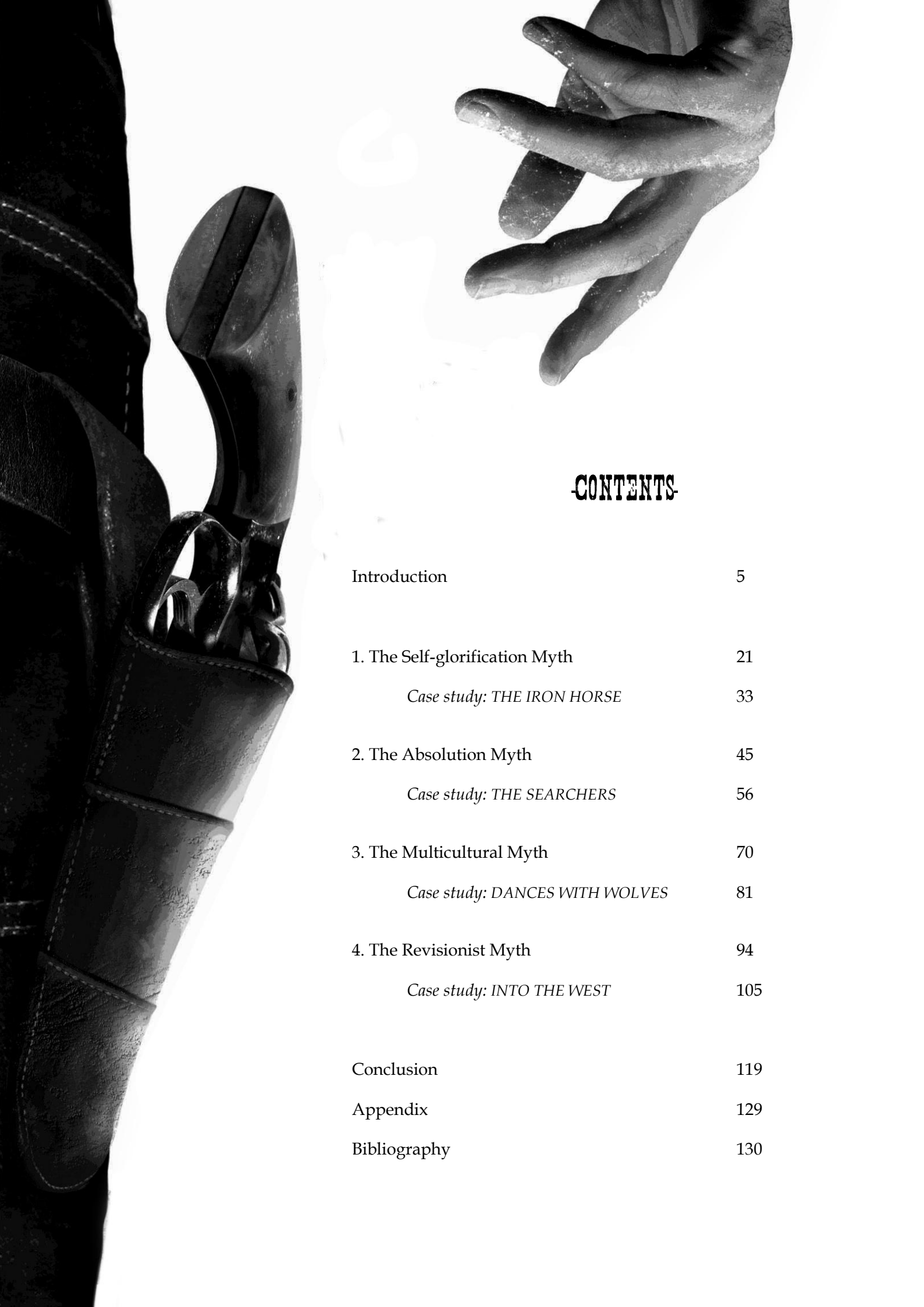




POETRY OF THE DISTANT HORIZON

*The Evolving Hollywood Myth of the American West
and its Reflection of Fundamental Cultural Values in American Society*

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-INTRODUCTION-

The American West has been a land of almost impenetrable mountains, mighty rivers, endless seas of grass and infinite horizons. People came to it from every point of the compass. To the Spanish who travelled up from Mexico it was the North. British and French explorers arrived by coming south and the Chinese and Russians by going east. The Americans were the last to arrive on the scene and called it the West.

Ever since its discovery the West has been a mythical place. It was not only a place of myth for the Native Americans who had been connected to the land for thousands of years, but also for the newly arrived Americans. The West became the most powerful reality and myth in the history of the United States. Historian Richard White explains:

When Americans tell stories about themselves they set those stories in the West. The American heroes are Western heroes. When you begin to think about the quintessential American characters they are always someplace over the horizon; there is always someplace in the West where something wonderful is about to happen. It is not what *has* happened, it is something that is *about to* happen. And even when we turn that around and say something has been lost, what is lost is always in the West.¹

¹ *The West*, Dir. Stephen Ives, Scr. Dayton Duncan and Geoffrey C. Ward, 1996.

The myth of the West has manifested itself as the dominant American national myth. Myths present a simplified version of history that try to convey meaning. National myths are narratives about origin, identity and purpose of a country that are partly rooted in reality. These myths form the basis and are an integral part of the ideological foundation of nationalism.² According to Anthony Smith, “what gives nationalism its power are myths, memories, traditions, and symbols of ethnic heritage and the way in which a popular living past has been, and can be, rediscovered and reinterpreted by modern nationalist intelligentsias.”³ Many Americans think about the West in terms of myth and therefore it is an integral part of the conception of the West. The West as region became dominant in the way America imagined itself as a nation.⁴ But how does the imagined myth of the West connect to the reality of American society?

The myth of the West has been a myth of nation-building and proved essential in the creation of an American identity. Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean state: “The construction of the idea of the West reveals certain ideologies that are central to any consideration of American cultural values: exceptionalism, destiny, power, race, and identity.”⁵ The narrative of the West does not merely exist in the background like a canon of history, but is a source of mythology that can be redefined and re-interpreted over time. Scholars have redefined the myth of the West repeatedly and this demonstrates that the Western myth is not a fixed entity but evolves along the lines of contemporary scholarship.

² Yinan He, “National Mythmaking and the Problems of History in Sino-Japanese Relations” (2003), 4.

³ Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9.

⁴ Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean, *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 136.

⁵ Ibidem.

This Western myth has manifested itself in a variety of different ways, among which music, literature, theatre, photography and film. Just like the myth of the West evolved in historical scholarship, it has changed in these art forms as well. The subject of this thesis is the evolving depiction of the American West in Hollywood westerns. However, before the evolution of the Hollywood western can be studied, it is necessary to clearly define the genre.

What is a western? The American Film Institute defines the western as “a genre of films set in the American West that embodies the spirit, the struggle and the demise of the new frontier.”⁶ Western stories are typically set in the period 1850-1900. The frontier landscape is an important element in the western’s iconography. Additionally, violence-- or the threat of violence—plays a significant role in the western narratives. Film scholar Jo van Ort states: “Guns constitute the visible moral center and the continual possibility of violence.”⁷

The American Film Institute limits the western genre to films and consequently excludes relevant television series. For this thesis it is necessary to broaden the definition of Hollywood western to all filmed endeavors in the western genre made by American film studios. This definition will include relevant television shows as well, which is necessary because for groundbreaking work from Hollywood in the twenty-first century one increasingly has to turn to television instead of cinema.

Why is it relevant to examine the myth of the West as presented in American westerns? Its relevance consists in that the American film industry has been essential in the shaping and popularization of the myth of the West. Most scholars agree that the history of the western genre dates back to 1903, when *THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY*

⁶ “American Film Institute Top 10 Westerns” [2008] *AFI.com*, 24-05-2011, <http://www.afi.com/10top10/category.aspx?cat=3>

⁷ Jo van Ort, “Evolution of Western Genre” [2003] *NorthWest College.edu*, 24-05-2011, www.northwestcollege.edu/dotAsset/111780.pdf, 2.

(Edwin S. Porter, 1903) was released. The film proved to be very popular and established a new genre that has been present – although in varying intensity – in the American film industry ever since.⁸ Many filmmakers were drawn to the western genre due to its adventure, its unbridled action and its use of wide open spaces.⁹ Especially the landscape forms an important part of westerns. By shooting on location, filmmakers tried to add a sense of realism or authenticity to their films. Still, despite a sense of authenticity, westerns should be treated as an *expression of myth*. However, the claim of authenticity has always been important to the western.

Authenticity – or the illusion of it – played an important part in the marketing of most cultural products – not only films – that popularized the West. For instance Buffalo Bill's Wild West show was billed as an authentic representation of the West.¹⁰ For Hollywood studios it was also important that the public perceived their westerns as authentic, because it would mean a possible increase in revenue. Yet, American westerns had to live up to the idea of the West that had been created by dime novels and Wild West shows. Filmmakers therefore were limited by the boundaries of the audience imagination that were created by other media. Real authenticity was an illusion but this illusion became an important factor in the production of westerns. Cultural historian Richard Slotkin explains: "Early filmmakers dealt with the dilemma of authenticity by following the Buffalo Bill recipe. They combined scenes and stories drawn from the traditions of the dime novel and stage melodrama with authentic details of costume and scenery."¹¹

⁸ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film History: An Introduction*, 8th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 30-31.

⁹ *The First 100 Years of Cinema: A Celebration of American Movies*, Dir. Chuck Workman, Scr. Sheila Benson and Chuck Workman, 1995.

¹⁰ Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1922* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 31.

¹¹ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 235.

In westerns the ‘dressing’ of the story was designed to produce what literary theorist Roland Barthes has called ‘the effect of the real’. This means it is not reality itself, but a sense of realness that suffices in a text.¹² As Buffalo Bill had done before, American filmmakers claimed that their representation of the West was historically accurate. Filmmakers benefitted from the popular belief that motion pictures, like photography, were a true representation of actual events.¹³ However, authenticity can very seldom be found in the depicted events, but instead should be looked for in the details of props, clothing and scenery. This does not mean that all details are a faithful representation as even in the details filmmakers sometimes prefer myth over reality.

Historical scholarship has indeed pointed out that the supposed historical accuracy of depicted events in westerns is in most cases an illusion. Although westerns serve as a form of national memory because of their nostalgic backward glance, it is a mythical national memory.¹⁴

The myth of the West in Hollywood films has been the subject of a substantial number of academic works. Not all works are relevant for this thesis, but it is the group of academics that have looked at how the western is the expression of myth in a tradition that includes literature, theatre and music, which is of importance here. The central question of this debate can be described as: what is the relevance of the myth of the West for contemporary American society? All scholars discussed here agree that the Western myth is relevant for the American people, but the debate about the meaning of that relevance

¹² Roland Barthes, “The reality effect” in *The Rustle of Language*, Roland Barthes, ed., trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986).

¹³ Slotkin, 235.

