLIAM STYRON (OC/VO): My intention had been, from the very beginning, to present a multifaceted complex overview of slavery as an institution, which totally degraded a race of people. And that included such torment upon one of its more gifted sons, namely Nat Turner, that it indeed turned him into a half-crazed avenger. My book turned him into a far more heroic figure than the actual Nat Turner was because I gave him human dimensions.

Image of actor playing NAT TURNER

OSSIE DAVIS (OC): He didn't humanize Nat Turner for me because I came to the novel with my own version of Nat Turner firmly established in my head. So, to whom did he humanize, to the white community? That might be possible since the white community has always tended to look upon our rebels as demons and as subhumans, as people who are attacking the bastions of white civilization.

JAMES BALDWIN (OC): When I was growing up, I was taught in American history books that Africa had no history and neither did I. That I was a savage about whom the less said the better, who had been saved by Europe and brought to America. And of course I believed it. I didn't have much choice. Those were the only books there were. I am one of the people who built the country.

Images of James Baldwin and William Styron.

WILLIAM STYRON (VO): Jimmy Baldwin moved into my house here in Connecticut in the winter of 1960.

Archival film footage shows Baldwin at the height of his celebrity in the 1960s.

WILLIAM STYRON (OC): By this time, I was boiling to write the book, and I think it was he who encouraged me more than anyone else to seize the idea of the first person and to plunge into that kind of narrative mode.

Because he himself had already begun to deal with the idea of writing about white people from an intimate point of view.

WILLIAM STYRON (OC): He said, "What you should do, as a white writer, is to be bold and take on the persona of a black man, Nat Turner."

Image of the cover of Gray's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.

NARRATOR (VO): William Styron gave his 20th Century novel the same title as Thomas R. Gray's 1831 confessions. Examining this document for clues about Nat Turner, Styron was fascinated by a particular passage.

NAT TURNER (OC): Miss Margaret, when I discovered her, had concealed herself in the corner, formed by the projection of cellar cap from the house. On my approach she fled, but was quickly overtaken, and after repeated blows with a sword, I killed her by a blow on the head with a fence rail.

Dissolve to a montage of photographs published in *Life Magazine* prior to the publication of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* that recreates William Styron's visit to Southampton in 1961.

THOMAS PARRAMORE (VO/OC): Margaret was the only person killed by Nat Turner in the course of the rebellion. She was a young white woman. Styron takes this and makes a love affair out of it, between Nat and Margaret. I think that African-Americans generally, and whites to some extent, resented the relationship that Styron created.

WILLIAM STYRON (OC): This was for a novelist the perfect sort of question to ask. "Why? Why did he do this?" Also, in addition, wasn't there some relationship between the two of them? Now we don't know anything about their relationship, but I was writing a novel, I wasn't writing a work of historiography, and I had a right to make a relationship between Nat and Margaret Whitehead a kind of centerpiece of the book.

Dissolve to a scene from *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. As NAT TURNER and MARGARET WHITEHEAD make their way through a grove of trees, we hear the inner voice of

NAT TURNER (VO): The closeness, the stillness, the seclusion here created once more a voluptuous stirring in my blood. Her eyes met mine unflinchingly, not so much coquettish as insistent - inviting, daring, almost expecting my gaze to repose in her own eyes while she prattled blissfully on. It was the longest encounter I could remember ever having with a white person's eyes. I turned away, swept with lust again, hating her guts, now driven close to distraction by that chattering monologue pitched at a girlish whisper, which I no longer bothered to listen to or understand.

NARRATOR (VO): Styron's attempt to imagine a relationship between Nat Turner and the teenaged Margaret Whitehead provoked a storm of protest from black critics.

OSSIE DAVIS (OC): Nat Turner is one of our great heroes and we wanted him to be presented to our children in a way that preserved and protected our needs and our necessities. We need to say to our young girls, "You're beautiful. Your hair is nappy. Of course, your skin is black. But you're beautiful. And you're loveable and worthy of the respect of our young men." But how could we say that if our great hero, instead of affirming the beauty of black womanhood, went and affirmed the beauty of white womanhood.