¹⁴ Richard Abel, “Our Country/Whose Country? The ‘Americanisation’ Project of Early Westerns” in *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western*, Edward Buscombe and Roberta E. Pearson, eds. (London: British Film Institute, 1998): 77-95, 84.

has led to multiple perspectives. Several key scholars have defined the debate about the myth of the West with regard to the Hollywood western.

One of the central works in the debate about the myth of the West is cultural historian Richard Slotkin's trilogy about the myth of the frontier; *Regeneration Through Violence*, *The Fatal Environment*, and *Gunfighter Nation*. The last volume of the series which was published in 1992, focuses on the myth of the West in twentieth century America. *Gunfighter Nation* analyzes the popular cultural expression of the Western myth in the twentieth-century and its societal functionality. Hence it is relevant in discussing the Hollywood myth of the West.

Slotkin argues that in twentieth-century America the myth of the West has come to symbolize progress, the potential for moral and physical renewal, and the infinite possibilities of the American nation. However, these positive aspects are but one side of the myth. According to Slotkin the Western myth is responsible for upholding a culture of violence, conquest and sacrificial bloodshed that still influences American society today. This argument demonstrates that the myth of the West is a powerful tool for influencing American collective thinking. Slotkin argues that elites use this tool of myth to justify their decisions and maintain their position. He primarily focuses on the political aspect of the relevance of the myth of the West.¹⁵

Historian Gerald D. Nash criticizes Slotkin's treatment of the myth of the West in his book *Creating the West*, in which he provides an overview of the academic interpretation of the West as Utopia and Myth. Nash believes that Slotkin reflects the guilt feelings many white Americans since the 1960s experience about the injustices they inflicted upon minority groups such as the Native Americans.¹⁶ According to Nash this

¹⁵ Slotkin.

¹⁶ Gerald D. Nash, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations 1890-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 197-257.

leads to the unbalanced depreciation of white individual achievements in the West and an unnecessary distrust of the myth of the West by contemporary scholars and audiences. Nash does not ignore the violence in the myth of the West, but he believes that not all blame should be attributed to white Americans. Furthermore Nash argues that the guilt leads to an over-emphasis on Native Americans. He states that in Slotkin's eyes the Native Americans can do no wrong while non-Indians can do no right. This creates new stereotypes of both white and Native Americans in the West, that lead to a distorted picture.

Although Nash focuses on the academic debate about the myth of the West, his critique can be applied to the Hollywood western. Where Richard Slotkin has created a positive stereotype of Native Americans, the westerns of the 1990s have done so as well. Chapter 3 of this thesis discusses how Nash's critique can be used in recognizing a myth that appeared in the western genre in the 1990s.

American historian Richard White's book *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own* – published in 1991 – offers a complex perspective on the contemporary relevance of the Western myth. White's approach to the myth of the West resembles that of Richard Slotkin's in that he places the myth in a contemporary cultural and political context. Although White acknowledges the role of conquest in the myth of the West he primarily focuses on the social interactions between different ethnical groups and tribes. Unlike Slotkin White does not see the West solely as a product of violence, but as the result of these social interactions. These interactions may not always have received a balanced treatment in the Western myth, but according to White they are essential to the perception

of the West.¹⁷ A study of these past interactions can guide contemporary American society in its social interactions, and in this way the myth of the West attains relevance.

According to feminist historian Susan Armitage, historical scholarship about the myth of the West needs to be remedied in order to make the myth relevant to all Americans. Since her 1987 publication *The Women's West* Armitage has continuously stressed the importance of including women in the male dominated myth of the West.¹⁸ Neither Slotkin nor Nash have devoted much attention to the role of women in the Western myth. Until the twenty-first century women played only a marginal role in this myth. As chapter 4 of this thesis will show feminist critique on the myth of the West—like that of Armitage—has been instrumental in the re-evaluation of gender in the Western narrative. This re-evaluation is important because it gives women a voice in the myth of the West and makes the myth relevant to female audiences.

Corresponding to the beliefs of the scholars mentioned here, historians Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher criticize in their book *The American West: A New Interpretive History* the contemporary opinion that myth is a synonym for 'erroneous belief'. Hine and Faragher argue that although myths reduce history to its ideological essence, it interprets and attempts to find meaning in past events. These efforts to find meaning in past events elevate myths from their status of being 'mere' stories and give them relevance for contemporary audiences. This understanding of the Western myth creates an importance for all groups of American citizens to be recognized in these mythical stories, because it means the acknowledgement of a given group in the narrative origin of the American nation. Although Hine and Faragher follow Slotkin in stressing the importance of myth, they criticize his argument that the myth of the West is created by elites to uphold their

¹⁷ Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

¹⁸ Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, eds. *The Women's West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987).

position. They believe the myth is an expression of the ideological past shaped along the lines of contemporary culture.¹⁹ Elites are part of this culture, but they are not the only influence on the formulation of the myth.

So, what will this thesis add to existing scholarship? What can be said about the myth of the West that has not already been said? Like all scholars discussed here this thesis will be concerned with the connection between the myth of the West and American society. It will demonstrate the relevance of the myth for contemporary American society by combining the arguments of key scholars of the myth of the West and applying these views to the western genre.

The following chapters will present an overview of the western's history that ranges from its inception until today. The chapters examine how the myth of the West was presented in certain key periods of the genre and how these presentations reflect the society they were part of. This thesis follows Slotkin's statement that the myth of the West in twentieth-century America has come to symbolize progress and possibility. However, it differs from Slotkin's belief that the Western myth has a societal functionality. Other than to unify the American people through a shared cultural tradition—as will be demonstrated in chapter 4—the Western myth has no direct social function, but is a reflection of American cultural values and society at a given point in time. Therefore this thesis follows Hine and Faragher's critique on Slotkin that the myth of the West is not created by elites to uphold their position, but rather an expression of contemporary culture. Elites may use the myth of the West in their rhetoric, but they are not the only group that is invested in its existence and continuing popularity.

By taking theories from American Studies and applying them to the western genre, this thesis seeks to combine existing scholarship of American Studies with that of Film

¹⁹ Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 472-511.

Studies. In this way a new perspective on the myth of the West in general and the western genre in particular, may be achieved.

The contemporary academic debate about the myth of the West is part of a debate that is as old as the myth itself. Developments in historical scholarship have continually redefined the Western myth. For instance, scholarship after the 1960s has given voice to multiple ethnicities on the frontier where the former sole focus of the myth was the white masculine hero. The changing of perspectives on the Western myth in historical research has influenced the development of the Hollywood western as well. In other words: the Hollywood western has always reflected scholarly thinking with regard to the West.

Since its inception the Hollywood western endures motions of demise and revival. As Edward Buscombe and Roberta Pearson have argued: “the western has many times been pronounced dead, only to renew itself. As far back as 1911 the film trade journal *Nickelodeon* declared that the western was ‘a gold mine that had been worked to the limit’.”²⁰ Yet every time the western resurfaced on the list of Hollywood’s ‘A’ releases.²¹ It has enjoyed popularity and has been a substantial part of Hollywood’s ‘A’ products during four periods in the genre’s history; the Silent Era: 1903-1931, the Golden Age of the western: 1939-1973, the 1990s, and the Post 9/11 Era.²² During these four periods the myth of the West was depicted in different ways.

This thesis is concerned with the evolution of the western during the four periods that it was part of Hollywood’s ‘A’ productions. However, cultural products are no

²⁰ Edward Buscombe and Roberta E. Pearson, *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western* (London, British Film Institute, 1998), 1.

²¹ ‘A’ films are produced by top filmmakers with significant budgets and high production values and differ from the cheaper ‘B’ productions that complement the studios’ release schedules. Typically studios reserve high budgets for genres that are popular because of the best chance of turning a profit.

²² Bordwell and Thompson, 153, 156, 225, 341-349, 528.

isolated entities but a part of the society they are created in. Therefore the development of the western gives insight into the fundamental cultural values of the society it reflects. In other words, central themes in a western of a given period can be linked to major developments and debates of the American society. The evolving perception of the American nation by academics and society in general and their redefinition of race, power relations, and gender roles changed Hollywood's portrayal of the American West. But how has Hollywood's interpretation of the myth of the West and its societal reflection changed? What was the impact of societal debates and changing cultural values on the development of the western? Many of the societal debates focus on questions of assimilation and integration into American society and questions about American self-perception. These debates and values underwent significant changes throughout the twentieth century and four phases in the evolution of the western genre reflect these changes. By examining how the myths in these phases connect to the society of their time, new insight into American cultural values may be attained.

The creation of a model allows the Hollywood western to be categorized in four myths. Each of the chapters of this thesis will focus on one of the periods that the western belonged to Hollywood's 'A' product. During these periods one myth was dominant in the genre. In each category a western of that period will form a case study to illustrate the dominant Western myth and the way it reflected its society.

The rise of a new myth did not mean that earlier myths disappeared. A new myth is merely an addition to the existing canon of cinematic mythmaking. Furthermore, the distinction between the categories is not absolute, as there are films of a given category to be found in earlier time periods, but each myth is connected to the time period where it was the dominant influence.

The Silent Era saw the rise of the *self-glorification myth*. The term self-glorification myth means that it is a myth designed by Americans to sing the praises of the American people. This myth has been part of the genre ever since its inception. It glorifies the outstanding achievements of people living on the frontier. The theme of American exceptionalism is present in these stories, for they show the greatness and heroism of the (white) American people. However, minority groups are not included in this narrative. As an example for this myth *THE IRON HORSE* (John Ford, 1924) will be analyzed. *THE IRON HORSE* was one of the early epic westerns produced by Hollywood and showed the potential greatness of the genre, and it influenced many subsequent westerns. Its focus on ‘authenticity’ and detail make it a good representative of its period while at the same time standing out as a great American film. The influential position of the film in the western genre is acknowledged by the inclusion in the Library of Congress’ National Film Registry. The Registry motivated its choice with the words: “*The Iron Horse* introduced to American and world audiences a reverential, elegiac mythology that has influenced many subsequent Westerns.”²³ This importance of the film in the history of the western genre makes it suitable as case study in chapter 1.

Absolution myths became prominent during the Golden Age of the western that ranged from 1939 until the early 1970s. The term absolution myth refers to the religious practice of absolving of past sins. This myth reflects a way of thinking that sought to justify the actions of white Americans in the West and absolve them from their responsibility. Although the majority of Americans during the Golden Age probably did not recognize the past treatment of Native Americans as ‘sins’, contemporary scholarship has defined these actions as such. Perceiving the western narratives of the Golden Age

²³ “2011 National Film Registry: More Than a Box of Chocolates” [2011] *Library of Congress.gov*, 12-01-2012, <http://www.loc.gov/today/pr/2011/11-240.html>

through the eyes of contemporary scholarship it is possible to recognize that they form a—sometimes implicit—justification for the violent dealings with Native American tribes. The concept of Manifest Destiny is closely related to the absolution myths and serves often as its justification. *THE SEARCHERS* (John Ford, 1956) will be analyzed to illustrate this myth and its social dynamic. Its depicted struggle with the Native American civilization makes it a useful example of its time period and the absolution myth. This film reflects the white dominance of the society it was created in and marginalizes minority groups. Despite the fact that its ideology was criticized after the 1960s, the American Film Institute praised *THE SEARCHERS* in 2008 as ‘the best western ever made’, because it exemplifies a large part of the western genre until the point of its production. In 1989 the film was selected for preservation by the Library of Congress’ National Film Registry for being “culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant.”²⁴ The substantial legacy of the film makes *THE SEARCHERS* suitable for analysis in chapter 2.

The 1990s saw the rise of the *multicultural myth*. This myth is named after multiculturalism, one of its main influences, because it resembles the key characteristics of that concept. As a reaction to centuries of white supremacy in American culture the 1990s saw a heightened focus on minority groups. This was reflected in the western genre as well as—under the influence of the idea of multiculturalism—the Western myth of the early 1990s shifted focus to Native Americans. Some scholars erroneously have called this the revisionist myth. However, this would imply that the depiction of multiple ethnicities is a balanced one. Instead the myths about Native Americans in this period solely emphasize the role of Native Americans and often discredit white American culture. This myth resembles the critique Gerald Nash expressed on Richard Slotkin’s work. A sole emphasis on Native Americans creates new stereotypes and presents a distorted picture

²⁴ “National Film Registry” [2011] *Library of Congress.gov*, 12-01-2012, http://www.loc.gov/film/registry_titles.php

of the myth of the West. Therefore these types of stories cannot be called revisionist myths but are named multicultural myths. As an example of this myth *DANCES WITH WOLVES* (Kevin Costner, 1990) will be discussed. *DANCES WITH WOLVES* tells the story of a white soldier who starts to live with a Native American tribe and eventually turns on his own culture. The theme of a white American soldier that chooses Native American culture over white society reflects a tremendous shift in cultural perception in American society of the 1990s. The film was an enormous success in 1990, becoming the highest grossing western of all time and influencing a wave of films with the same themes. It was inducted into the Library of Congress' National Film Registry for being "culturally and historically significant."²⁵ Its legacy of influence and success makes it suitable as case study of the multicultural myth in chapter 3.

In the post 9/11 Era the true *revisionist myth* emerged. The term revisionist myth refers to the revisions this myth made with regard to other myths. This is true of other myths as well, but in film scholarship the revisionist western has become synonymous for a contemporary take on the Western myth. Influenced by a re-interpretation of multiculturalism the westerns released in the twenty-first century gave voice to multiple groups and ethnic minorities without over-emphasizing a single one. This myth is critical of the way white Americans have treated Native Americans, but on the other hand leaves room for the glorification of the achievements of the people that helped settle the West. Native Americans are not elevated to the status of martyrs but neither are they portrayed as villains. In addition to a more balanced ethnical representation the revisionist myth examines gender in the West. Inspired by feminist critique on the myth of the West the revisionist myth incorporates strong female roles and in this way tries to connect the myth of the West to contemporary female audiences. The television mini-series *INTO THE WEST*

²⁵ National Film Registry.

(William Mastrosimone, 2005) is a good example of the revisionist myth and will be analyzed to signify the connection between the myth and the society of its time. The series presents different perspectives on the settling of the American West without taking sides in the conflict. This reflects a more balanced way of thinking about ethnicity in American society. Produced on a high budget by one of Hollywood's leading filmmakers, Steven Spielberg, and a film crew that usually worked on Hollywood blockbusters *INTO THE WEST* has much in common with film westerns. Although it is too early to determine its lasting legacy, the series was highly acclaimed and successful upon its release. A presentation of the central themes of the revisionist myth in combination with popularity and success makes it suitable for analysis in chapter 4.

This thesis is solely concerned with American westerns because it is the social dynamic of the *American* myth that will be analyzed. The way non-Americans perceive and have constructed the mythical West is another topic and consequently European westerns – like the Italian spaghetti westerns or German westerns – will be no part of this thesis. By analyzing the mythology that is manifested in Hollywood westerns greater insight into aspects of an American identity can be acquired. Historian William Deverell writes:

The American West plays an immense role in shaping and explaining American history. The remote, heroicized West is itself more representative of national character than any other chronological or regional chapter in the text of popularized American history.²⁶

²⁶ William Deverell, "Fighting Words: The Significance of the American West in the History of the United States" in *A New Significance: Re-envisioning the History of the American West*, Clyde A. Milner II, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 29-55, 31.

The analysis of a national myth provides insight in the way a nation perceives itself. Hence by examining the myth of the West and its function a deeper understanding can be acquired about the self-perception of a number of Americans.

1 -THE SELF-GLORIFICATION MYTH-

When the first motion pictures were shown to audiences at the end of the nineteenth century people were impressed by the medium's ability to show moving images. However, by 1903 film had outgrown its novelty quality and some observers noted that film could very well be a passing fancy.²⁷ In order to keep the attention of the public, the emerging world film industry presented narratives in the film medium. Early filmmakers drew on genres established by literature and theatre in the choosing of their subject matter. In 1903 the American film industry started to make use of a genre that had been popularized by dime novels, stage shows, and photography; the western. *THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903) started a genre that became well established by the 1910s and would dominate Hollywood's output for large periods of time until the 1970s.²⁸ The western has been proclaimed by American filmmakers as a genre solely developed on the American continent.²⁹ The American West provided Hollywood filmmakers with a rich source of stories to grasp the audience's imagination.

²⁷ Mark Cousins, *Story of Film* (London: Pavillion Books, 2004), 36.

²⁸ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 328.

²⁹ Slotkin, 234.

Film proved to be a popular medium for the presentation of the myth of the American West, as the genre was extremely popular during large parts of the Silent Era that lasted from 1903-1931.³⁰ Although the Silent Era technically ended in 1927 when Warner Bros. released *THE JAZZ SINGER* (Alan Crosland, 1927) as the first sound film, it took a few years for all the studios to adopt this new technology. Additionally in 1931 RKO Pictures released *CIMARRON* (Wesley Ruggles, 1931) which proved to be the last 'A' western of the period. Therefore in this thesis the Silent Era can be defined as reaching from 1903-1931.

The dominant myth that emerged in the western genre during the Silent Era was the *self-glorification myth*, a myth that has remained part of the western genre ever since. The self-glorification myth is defined as a narrative that focuses on the outstanding achievements of people living on the frontier and that glorifies the white American nation. The release of films like *THE ADVENTURES OF BUFFALO BILL* (Charles A. King, 1917), *THE MONEY CORRAL* (William S. Hart, 1919), and *THE COVERED WAGON* (James Cruze, 1923) firmly established this myth that was expressed in the majority of Hollywood westerns during the Silent Era.

One of the major works of the self-glorification myth is *THE IRON HORSE* (John Ford, 1924). An analysis of this movie that follows in this chapter will illustrate this myth and demonstrate the way it reflects American society in the Silent Era. However, before *THE IRON HORSE* can be discussed it is necessary to analyze the self-glorification myth in further detail.

The narratives of the self-glorification myth dealt with hardships that had to be endured by the people of the West. The struggle with hostile Indian tribes, the crusade for law and order in frontier towns infested with desperados, and the hard work to cultivate

³⁰ Slotkin, 231.

the wilderness are all part of the self-glorification myth. The frontier tested the resilience of the people living there. The protagonists lived according to American cultural values to survive at the frontier.

The cowboy hero as personified by actors like William S. Hart and Harry Carey was self-reliant and individualistic.³¹ These heroes often started as outlaws, but during the film were reformed by positive American influences manifested in the love of a good woman, the church, or frontier society. Hence these narratives not only glorified the western hero, but American civilization as well.

Westerns showed and enhanced the popular American belief of the West as a place of egalitarianism where any man who dreamt big enough and had the guts to follow his dreams could make a fortune.³² As film scholar Malgorzata Martynuska states:

The western represents adventure, achievement, optimism for the future, the beauty of the land, and the courage of the individuals who won the land. The classic western can be an allegory of the fight between good and evil. American values – individualism, self-reliance and equality of opportunity – were all present in both the frontier life and westerns.³³

The early western glorified the courage of the frontiersmen, American values and the equality that could be found in the West. In this way the western became the carrier of an ideology that exalted civilization and the white Americans that build it.

The self-glorification myth celebrates not only individuals but the American nation in its entirety. Nation should in this case be defined as a group of white Americans who are closely associated through not only a common European ancestry, but additional factors including a dominant common language, politics, culture, history and occupation

³¹ Slotkin, 247-248.

³² Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 27-29.

³³ Malgorzata Martynuska, "The Evolution of the Western Genre Resulting From Social Changes in the USA" *International English Studies Journal* 6 (2009): 59-67, 66.

of the same territory.³⁴ It is a connection that goes further than a mere ethnical communality. However, it is important to note that only a specific part of this nation is exalted, namely the white American male.

The central hero of most Hollywood westerns and certainly those of the self-glorification myth is this white American masculine figure. Women as well as non-white ethnicities are marginalized or ignored. Film theorist Edward Buscombe writes: "The conventional view is that the western is sexist and racist, that it purveys a white male, indeed a middle-aged white Anglo-Saxon Protestant view of the world."³⁵ Although this conventional view oversimplifies and ignores the complexity and subtlety that westerns of the self-glorification myth can possess it speaks the truth in that the role of non-white ethnicities and women is small at best. The emphasis on masculinity, as popularized by men like Theodore Roosevelt, William Hart and later John Wayne, lies at the heart of the self-glorification myth because it is mostly the men who possess American traits like self-reliance, individuality and a notion of freedom. The concept of white masculine domination of the Hollywood myth of the West will be discussed in more detail in the chapter about the absolution myth.

In this chapter two theories will be discussed that explain the main tenets of the self-glorification myth. The first is the Frontier Thesis by late-nineteenth-century historian Frederick Jackson Turner. The second theory, which bears some relation to Turner's Frontier Thesis, is the theory of American exceptionalism as articulated among others by twentieth century political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset. Both theories are an expression of the belief that the United States is a unique nation. This theme has always

³⁴ Alys Eve Weinbaum, "Nation" in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, eds., (New York: New York University Press, 2007): 164 – 170, 164.

³⁵ Buscombe and Pearson, 3.

been present in American collective thinking and the theories discussed in this chapter serve as examples to illustrate this. In discussing American uniqueness, as articulated by Turner and Lipset, this chapter focuses on a paradigm of American self-understanding. From the moment Pilgrim Father John Winthrop stressed in his 1630 sermon *A Modell of Christian Charity* the importance of the American undertaking as 'a city upon a hill', the idea of American distinctiveness has been a part of American culture.³⁶ The theories of Turner and Lipset about the uniqueness of the American nation are examples of a central theme that can be found throughout American history. But how do these theories about American uniqueness connect to the self-glorification myth? An analysis Turner's and Lipset's theories will demonstrate this connection.