LOUISE MERIWETHER (OC): When I got the information from the Book-of-the-Month Club, just reading about the book made me so angry that I tore up the newsletter, flushed it down the toilet, and wrote a letter resigning from the Book-of-the-Month Club in protest against them picking this book.

LOYLE HAIRSTON (OC): It got tremendous reviews. All the critics loved it. This tells me a great deal about attitudes. They themselves have never come to grips with slavery, what it was about.

Dissolve to scenes from *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.

NARRATOR (VO): But not all reviewers lavished praise on the novel. A group known as "The Ten Black Writers" published a volume deeply critical of Styron's image of the slave rebel.

Dissolve to montage of photos and articles of the Ten Black Writers. As we hear his voice, we see close-ups of his article dissolving to the author reading from his essay.

EKEWUEME MICHAEL THELWELL (VO/OC): It is a book that made me particularly indignant because it was so disappointing, because finally Nat Turner is going to get presented on the main stage of American culture, instead of which, we get this travesty.

Dissolve to the beginning of a scene dramatized from William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.

VOICE OF NAT TURNER: I recall one of my former owners, Mr. Thomas Moore, once saying that Negroes never committed suicide. I recollect the exact situation - hog-killing time and Moore's puckered, pockmarked face as he labored at the bloody carcass, and the exact words spoken to two neighbors as I stood by listening.

THOMAS MOORE: Ever hear of a nigger killin' hisself? No, I figger a darky he might want to kill hisself but he gets to thinkin' about it, and he keeps thinkin' about it, thinkin' and thinkin', and pretty soon he's gone to sleep. Right, Nat?

NAT TURNER: Yes sir, Marse Tom, that's right, sure enough.

VOICE OF NAT TURNER (NAT TURNER SITS IN THE JAIL CELL): I had to admit to myself that I had never known of a Negro who had killed himself and in trying to explain this fact I tended to believe that in the face of such adversity it must be a Negro's Christian faith, which swerved him away from the idea of self-destruction. But now as I sit here amid the incessant murmur and buzz of the flies, I can no longer say that I feel this to be true. It seemed rather that my black shit-eating people were surely like flies, God's mindless outcasts, lacking even that will to destroy by their own hand their unending anguish.

EKEWUEME MICHAEL THELWELL (VO): How would anybody seeking to organize his people to struggle for their own liberation have that perception of them?

EKEWUEME MICHAEL THELWELL (OC): It was an act of arrogance, coming out of a profound ignorance that led him to think he could restructure that experience in anything that would be a credible way, or a way that reflected anything that an informed black person would know of our own experience, to make it acceptable to black people.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR. (OC): Novels can be good, novels can be bad, but I think it is different to say that than to say, "You shouldn't have written this in the first place because you are white" or "What are you doing to our history by creating this character about whom we feel deeply ambivalent?" Believe me, I think it was the sexuality of Nat Turner that bugged people the most no matter how they justified it. I think that without that the novel would have passed through without a peep.

NAT TURNER bends down to move a branch from their path and as he rises, his arm brushes against MARGARET WHITEHEAD'S breast. She reacts with mild surprise and they continue walking, chattering on as before.

NAT TURNER (VO): The place where her breast had met my arm was like an incandescence, tingling; again I was smothered by remorseless desire. Insanely, I found myself measuring the risk. (His voice becomes insistent.) Take her. Take her here on this bank by this quiet brook. Forget your great mission. Abandon all for these hours of terror and bliss....

EUGENE GENOVESE (OC): Being attracted to and repelled by members of the opposite sex strikes me as the most natural thing in the world. And to have left that out, to have rendered Turner incapable of that kind of internal struggle, would have reduced his humanity. I think Styron knew exactly what he was doing, and I think he did the right thing.