The Turner Thesis

The self-glorification myth shows that the frontier brought out the best in the American people. The western was the visual manifestation of the importance of the frontier in its possibility for the potential display of American cultural values by American citizens who inhabited the region. In this way the self-glorification myth bears resemblance to the Frontier Thesis that was articulated by American historian Frederick Jackson Turner. In 1893 Turner delivered his address *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* in which he outlined his influential Frontier Thesis. At a time the frontier was just declared closed, Turner stressed the significance of the frontier for the United States.

Turner believed that the main focus in American history would not be the development of the Eastern United States but the westward expansion.³⁷ In other words,

³⁶ John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity" in *An Early American Reader*, J. A. Leo Lemay, ed. (Washington: United States Department of State, 1988): 14-24, 23.

³⁷ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" in *A Nineteenth Century American Reader*, M. Thomas Inge, ed. (Washington: United States Department of State, 1995): 81-85, 81.

in explaining the history of the United States historians would focus on the West instead of the East. Whether this is in fact true remains the subject of debate, but it is important to note the significance Turner attributes to the American West. This analysis of Turner's Frontier Thesis focuses on the West as place of societal renewal and the birth of new American citizens.

The frontier is of vital importance for the creation and re-shaping of an American identity, according to Turner. He writes: "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development."³⁸ According to Turner the frontier was a place where American social development could continually begin over again and hence allowed for a perennial rebirth and renewal of American society.³⁹ Turner believed the frontier to be empty and devoid of civilization. This allowed American settlers to start building a new society that lacked the corruption of older ones. These new societies could then influence the older societies in the East and in this way American society could renew itself.

Not only allowed the frontier for a reinvention of American society, it created new citizens as well. It was on the meeting point between savagery and civilization that a new type of man was born that transformed his surroundings. This new citizen could rightfully be called an American that had acquired a new identity. These Americans settled the land and transformed their surroundings to a place where civilization could flourish.

Turner emphasized that this changed the relationship with Europe. As he explains: "little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old, Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs (...) The fact is, that here is a new product

³⁸ Turner, 81.

³⁹ Ibidem.

that is American.”⁴⁰ The trials of the frontier existence create a new kind of American citizen and civilization that differs from old European roots. Turner glorifies this new American identity in the same way the self-glorification myth would do. This creation of new kind of American identity and civilization gives the West its significance according to Turner.

With this view on the importance of the frontier and its ability to create a true and new American citizen and society Turner is an example of a way of thinking that can be found throughout American history. For example, Turner’s ideas resemble those of eighteenth-century French-American intellectual John Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur. Although Crèvecoeur wrote his views on the frontier more than a century before Turner, both men believed that a new American citizen is born on the border between civilization and wilderness. Crèvecoeur—who lived on the frontier and possessed European roots himself—argued in the early years of the American Republic that a new man was formed in interaction with an environment that lacked traditional civilization.

Crèvecoeur believed that in the United States, far removed from traditional European society a new man could be born that differed from his non-American ancestors. “He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds.”⁴¹ The American distances himself from the old European habits and prejudices and becomes a new man. According to American Studies scholar Nikhil Pal Singh Crèvecoeur described the new American as a “national subjectivity derived from a carefully delimited heterogeneity that is a mixture of English,

⁴⁰ Turner, 82.

⁴¹ St. John de Crèvecoeur, “Letter III: What is an American?” in *Letters From an American Farmer* (1782).

Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans and Swedes.”⁴² It is important to note that Crèvecoeur only includes immigrants of European descent, excluding non-white ethnicities.

Crèvecoeur wrote his views on the frontier in a time that America still had a ‘wilderness’. Although by the time Turner posed his thesis the frontier had closed, Turner stressed the significance of the border between wilderness and civilization. Without a frontier it would be more difficult for the American nation to reinvent itself.

The traditional frontier of the American West was a memory by the time the self-glorification myth became popular in American cinema. This however, could account for the popularity of these stories because they reminded the audience of a glorious past full of possibilities as well as the great achievements of the white American nation. The frontier life and its American inhabitants are celebrated in the self-glorification myth because the American West has occupied an important position in American culture. The frontier was believed to be a place where Americans could reinvent themselves and sever the ties with old European traditions. The self-glorification myth also depicts the West as place where the resilience of the ‘new’ American could be tested. To survive the frontier life an American had to be exceptional. This distinctiveness of the American nation and people is articulated by the concept of American exceptionalism.

American Exceptionalism

American exceptionalism is the second theme that can be found in the self-glorification myth. According to American political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset Americans are

⁴² Nikhil Pal Singh, “Rethinking Race and Nation” in *American Studies: An Anthology*, eds. Janice Radway et. al. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell 2009): 9-16, 9.

proud to emphasize their uniqueness.⁴³ This pride in American uniqueness is articulated in the concept of American exceptionalism, which emphasizes the differences between the United States and the rest of the world. As mentioned above, the emphasis on American distinctiveness is a theme that can be found throughout American history. Lipset is an important example of the many intellectuals that have commented on it, as his remarks have defined the debate about American exceptionalism since the mid-1990s. The self-glorification myth resembles certain aspects of American exceptionalism because it glorifies the actions of white Americans and consequently emphasizes the way the American nation – and especially the West – is different from the rest of the world.

American exceptionalism as articulated by Lipset, more than a century after Turner's Frontier Thesis, is similar to Turner's notion of American exceptionalism. Although Turner never explicitly mentioned the term 'exceptionalism' he perceived self-reliance as a defining characteristic that sets Americans apart from the rest of the world. Therefore in Turner's Thesis American exceptionalism is given the meaning of self-reliance. Self-reliance in Turner's Thesis means an avoidance of conformity, the ability to survive and the following of individual instincts and ideas. Although Turner discussed self-reliance in relation to individuals, its aspects can also be applied to the American nation as a whole. By non-conformity to the rest of the world and the articulation of its own ideas the United States became and remained unique. In this way the aspects of self-reliance are part of American exceptionalism.

However, according to Lipset self-reliance or individualism is but one part of American exceptionalism. Other aspects include; liberty, egalitarianism, populism, and laissez-faire. In discussing American exceptionalism in relation to the self-glorification myth this thesis will not focus on the entire concept but emphasizes the aspects of

⁴³ Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: Norton & Co, 1996), 17.

individualism or self-reliance—as voiced by Turner—liberty, and egalitarianism. The analysis of American exceptionalism in this chapter consists of three elements: The West as exceptional region in comparison to the Eastern United States, American exceptionalism in western heroes, and the negative side of American exceptionalism.

Turner's frontier thesis shows how the wilderness of the American West creates new citizens who are self-reliant and who differ from their non-American ancestors and American exceptionalism subsequently emphasizes this uniqueness. Naturally it is only possible to emphasize unique aspects of a society *in comparison* to other societies. Because westerns usually focus on a specific region or place in the American West they seldom depict a comparison between the West and other countries. However, this does not mean that the concept of American exceptionalism cannot be applied to the self-glorification myth.

The emphasis on the positive aspects of a country or region can show its exceptionality even without making an explicit comparison within the narrative. This is what the self-glorification myth does. It emphasizes victory and achievement on the frontier and in this way the myth depicts the exceptional qualities of the American nation. However, it should be noted that it is not the United States in its totality that is presented as exceptional, but only the western region.

In the western the Eastern part of the United States is often presented as still being under the influence of Europe. This idea can also be found in the work of Frederick Jackson Turner as he states that Europe's influence lessens with the steady movement westward:

At first, the frontier was the Atlantic coast. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense. Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American. (...) Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines.⁴⁴

The aspect of egalitarianism in the self-glorification myth can be found in the depiction of the difference between the East and West of the United States. The American meaning of egalitarianism is the equality of opportunity and respect that is not based upon class or condition.⁴⁵ The western emphasizes the difference between the East of the United States, where ancestry, money, and influential connections play an important role—although to a lesser extent than in Europe—and the West which provides an equal opportunity for all citizens.

In western narratives the East is presented as still being under the influence of Old Europe. For example, in *TOOLS OF PROVIDENCE* (William S. Hart, 1915) the protagonist travels west while the title card displays his motivation: “European money controls the East, but Americans rule the West!”⁴⁶ According to the Hollywood western true exceptionalism can only be found in the West—because of European influence in the East—where aspects of egalitarianism and liberty are present as well as people that are self-reliant. In this way the western resembles the remarks of nineteenth-century British politician and historian James Bryce who writes: “What America is to Europe, what Western America is to Eastern, that California is to the other Western States.”⁴⁷ This shows a firm belief that regions increase in exceptionality as they are positioned further west. The true American virtues therefore can only be found in the West because it is entirely free of European influences.

⁴⁴ Turner, 82.

⁴⁵ Lipset, 19.

⁴⁶ *Tools of Providence*, Dir. William S. Hart, Scr. C. Gardner Sullivan, Act. William S. Hart, Rhea Mitchell and Frank Borzage, 1915.

⁴⁷ James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, vol. 2 (New York, 1888), 372.

Multiple aspects of American exceptionalism—liberty, egalitarianism, and individualism—are central themes in Hollywood westerns, as Malgorzata Martynuska has noted.⁴⁸ These aspects of American exceptionalism can also be found in the heroes of the western narratives. Nearly all heroes of the self-glorification myths live according to or possess the virtues articulated by American exceptionalism. As American philosopher Douglas J. Den Uyl argues:

Western heroes possess awe-inspiring strength, skills and courage that stand out significantly. (...) Heroes of the American western evoke this standing apart from, and above, ordinary men and women; yet they simultaneously seem more human and closer to us than other mythic heroes.⁴⁹

So even though the western hero possesses mythic virtues that correspond to some of the terms of American exceptionalism, he is still accessible to ‘ordinary’ Americans and in this way a sense of equality is preserved. So, according to Den Uyl, American heroes differ from their counterparts in the rest of the world. This shows that even in the construction of legends and a mythology the United States is exceptional. However, not all exceptional traits are positive assets.

That America is exceptional does not mean that it is better, for exceptionalism also has a dark side. Lipset describes it as a ‘double edged sword’. He writes: “The positive and the negative are frequently opposite sides of the same coin. (...) The United States is the worst as well as the best depending on which quality is being addressed.”⁵⁰ The United States is

⁴⁸ See quote on page 23.

⁴⁹ Douglas J. Den Uyl, “Civilization and Its Discontents: The Self-Sufficient Western Hero” in *The Philosophy of the Western*, Jennifer L. McMahon and B. Steve Csaki, eds. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010): 31-53, 31.

⁵⁰ Lipset, 19, 26.

exceptional in its positive aspects—one edge of the sword—but it is also distinctive with regard to the negative aspects—the other edge of the sword. For instance, Lipset mentions the high crime rates and lack of adequate social security as a result of the American virtues of individualism and self-reliance. However, most self-glorification myths do not attempt to explain high crime rates, but rather focus on the glorious actions of the crimefighter. In the self-glorification myth the negative sides of American exceptionalism receive little attention or are ignored entirely. Instead of depicting American exceptionalism as a double edged sword the self-glorification myth only focuses on the positive edge.

The self-glorification myth that developed during the Silent Era exalts the frontier and its inhabitants but carefully selects which parts to glorify, leaving out negative aspects of American exceptionalism. If Hollywood presented this type of myth during the Silent era what does that say about the society that created these cultural products? How does the self-glorification myth relate to the American society of the Silent Era? An analysis of *THE IRON HORSE* will exemplify the self-glorification myth and its societal connection.

Case Study: *THE IRON HORSE*

It is no surprise that Americans in the 1920s were interested in stories that glorified the American nation. A brief overview of some main developments in 1920s American society will help explain the popularity of the self-glorification myth during this era. These developments will be connected to the self-glorification myth later in this analysis. The 1920s were a decade of progress and prosperity for the United States. In 1918 the United States emerged from World War I as one of the victors. The war had devastated European powers and the United States took over from Great Britain as the largest economy in the

world.⁵¹ Although the 1920s started with economic decline due to the absence of wartime orders and demobilized soldiers that flooded the workforce, the American industry quickly recovered and the period 1922-1929 saw tremendous economic growth.⁵² The first two years after the post-war recession the American economy grew 30%. The unemployment rate dropped from 12.3% in 1921 to 3.2% just before the crash of the stock market in 1929, and the national debt shrank from \$24 billion to \$16 billion.⁵³ This allowed the United States to transform from a debtor into a creditor nation and becoming the world's leading banker.⁵⁴ Although already a superpower before World War I, after the war the United States became the most powerful nation in the world for the first time in the country's history.

In this social context THE IRON HORSE was released in 1924. It was the first epic western that brought a new grandeur to the western genre and differed from the 'shoot 'em ups' that studios had developed before.⁵⁵ The film was entirely shot on location and this enhanced the imagery. With a tagline on the film poster that read 'a romance of the East and West', THE IRON

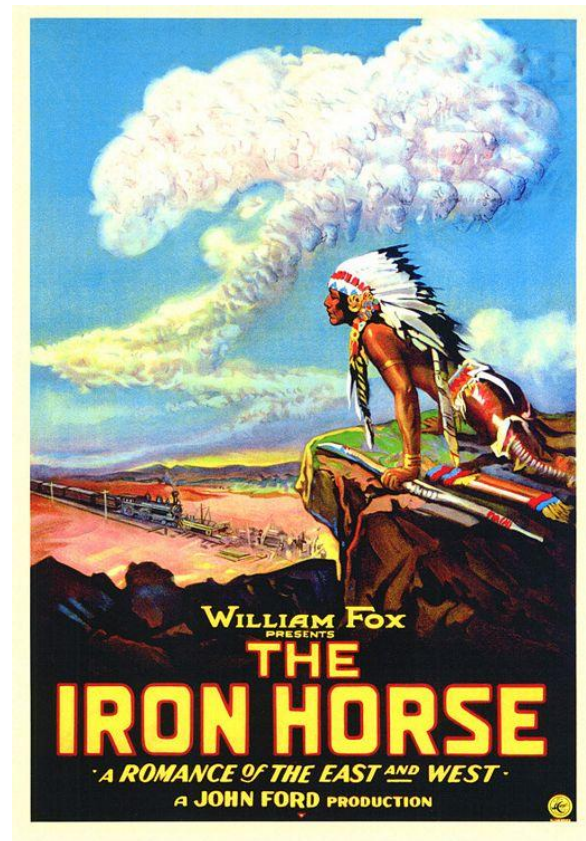


Fig. 1-1. THE IRON HORSE theatrical poster. 1924. Courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox.

⁵¹ David Puttnam, *The Undeclared War: The Struggle for Control of the World's Film Industry* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997), 74.

⁵² M.B. Norton, et. al., *A People & A Nation*. 8^e ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 679.

⁵³ Bernard Baumohl, "The Best of Times?" *Time Magazine* Vol. 150, Issue 4, (July 1997).

⁵⁴ Norton, 673.

⁵⁵ 'Shoot 'em ups' are relatively simple stories about a protagonist who defeats the antagonist and saves the heroine. These westerns usually lacked big sets and were shot on the studio back lots.

HORSE told the story of the development of the trans-continental railroad.⁵⁶ The film differs from many other westerns of the era in that it does not have a single hero, but depicts a group of men facing the hardships of the West. The analysis of THE IRON HORSE will focus on three key elements: the dream or vision of greatness in the West, progress or the triumph of industrialization, and the depiction of minority groups.

The *first* theme is the vision of American greatness in the West. The glorification of the white American nation in THE IRON HORSE starts with the ability to dream of great achievements. The protagonist of the film dreams of going west and help build the railroad despite advice from his neighbors not to go. The West for him is a region of equal opportunity, a recurring aspect in the self-glorification myth.

To audiences in the 1920s this dream of going west to build a prosperous life was still very real. In the early 1920s Businessman Henry E. Huntington envisioned a rich future for the West and especially ‘his’ city Los Angeles:

Los Angeles is destined to become the most important city in this country, if not the world. It can extend in any direction as far as you like; its front door opens on the Pacific, the ocean of the future. The Atlantic is the ocean of the past. Europe can supply her own wants. We shall supply the wants of Asia.⁵⁷

This demonstrates the 1920s confidence in the future for people living in the West. Historian Robert Hine says that Huntington “stood at the modern end of a long line of westering prophets.”⁵⁸ At the dawn of the 1920s great prosperity was expected in the American West—by people like Huntington—and those who lived there could benefit from it.

⁵⁶ *The Iron Horse*, Dir. John Ford, Scr. Charles Kenyon, Act. George O’Brien, Madge Bellamy and Charles Edward Bull, 1924.

⁵⁷ David Rieff, *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World* (New York: Touchstone, 1991), 41.

⁵⁸ Hine and Faragher, 417.

Progress that is achieved by the hard work of Americans is the *second* important theme in *THE IRON HORSE*. The protagonist moves west to work on the railroad as “he feels the momentum of a great nation pushing westward.”⁵⁹ The railroad is the symbol of progress, industry, modernity and enlightenment and the film is accurate in its emphasis on the impact of the trans-continental railway on the American West. When the train arrives Indians unsuccessfully try to rope it, like they had tried to rope the stagecoach. The engineer says: “Aint it a shame, – thim fool Indians tryin’ to rope our poor, weak little injine.”⁶⁰ His remark makes it clear that progress and technology are triumphing over the old ways. Where the railroad comes, towns emerge and civilization—in a primitive form—is introduced. As *THE IRON HORSE* shows, the train transformed the American nation.

The railroad united the East and West from the 1860s onwards, as the speed of the steam engine reduced the travel time between them. The West became more accessible and therefore attractive to Easterners who wanted to make their home there. The railroad boosted the steel industry and benefitted the cattle industry that now could use the train for transportation. Farmers were encouraged to move to the West and work the vast areas of land available. Historian Anne Hyde notes: “Anyone who suggested that inadequate rainfall might be a problem on the plains west of the one hundredth meridian was laughed at and reminded that a nation that could bring iron rails west of the Mississippi could surely bring some rain.”⁶¹ The railroad became an icon of American achievement and industry’s triumph over nature as well as a promise of what was possible.

⁵⁹ *The Iron Horse*.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ Anne Hyde, “Cultural Filters: The Significance of Perception” in *A New Significance: Re-envisioning the History of the American West*, Clyde A. Milner II, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 175-201, 187.

Although it is not shown in the film, the triumph of technology over nature had a profound influence on the American collective thinking in the nineteenth century. American Studies scholar Leo Marx uses the metaphor of the 'machine in the garden' to show how the steam engine disturbed what he calls the sentimental pastoral ideal of America. The sentimental pastoral ideal is the glorification of a simple, rural lifestyle – as opposed to a complicated urban lifestyle – that had been propagated for nearly a century by people like Thomas Jefferson.⁶² With the coming of the railroad country and city were no longer exclusive. Jefferson believed the rural lifestyle to be the moral center of democracy. The arrival of industry in the country threatened this moral center for the coming of industry altered the life of the workers significantly.⁶³ In *THE IRON HORSE* this change is presented as a positive asset, but the coming of industry in the country had a dark side too.

The railroad did not only bring progress, it also brought money and the old style European power into the West that has a potential corrupting influence. The industrialization of the wilderness meant that the negative influences and powers of that process would come to the West as well. *THE IRON HORSE* ignores these negative effects of the coming of technology to the West. Only the positive aspects of progress are emphasized and glorified, even though negative aspects are present as well. Because the self-glorification myth exalts the achievements of the American nation there is little room for the depiction of negative aspects of these achievements, for they could detract from the glory of its builders.

According to Leo Marx, the irreversible arrival of the machine in the garden gave birth to the concept of a new, complex pastoral ideal; the idea that industry and nature

⁶² Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 19.

⁶³ Idem, 123.

can coexist and man could benefit from the best of both worlds. Nineteenth-century American judge Timothy Walker posed the view that the machine could be used to make life on the frontier possible. In his view the wilderness was not yet a garden but “with the help of the machine, a waste land can be transformed into a garden.”⁶⁴ This is the view *THE IRON HORSE* poses as well. The American nation subdues the wilderness and makes it accessible for all to live.

The emphasis on the power of advancing technology and the progress of the American nation were familiar themes to audiences in 1924. Although progress has always been an important theme in American history, it was especially relevant to audiences in the 1920s. As discussed above, this was the period in which the United States became the most powerful nation in the world. Technological progress had been instrumental in securing this position. The building of the railroad in *THE IRON HORSE* served as a metaphor for contemporary progress to audiences in the 1920s.

Just like the steam engine had revolutionized the American West sixty years before, the new technology of electricity powered the economic boom of the 1920s. At the start of the decade more than half of the factories were still run on steam engines. However, by the end of the decade 80% were on electricity. This modernization changed society and affected the lives of many Americans. For instance, modernity altered the mode of transportation of ordinary Americans as car ownership grew from 8 million in 1922 to 24 million at the end of the 1920s.⁶⁵

These statistics not only show a modernization of society, but also reflect an increase in wealth of major parts of the American people. President Herbert Hoover declared in 1928: “We in America are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever

⁶⁴ Marx, 183.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

before in the history of any land.”⁶⁶ Hoover’s statement demonstrates the optimism and confidence in the future the American people had in the 1920s. ‘Their’ United States had almost reached a state of perfection where no poverty would exist. Hoover emphasized that the United States was closer to solving the ancient problem of poverty than *any* nation has ever been. This confidence gives voice to the idea that the United States is different from all other nations. Advancing technology, a booming economy and a significant amount of power in the world fuelled the ideas of American exceptionalism.

Because of this confidence in the future and enormous pride in the American nation’s new status as most powerful country in the world, it is no surprise that the self-glorification myth flourished during the Silent Era. After the dark years of World War I progress made Americans perceive the future optimistically. In this period Hollywood presented a myth of the West that glorified the American state and people and thus connected to the existing sentiments of the era. *THE IRON HORSE* shows how the emphasis on specific elements of the myth of the West can connect contemporary audiences to that myth. For instance, the film emphasizes progress in the West in a period that progress was a prominent issue in American society. *THE IRON HORSE* celebrated great achievements of the American race from the past and reminded audiences that they were part of a tradition that reveled in accomplishments.