LOYLE HAIRSTON (OC): We have to deal, as black people, with so much of this kind of stuff, not so much in writing, but in our everyday lives.

RAY WINBUSH (VO): What Styron had done was play at the worst fears of White America and I think, frankly, fantasizing in his own mind as a white male about the lustful feelings that black men had for white women.

Excerpt from "Birth of Nation."

RAY WINBUSH (OC): I didn't want a white woman, and I didn't know of any of my brothers who did. He said that Nat wanted one, and not only did he want one, but he was willing to kill for it. And not only that, but that was his primary motivation. Liberation was irrelevant. It was sexual, unbridled sexual lust or something like that.

WILLIAM STYRON (OC): What really would have caused rage on the part of the Black community, I think, is if they had had a consummated sexual relationship, which would really have proved my own racism. But actually, the relationship between Nat Turner and Margaret Whitehead was infinitely more complicated, it's as much filled with rage and hatred on Nat's part than any kind of unrequited love.

Dissolve to a scene from The Confessions of Nat Turner. We see MARGARET WHITEHEAD fleeing from NAT TURNER into a hayfield. NAT TURNER catches up with MARGARET WHITEHEAD as she attempts to climb over a pole fence. One of the poles gives way under foot. She trips forward, bare arms outstretched. NAT TURNER thrusts his sword into her side, just below her breast. She crumbles to the ground, limp. NAT TURNER stabs her again in the same place. Blood stains her blue taffeta dress. NAT TURNER lurches away from the stricken girl but stops when he hears a faint cry.

MARGARET WHITEHEAD: Nat. Please kill me.

NAT TURNER turns and stares in the girl's direction.

MARGARET WHITEHEAD: Please kill me.

NAT TURNER drops his sword and returns to the body of MARGARET WHITEHEAD. Her head is cradled against the inside of her arm, as if she has composed herself for sleep. NAT TURNER reaches down and picks up a fence rail. He raises it above her head.

NAT TURNER (SOFTLY): Shut your eyes.

MARGARET WHITEHEAD gazes up at NAT TURNER with a look of drowsy tenderness and then closes her eyes.

MARGARET WHITEHEAD (WHISPERS): I hurt so.

NAT TURNER brings the fence rail down on her head, killing her. He hurls the shattered rail far into the field. The camera slowly pulls away as NAT TURNER slowly circles the lifeless body, and we hear the voice of William Styron.

WILLIAM STYRON (VO/OC): He does at the end realize the horror of having killed this woman, out of his rage. I think that Nat Turner's feeling of love at the end is really an attempt to express his own sense of reconciliation and redemption and has very little to do with any direct human connection. I think this is an abstraction. At least that was what I was attempting to do.

Montage of images reveal the fury of student demonstrations on universities and colleges demanding the end of the war in Vietnam, opposing the draft and demanding the creation of Black Studies programs.

As we hear from Styron, we continue the montage of demonstrations increasing tension, as we intercut images from the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, culminating in full scale riots in major cities across the country.

WILLIAM STYRON (VO/OC): It always struck me as a great irony that I began to write Nat Turner the summer of Martin Luther King's great speech in Washington, and it was a time of reconciliation, of non-violence and peacefulness, a sense that blacks and whites could work this thing out together. But by the time I finished the novel in 1967, this sweetness and light that Martin Luther King was predicting had turned into a kind of hellish nightmare on the racial scene, and so Nat Turner appeared, my Nat Turner appeared at a time when this dream of Martin Luther King's had evaporated. So, there was a good reason why my book was met with such a mixed reaction.

Dissolve to a montage of images from the debate over the novel in the media.

PETER WOOD (OC): I do think that in an extraordinary and strange way, Bill Styron did do a service in a sense of putting Nat Turner back on the table. Making people argue about who he was and nobody, no matter which side they took of the argument, really knew very much. It was like people throwing punches in the dark. And in the last generation since then, we've learned a lot more, though we still have not penetrated the veil entirely.