As *THE IRON HORSE* shows, progress does not come easy. In the 1920s it had to come through the flames of World War I and in the old American West it came through braving hardships and adversity. The hardships in *THE IRON HORSE* present railroad workers with the opportunity to show their courage and exceptionality. The men overcome natural obstacles like rivers and mountains that complicate the construction of the railroad, endure the elements of heat, rain, and snow, and face attacks by hostile

⁶⁶ “Herbert Hoover, 1929-1933” [2008] *Whitehouse.gov*, 15-06-2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/herberthoover>

Indians. *THE IRON HORSE* resembles Turner's idea that the West brings out the best in people and creates new, self-reliant persons. When the railroad is finished the title card reads: "By superhuman effort and undaunted courage, the rails meet seven years earlier than expected."⁶⁷ At other moments during the film the railroad workers are described as heroes. In this way the film explicitly glorifies the American nation and its achievements.

However, the film is selective in its depiction of the people that worked on the railroads, as the *third* element of the analysis—the depiction of minority groups—indicates. Historical sources prove that many Asian Americans worked at the construction of the railroad. With the exception of two brief shots the involvement of Asian Americans is completely omitted from the film. The only ethnic minority group that plays a major role is that of the Irish immigrants. The Irish workers were an important part of the workforce that constructed the railways.⁶⁸ They were an ethnic minority that usually was not popular with other Americans. Late twentieth century historian Ronald Takaki argues:

The Irish were stereotyped as 'a race of savages', at the same level of intelligence as blacks. Pursuing the 'lower' rather than 'higher' pleasures, seeking 'vicious excitement' and 'gratification merely animal', the Irish were said to be 'slaves' of their 'passions'.⁶⁹

Irish immigrants were sometimes even referred to by other white Americans as 'Irish niggers'. These kinds of prejudices are also present in the film. When the workers strike

⁶⁷ *The Iron Horse*.

⁶⁸ Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1993), 138.

⁶⁹ *Idem*, 141.

because the bosses fail to pay their salaries, 'those foreigners' – the Irish – are blamed by the overseers.⁷⁰

However, although not always portrayed positively, it is significant that the Irish workers are mentioned explicitly. The depiction of the Irish workforce shows that people who were unpopular at the East coast were able to find work in the American West. The West is depicted as a region where even the unpopular could build a new life. Thus *THE IRON HORSE* partly echoes the ideal of egalitarianism.

Even though the Irish were unpopular among other white Americans, they remained *white* Americans and this partly accounts for their representation in *THE IRON HORSE*. Another reason may have to do with the fact that director John Ford was of Irish descent. Ford took pride in his ancestry and Irish people often featured prominently in his films.⁷¹ With the depiction of Irish railroad workers Ford shows their importance to the construction of the country and the advancement of technology and civilization. They were included in the myth of the West because Irish – although unpopular – were white and hence formed an acceptable part of the American people in a way that non-white minority groups did not. The omission of non-white minorities shows that despite its claims of authenticity *THE IRON HORSE* is still a myth.

That Hollywood presented a myth of the West in the Silent Era where the white American people dominated the narrative reflects the racial tensions of the time. In 1915 the second Ku Klux Klan was founded, supposedly inspired by the release of *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* (D. W. Griffith, 1915).⁷² By the mid-1920s the Klan claimed to include 15%

⁷⁰ Audiences in the 1920s shared a distrust of organized labor with the overseers in the film, because of a fear of impending communism said to be brought to the United States by radical immigrants.

⁷¹ Scott Eyman, *John Ford: The Complete Films* (Köln: Taschen, 2004), 143.

⁷² Norton, 668.

of the nation's eligible population, some 4.5 million men.⁷³ The Klan resisted what they called 'the Negro invasion', the migration of large numbers of African Americans to urban areas in the late 1910s and early 1920s. As a result to white resistance some African Americans turned to black militancy to seek a separate black nation.⁷⁴ In American society distrust of immigrants grew and this led to a restriction of immigration with the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the National Origins Act of 1924. These bills drastically reduced the number of foreigners entering the country. With these radical methods white Americans tried to protect their identity and way of life. In a society full of distrust of other ethnicities it is no surprise that Hollywood presented a myth of the West that only included the white American race as the majority of audiences still consisted of white Americans. By focusing on white achievements, the westerns could serve as medium of 'Americanization' which educated immigrants in the American way by showing the cultural tradition of the country.

THE IRON HORSE shows the American nation during one of its momentous achievements. With the construction of the trans-continental the American people did what many had considered impossible. The film celebrates the coming of technology and modernity to the West by the hands of white American men, and is therefore a good example of the self-glorification myth. The film depicts how the frontier holds the possibility of a potential display of American cultural values by the people inhabiting the region and thus underlines Frederick Jackson Turner's statements about the importance of the frontier.

The people depicted in THE IRON HORSE are self-reliant and are shown to be different from their Eastern American and European counterparts. The men overcome the

⁷³ Shawn Lay, "Ku Klux Klan in the Twentieth Century" [2005] *Georgia Encyclopedia.org*, 16-06-2011, <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-2730>.

⁷⁴ Norton, 668.

hardships of terrain, weather, and threats from their environment but eventually emerge as the victors. Progress and technological advancement triumph over the wilderness. The builders of the railroad consequently not only unite a nation through the conquest of the wilderness but introduce—a primitive form of—civilization at the same time. As Turner's thesis states, away from European influences they bring out the best in the American nation.

Several aspects of American exceptionalism as described by Seymour Martin Lipset are recurring themes in the self-glorification myth. Self-reliance, like Turner describes, but also liberty, and egalitarianism. As the self-glorification myth demonstrates nowhere are these aspects of American exceptionalism more prominently featured than in the American West. The West is portrayed as a place of freedom and equality of opportunity for all who live there.

However, freedom and equality as the self-glorification myth depicts were only guaranteed to white Americans. Native Americans as well as other ethnicities have no place in the self-glorification myth. In *THE IRON HORSE* this is evident because non-white ethnicities that worked on the railway are almost completely omitted from the story. The supposed liberty and egalitarianism as portrayed by the self-glorification myth proves an illusion. Only white Americans in the West were able to enjoy these virtues of American exceptionalism.

White Americans were the main focus of the self-glorification myth and the myth connected well to these audiences in the 1920s. An important reason for this connection was the fact that after World War I the United States became the most powerful country in the world. The theme of advancing technology and progress was familiar to audiences as the United States had just entered a promising new era of achievement and advancement. The railroad in *THE IRON HORSE* served as a metaphor for the technological

advancements American society was making in the 1920s. Audiences were able to identify with the frontiers people in the film because they embodied what the United States could be at its best. The actions of the men that worked on the transcontinental railway exemplified the idea of American exceptionalism. The release of *THE IRON HORSE* in an era of optimism with regard to the United States' position in the world enhanced this sentiment.

The self-glorification myth celebrates the coming of progress to the West. This celebration of progress exalts the white American people that brought modernity to the West while it *ignores* other ethnicities. The second myth that emerged in the western genre glorifies the American nation at the *expense* of other races. It celebrates the civilization of the wilderness and actively resists non-white ethnicities to show its own white cultural superiority. This myth is called the absolution myth and will be the subject of the next chapter.

2 -THE ABSOLUTION MYTH-

During the Great Depression in the 1930s the western genre diminished in popularity. Few 'A' westerns were released and the genre leaned on low-budget 'B' productions for its survival.⁷⁵ In 1930 'A' westerns made up 2.6 percent of all films produced by the seven major Hollywood studios, and by 1932 this number had even dropped to 0.6 percent.⁷⁶ Several studios failed at an attempt to revive the genre by the mid-1930s. The western seemed dead.⁷⁷

However, in 1939 the western returned to center stage as an important genre of feature films with the release of *STAGECOACH* (John Ford, 1939). *STAGECOACH* started a 'renaissance' of the western as other 'A' productions followed in its wake. The new westerns were more prestigious than those of the Silent Era and were often presented in color.⁷⁸ At the end of the 1930s, after a lean decade, the western entered a new period of

⁷⁵ For more information on the diminishing popularity of the western during the Great Depression see:

Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).

⁷⁶ Slotkin, 255.

⁷⁷ Ibidem.

⁷⁸ Bordwell and Thompson, 341.

heightened popularity that lasted until 1973 and would become known as the Golden Age of the western.⁷⁹

During the Golden Age the dominant myth that emerged beside the self-glorification myth was the *absolution myth*. The absolution myth can be defined as an attempt to deny or rationalize past events—that are now perceived by scholars as wrongdoings—against others. From a contemporary perspective it is possible to notice that the narratives defined as absolution myths seek to absolve the nation of past sins. This can be done by showing the supposed cultural inferiority of the ‘other’ or to offer a justification or explanation for actions that are now considered morally reprehensible. The absolution myth was expressed in a substantial number of films during the Golden Age, among which: FORT APACHE (John Ford, 1948), SHE WORE A YELLOW RIBBON (John Ford, 1949), WINCHESTER ’73 (Anthony Mann, 1950), and HOW THE WEST WAS WON (Henry Hathaway, 1962).

One of the major American westerns and a good example of the absolution myth is THE SEARCHERS (John Ford, 1956). Produced during the height of the Golden Age of the western by one of its leading directors and proclaimed by the American Film Institute as ‘the best western ever made’, THE SEARCHERS proved highly influential to the genre.⁸⁰ This film will be analyzed to explain the absolution myth and its connection to American society of the Golden Age. However, first a detailed analysis of the absolution myth is necessary.

The absolution myth narrates the struggle between the ‘civilized’ white American nation and the ‘uncivilized’ wilderness. Native Americans are an important part of the uncivilized wilderness and many narratives of the absolution myth focus on the wars

⁷⁹ The Golden Age was briefly interrupted during World War II as fewer westerns were released during the war years.

⁸⁰ “American Film Institute Top 10 westerns” [2008] *AFI.com*, 21-09-2011, <http://www.afi.com/10top10/category.aspx?cat=3>

between the United States and the Indian tribes. Because of the focus on the struggles with Indians literary critic Leslie Fiedler interprets the mythic West as a major theatre of racial conflict in the United States:

The western story in archetypal form is a fiction dealing with the confrontation in the wilderness of a transplanted WASP and a radically alien other, an Indian, leading either to a metamorphosis of the WASP into something neither White nor Red... or else to the annihilation of the Indian. In either case, the tensions of the encounter are resolved by eliminating one of the mythological partners, by ritual or symbolic means or by physical force.⁸¹

Not all western narratives meet Fiedler's definition, but those of the absolution myth do. In this myth the ideological struggle between a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) identity and the Indians is prominent. The struggle usually ends in violence and the confiscation of territorial lands from the original inhabitants. This confiscation of lands that were previously owned by Native Americans is emphasized and presented as a positive aspect in the absolution myth.