EKEWUEME MICHAEL THELWELL (OC): We can't be depending on white people to represent our culture with integrity and imagination and respect.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR. (OC): I think that if you don't like Bill Styron's Nat Turner, write your own. I think the only way that you can fight a representation in art that you don't like is to create new art, create more art, surround it.

James McGee is putting the finishing touches on a very large painting depicting Nat Turner and his rebel army.

JAMES MCGEE (VO): I don't consider myself an artist. I don't consider myself as someone who can critique art. I only paint for one reason and one reason only, and that is to illustrate what is said to me through my ancestors. They're not asking for revenge. They're asking to be recognized. I believe that they will not rest unless their story is told, unless their voices are heard.

Dissolve from James McGee's painting depicting Nat Turner and his rebel army to a reprise of the attack on the Travis family.

NARRATOR (VO): But can any work of art move Americans closer to an agreement on the meaning of Nat Turner and his revolt?

At the sound of "Cut," we show the director and crew working on this scene and others throughout the ending of the film.

CHARLES BURNETT (VO): I think there is a need for closure. There is a need to resolve this thing. Sometimes it takes a mediator. A piece of artwork can do that.

CHARLES BURNETT (OC): The whole idea is "Who is Nat Turner?" We don't know. And people with little information have created their own Nat, they have claimed him. It is not that we are trying to reclaim Nat. We are just trying to present other artist's interpretations of Nat Turner and trying to do that very faithfully without interpreting their work.

Charles Burnett is seen directing actors in scenes from earlier in the film.

KENNETH GREENBERG (OC): Everywhere in the film there is interpretation and the subject matter we are dealing with is interpretation. Now, when you do a film about interpretation, what's the film about that interpretation? Isn't that film another interpretation? Every interpretation ultimately forces you back into another interpretation, another interpretation, another interpretation.

Charles Burnett directs a scene from Styron's novel.

CHARLES BURNETT (OC/VO)

That's the tension here, is to say, "No, you are not doing your movie about Nat Turner." What you are doing, you are doing William Styron's interpretation of Nat Turner as faithful as possible to William Styron's scenes in his novel. Same thing with Thomas R. Gray, you are trying to be matter-of-fact about Thomas R. Gray. You are not trying to take any kind of license.

CHARLES BURNETT (VO): We can't say in this film that this person is wrong or that person is wrong. It is not about that. The truth is this event happened. People interpreted it a certain way on racial lines and the only way to resolve it, or to live it is to have some kind of dialogue and come to terms with what was this event.

We see the scene of Nat Turner killing Margaret from Styron's novel from the film crew's POV.

MARTHA MINOW (VO/OC): I think there is a danger of sliding into a kind of relativism. There are multiple versions of history, and let's just line them all up. And I think that the great challenge would be how to devise a structure that permits some degree of interpretation and reflection on multiple perspectives without implying there was no truth of the matter.

Dissolve to an image of Nat Turner superimposed Gray's Confessions.

EKEWUEME MICHAEL THELWELL (OC): The fact is there was a historical Nat Turner. The fact is that certain things were known about him. The fact is that as a consequence of his actions, he occupied a very prominent and important role in the collective memory and imagination of the black community and, perhaps, possibly in the white community too.

Dissolve to a montage of Nat Turner who face is not clearly seen.

WILLIAM STYRON (OC): I think that the mysteriousness of the man, the absolute mysteriousness of the man, will perpetually provoke people's imagination. He represents an incredible need and hunger, just the fact that he did what he did, right or wrong, or whatever the moral implications of what he did; he did it.

Dissolve to Nat Turner and Hark entering the Travis bedroom and raising the hatchet.

VINCENT HARDING (OC): And it seems to me that trying to figure out Turner and his meaning for those who lived and died is an arduous task and that, whether we like it or not, is what we are called to as Americans.

Dissolve to a swamp in Southampton County. The faint image of Nat Turner emerges before we fade to black.