The previous chapter showed how the theory of American exceptionalism expresses the American nation's sense of uniqueness. It is by this self-proclaimed virtue of exceptionalism that the United States claimed to possess the right to subdue and civilize the land. The white Americans in the West thus became harbingers of civilization. The need for civilization of the wilderness is underlined in the absolution myth and in this way it rationalizes and justifies past dealings with Native Americans.

As became apparent in the chapter about the self-glorification myth the West has the ability to create what Frederick Jackson Turner called 'real' Americans. Turner underlined the importance of the frontier in American history because of its potential manifestation of American cultural values. These American cultural values found their

⁸¹ Leslie Fiedler, as cited by Gerald Nash, 238.

supreme display in the white American male. The white American male is celebrated as the bringer of civilization to the West and forms an important focus of the absolution myth. In the public mind the West became not only the place where American cultural values could be found, it also became the region for the celebration of white masculinity.

In following with, and at the same time influencing, the popular opinion of the American people in presenting the West as a place of American masculinity, the absolution myth reduces the women of the West to a domestic role. By presenting the West as a harsh place where only 'real' men can survive the absolution myth rationalizes and explains the small parts or complete absence of women in most stories.

In this chapter two concepts will be discussed in relation to the absolution myth. First the concept of 'Manifest Destiny' as articulated by nineteenth-century journalist and diplomat John L. O'Sullivan and further defined by twentieth century historian William E. Weeks. The second part of the analysis of the absolution myth will briefly focus on the culture of American masculinity in the West as articulated by men like Theodore Roosevelt. Because the white American male became an icon as the bringer of Manifest Destiny it is important to elaborate on the male dominance of the Western myth. How do these two theories connect to each other and to the absolution myth? A discussion of the two concepts will form the structure of the analysis of the absolution myth in this chapter.

Manifest Destiny

In explaining the past with regard to the interaction with other nations on the American continent the absolution myth follows the doctrine of American expansionism as exemplified by the concept of 'Manifest Destiny'. Historian Albert Weinberg described in 1935 the ideology of American expansionism as follows:

The ideology of American expansion is its motley body of justificatory doctrines. It comprises metaphysical dogmas of a providential mission and quasi-scientific 'laws' of national development, conceptions of national right and ideals of social duty, legal rationalizations and appeals to 'the higher law', aims of extending freedom and designs of extending benevolent absolutism.⁸²

Multiple aspects that Weinberg mentions are present in the idea of Manifest Destiny. Although this chapter is limited to the examination of Manifest Destiny as supreme example of American expansionism, it is important to note that it encompasses not the entire doctrine.⁸³ American expansionism is manifested in several theories about expansion and empire motivated by economic or diplomatic interests. However, they will be no part of this chapter.

Although Manifest Destiny as an ideology can be found throughout American history, American journalist and diplomat John O'Sullivan is credited with coining the term. In 1845 he commented in an editorial in the *New York Morning News* upon the United States' thirst for expansion:

It is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federative development of self government entrusted to us. It is a right such as that of the tree to the space of air and the earth suitable for the full expansion of its principle and destiny of growth.⁸⁴

Manifest Destiny as articulated by O'Sullivan means the divine right of conquest and population of the entire American continent by the white American nation.

⁸² Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1935), 2.

⁸³ Weinberg, 2.

⁸⁴ John L. O'Sullivan, "The True Title," *New York Morning News* (New York, NY), December 27, 1845.

According to historian William E. Weeks three key themes play an important role in the definition of Manifest Destiny and are often mentioned by its advocates; virtue, mission, and destiny.⁸⁵ The *virtue* that was frequently mentioned by supporters of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny became later known as American exceptionalism.⁸⁶ However, American exceptionalism as discussed in the first chapter differs from the concept related to Manifest Destiny, for it serves as little more than a source of pride for the American people. Related to Manifest Destiny, American exceptionalism becomes more than a source of pride, namely the belief that the United States is not only unique but in fact better than other nations. It highlights self-perceived cultural superiority over supposed inferior cultures of the 'other'.

American exceptionalism in the West becomes a form of white supremacy that serves as a justification for the genocide of the Indian tribes. The absolution myth resembles this idea as the cultural superiority of white frontiersmen is highlighted in contrast with the Native Americans that are frequently referred to as 'savages'. This depiction has led American Studies scholar Robert Rydell to call these types of western 'white supremacist entertainments'.⁸⁷ By using this element of Manifest Destiny in western narratives, no guilt or shame needs to be displayed at the extermination of Indian peoples, because their culture is believed to be inferior and the destruction of it no loss to the world.

The second theme of Manifest Destiny, the *mission*, derives directly from its virtue of American exceptionalism. For if America is unique and superior, American cultural values should be promoted everywhere. The mission therefore is the conquest and

⁸⁵ William Earl Weeks, *Building the Continental Empire: American Expansion From the Revolution to the Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 59-64.

⁸⁶ Idem, 53.

⁸⁷ Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 6.

civilization of the wilderness.⁸⁸ It calls for the spread and promotion of American institutions and cultural values and to reshape the wilderness in the American image.

American politician Albert Gallatin wrote in 1848:

America's mission is to improve the state of the world, to be the 'model republic', to show that men are capable of governing themselves, and that the simple and natural form of government is that also which confers most happiness on all, is productive of the greatest development of the intellectual faculties, above all, that which is attended with the highest standard of private and political virtue and morality.⁸⁹

This shows a firm belief in the uniqueness and superiority of the American nation and its institutions. The mission stems from the idea that the promotion of American institutions on the entire continent would ultimately benefit everyone who lives there.

The promotion of American values in the West is an important part of the absolution myth. The frontiers people are depicted as doing a noble work in fighting barbarism and bringing civilization to the West. Imposing white American culture on the Indian tribes is depicted as necessary and unavoidable. In this way the absolution myth resembles a way of thinking that can be found throughout American history.

Nineteenth-century American philosopher John Fiske compared the conquest of the American continent with the conquest of the Roman Empire in Europe. Just like the Romans defeated the barbarous nations of Europe to bring an empire of civilization, the United States needs to subdue the barbarous Indians. According to Fiske this is a necessary and noble undertaking.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Weeks, 60-62.

⁸⁹ Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 262.

⁹⁰ John Fiske, "Manifest Destiny" *Harper's Magazine* (New York, NY), March, 1885.

America's mission hence dictates that the entire continent should be submitted to its will. American explorer and first Governor of Colorado William Gilpin said in the 1830s:

The destiny of the American people is to subdue the continent—to rush over this vast field to the Pacific Ocean. To change darkness into light and confirm the destiny of the human race... Divine task! Immortal mission! The pioneer army perpetually strikes to the front. Empire plants itself upon the trails.⁹¹

Gilpin not only outlines the mission of the American nation, he also underlines the divine aspect of Manifest Destiny. This is a key theme in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny.

This *destiny* is the third important theme of the Manifest Destiny ideology. Originated from the Puritan belief that the grace of God is guiding the American undertaking, advocates of Manifest Destiny stressed that the conquest and civilization of the wilderness was a task appointed by God. Nineteenth-century minister Josiah Strong believed that in the struggle between races, the Anglo-Saxons were blessed by God. He writes:

It seems to me that God, with infinite wisdom and skill, is training the Anglo-Saxon race for an hour sure to come in the world's future. (...) The world will enter upon a new stage of its history—the final competition of races, for which the Anglo-Saxon is being schooled.⁹²

So according to Strong the American nation is endowed by their Creator with special traits to succeed in the ideological struggle between the United States and non-white nations. Eventually the outcome of this struggle would be to the greater glory of God.

⁹¹ *The West*.

⁹² Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: The American Home Missionary Society, 1885), 23.

Barbarism was supposed to be replaced with civilization and paganism should be conquered by Christianity.⁹³

The perception of Manifest Destiny as a divine right is important with regard to the absolution myth for it rationalizes the eradication of other cultures in the narratives. God may not always be mentioned explicitly in the absolution myth, but the narratives seldom leave dispute about the fact that the American nation has a right to conquer the land. Who gave the Americans this right is sometimes left for the audience to decide, but in the Golden Age many Americans may have thought about the 'higher law'.⁹⁴

The absolution myth deals with a controversial part of American history. Instead of presenting a narrative of genocide—as scholars and later filmmakers would do after the 1960s—the absolution myth tries to explain the myth of the West without mentioning guilt. Manifest Destiny is a driving factor for many white characters in the absolution myth. They believe the land is theirs for the taking and that the Indian tribes form a credible threat to the progress of the United States. The winning of the West is presented as a glorious achievement and the extermination of Indians as necessary and unavoidable. According to the absolution myth the white American nation was not only stronger than the Indian tribes, but was destined—by God—to rule the continent.

By resembling a theory of white supremacy that deems other cultures inferior, the absolution myth reflects a way of thinking that tries to write the myth of the West in favor of the conquerors. The destruction of inferior cultures is no loss to the world and the civilization of barbarous nations a noble undertaking. The absolution myth celebrates the white American culture at the expense of non-whites. Central to this celebration is the figure of the white American male.

⁹³ Strong, 23-24.

⁹⁴ Weinberg, 2.

White American Masculinity

In many westerns, especially those of the absolution myth, the white American male occupies a central position. Frederick Jackson Turner stressed the importance of the frontier for its possibility for display of American cultural values. The white American male in westerns is the personification of these values and becomes the agent of Manifest Destiny in the absolution myth. Co-founder of the academic discipline American Studies Henry Nash Smith states:

The cultural image of the cowboy suggests to Americans a certain conception of themselves, and embodies value judgments. Although the cowboy is a relatively recent addition to the roster of American folk heroes, he is heir to an imposing body of emotions associated with the Manifest Destiny of the United States in the Far West.⁹⁵

As embodiment of the Manifest Destiny ideology the white American male is the central focus of the absolution myth.

This myth presents the American West from a Darwinist perspective, as an unrelenting place where only the strongest Americans survive. In doing this it bears resemblance to the ideas about masculinity as articulated by men like American President Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt believed in the racial superiority of the American people and perceived the white American male as the zenith of this race. Roosevelt quotes American author Mark Twain in his description of the people who helped settle the West:

It was an assemblage of young men—not simpering, dainty, kid-gloved weaklings, but stalwart, muscular, dauntless young braves, brimful of push and energy, and royally endowed with every attribute that goes to make up a peerless and magnificent manhood—the very pick and choice of the world's glorious ones. No women, no children, no gray and stooping veterans—none but erect, bright-eyed, quick-moving, strong-handed young giants—the strangest population, the finest

⁹⁵ Henry Nash Smith, "The West as an Image of the American Past" *University of Kansas City Review* 18 (1951): 29-40, 31.

population, the most gallant host that ever rode down the startled solitudes of an unpeopled land.⁹⁶

Roosevelt—in Twain's words—paints a mythical picture of the people living on the frontier. He not only removes women and children from the myth of the West, but also describes the men on the frontier in an idealized way.⁹⁷

In celebrating the white American male, the absolution myth marginalizes women and children. It does not omit women and children entirely, for there are many narratives in which they play a role. However, this role is nearly always restricted to domestic services and remains small. By presenting the American West as a brutal and violent place the absolution myth rationalizes the choice to marginalize women and children. The West is depicted as a place where women and children cannot survive and only the strong white American male is able to maintain himself. Additionally, the depiction of women and children in a position of weakness enhances the need for the American male to provide protection and in this way display true masculinity.

The protection of women and children against hostile Indians is a recurrent theme in the absolution myth. The myth is a narrative of conquest, but in many stories the whites are attacked by Native Americans. This presents a story of inverted conquest in which the conquerors are the victims that act out of self-defense. The effect of celebrating conquest by victimizing the conquerors is the winning of the West without the guilt.

Because the focus on the white American male in the absolution myth comes from ideas of white supremacy, non-white ethnicities are ignored or only presented as antagonists. Thus the absolution myth presents a story of the West where there is little

⁹⁶ Sarah Watts, *Rough Rider in the White House: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Desire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 130.

Roosevelt took his quote from Mark Twain's semi-autobiographical novel *Roughing It* (1872).

⁹⁷ Additionally the West is described as an 'unpeopled' land, thus ignoring the presence of Native Americans.

room for anything other than the white American male. However, cultural products are always part of the society in which they are created, so how does the absolution myth relate to the American society of the Golden Age? An analysis of *THE SEARCHERS* will illustrate the absolution myth and provide insight into its connection to American society of the 1950s.

Case Study: *THE SEARCHERS*

A brief consideration of some major developments in American society during the 1950s and 1960s provides a historical context in which *THE SEARCHERS* will be discussed. These developments will be connected to the absolution myth later in this analysis. United States foreign policy in the 1950s was characterized by a conservative political climate created by the Korean War that was waged from 1950-1953 and the beginning of the Cold War that started in 1946. During the Cold War the United States became engaged in an ideological struggle with the Soviet Union. Although both superpowers regarded each other with animosity they never engaged in direct armed conflict.⁹⁸ The ideological war between the United States and the Soviet Union was largely ‘fought’ abroad. Critics of United States foreign policy condemned the United States for extending its sphere of influence abroad and supposedly becoming an imperial superpower, while conservative policy makers argued extending the influence of capitalism was the only way to contain communism.⁹⁹

The 1950s and 1960s showed a stark contrast between different groups in American society. After World War II the United States entered an era of prosperity that

⁹⁸ At times the United States and the Soviet Union used proxy warfare, where third parties functioned as substitutes for the war between both superpowers. Famous Cold War proxy wars are: the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the Afghan War of 1979.

⁹⁹ Geir Lundestad, *The United States and Western Europe Since 1945: From ‘Empire’ by Invitation to Transatlantic Drift* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 111-130.

came close to that of the 1920s.¹⁰⁰ A large American middle class emerged consisting of traditional families where the man was sole breadwinner and the woman performed domestic services. However, this prosperity of white Americans contrasted with the racism and poverty non-white ethnicities experienced. These ethnicities largely failed to profit from the post-war economic growth, because they lacked essential rights to do so.¹⁰¹

These turbulent developments coincided with the Golden Age of the western, which saw one of the genre's most influential directors at the top of his game. Noted for multiple high quality westerns John Ford outdid even himself in 1956 with the release of *THE SEARCHERS*. Initially met with mildly favorable reviews, the film has been hailed since as the most influential western and one of the best American films ever made.¹⁰² With the depiction of the struggle between white people living on the frontier and Native Americans, *THE SEARCHERS* is a good example of the absolution myth. Its influential position in the western genre makes it suitable for analysis in this chapter.

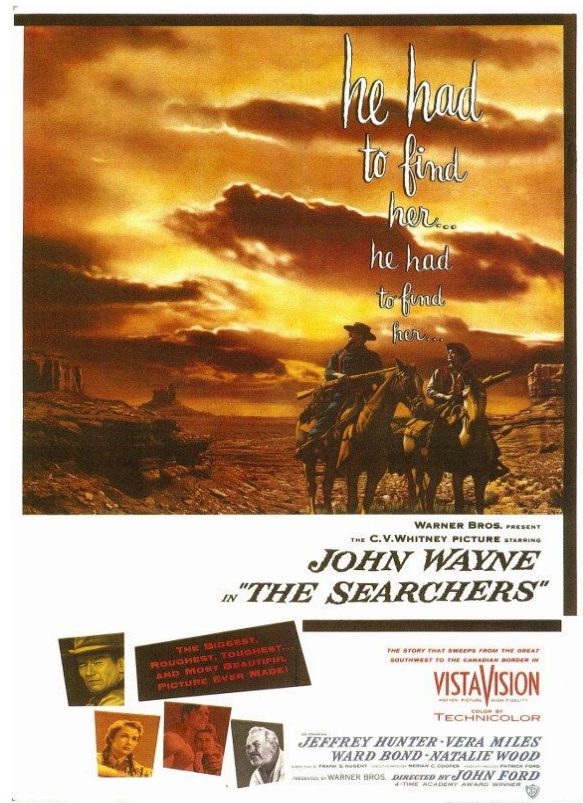


Fig. 2-1. *THE SEARCHERS* theatrical poster. 1956. Courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures.

¹⁰⁰ This prosperity accounts for the production of multiple self-glorification myths in the 1950s and 1960s.

¹⁰¹ Norton, 39.

¹⁰² "AFI's 100 Years... 100 Movies" [2007] *AFI.com*, 22-09-2011, <http://www.afi.com/100years/movies10.aspx>

THE SEARCHERS tells the story of Ethan Edwards, a veteran of the Confederate Army, who finds out that his family has been murdered by Comanche Indians. He sets out to find his niece Debbie who is kidnapped by the Indians and vows to kill the Comanche responsible. However, after a search of more than five years his motivation becomes increasingly questionable.¹⁰³ Three key themes in this narrative and their relation to post-World War II American society will be examined in this analysis: The ideological struggle in the West, racism and gender roles.

Manifest Destiny as depicted in the absolution myth is the struggle between cultures and their ideologies. In THE SEARCHERS this struggle for existence is between the white frontiers people and the Comanche Indians. The film shows a clear contrast between the white culture and that of the Comanche, but clearly sides with the white Americans in its depiction as their culture gets much attention. Funerals and weddings performed according to Christian standards are depicted in detail. Film scholar Christopher Sharrett notes: "[Director] John Ford is noted for his interminable celebrations of the white culture in weddings, dances, funerals, and the like, whether or not they have much role in exposition."¹⁰⁴ Although the wedding and funeral in THE SEARCHERS have expository value it is still important to note that much attention is given to them, because they celebrate white culture.

Reverend Samuel Johnston Clayton occupies an important position in the story because he is also the captain of the Texas Rangers that sets out to find the Indians responsible for the massacre. The secular and religious law are embodied by the same person, indicating that white civilization comes with the Christian religion. This depiction

¹⁰³ *The Searchers*, Dir. John Ford, Scr. Frank S. Nugent, Act. John Wayne, Ward Bond, and Vera Miles, 1956.

¹⁰⁴ Christopher Sharrett, "Through A Door Darkly: A Reappraisal of John Ford's *The Searchers*" *Cineaste* 41 (2006): 4-8, 5.

of white Christian culture—the virtue of Manifest Destiny—contrasts with the Indian culture that is depicted as inferior.

In *THE SEARCHERS* the Indians are portrayed as the villains of the story. The focus of the film is on Ethan Edwards who lost his family because of the Comanche and thus the Indians are portrayed as threatening while the white frontiers people are victimized. The brutal way in which the Indians kill their enemies enhances their position as cruel antagonists. Depicting the Indians as cruel is not the only way *THE SEARCHERS* shows their cultural inferiority. At certain points the Indian culture is ridiculed. People imitate the death songs of the Comanche in a comical way and reverend Clayton calls the Comanche ‘childish savages’.¹⁰⁵ Because the Indian culture is perceived to be inferior by the very people the film tries to evoke sympathy for, it becomes an important message of *THE SEARCHERS*. In this way the film qualifies as an absolution myth.

In *THE SEARCHERS* the West is the stage for the struggle between the ideologies of white culture and those of the Indian culture. As will be described below this ideological struggle serves as a metaphor for the Cold War between Soviet communism and American capitalism. In the film the Indians burn down the farms of the homesteaders in an attempt to drive them off the land. When one of the homesteaders hears he has lost his son in a battle with Indians he says: “It’s this country—meaning: the Indians—killed my boy!” However his wife answers: “We’re way out on a limb, but I don’t think it will be forever. Some day this country is gonna be a fine good place to be. Maybe it needs our bones in the ground before that time can come.”¹⁰⁶ She holds a firm belief that the mission of Manifest Destiny—which is the spread of American civilization—will succeed. Again, it is important to note that the white settlers are depicted as victims. All their actions are

¹⁰⁵ *The Searchers*.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*.

out of self-defense, which absolves them from any blame in their dealings with the Native Americans.

Ethan as defender of white civilization tries to track down the Indians in order to rescue his niece and revenge the murder on his family. When he encounters a dead Indian Ethan shoots the Indian's eyes out of his head. When the reverend asks for the purpose of this thing he answers: "That Comanche believes he ain't got no eyes, he can't enter the Spirit Land. And has to wander forever between the winds."¹⁰⁷ Ethan openly defies and tries to destroy the Indian culture even though he does not share their spiritual beliefs. For him it is not enough that the Indian is dead physically, he also wants to ensure a spiritual death.

When a battle between the tracking party and the Comanche Indians ensues, some of the men pray to God. The white frontiers men succeed in driving off the Indians and reverend Clayton shoots his gun while crying 'hallelujah'. Although it is not mentioned explicitly scenes like these indicate the belief that God is blessing the American undertaking—the destiny of Manifest Destiny.

The struggle between white culture and Comanche culture reaches its climax when Ethan after five years finds his niece Debbie. Debbie has integrated into the Comanche tribe and does not intend to leave 'her' people. When Ethan realizes that Debbie has become part of the Indian tribe he is disgusted and tries to shoot her in order to rescue her from 'a fate worse than death.'¹⁰⁸ Ethan rather sees Debbie die than to accept that she has lost her white civilization. Only after the Comanche tribe is exterminated by the United States cavalry at the end of the film he is ready to re-accept Debbie as his family. Debbie can rejoin white civilization only after her adopted people and culture are no more.

¹⁰⁷ *The Searchers*.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*.

The Cold War struggles that started in 1946 and intensified during the 1950s made the absolution myth relevant to audiences in the Golden Age. The Cold War proved to be a conflict between the American ideology of freedom¹⁰⁹ and communism advocated by the Soviet Union and consequently the theme of an ideological war as presented by the absolution myth was not unfamiliar to audiences in 1956. Stories about the divine task of winning new lands by replacing 'barbarism' with white civilization was a theme that resounded well with post-World War II American audiences. The narratives of the absolution myth could be seen as metaphors for the ideological war the American nation fought in the 1950s and 1960s, placing a welcome emphasis on the superiority of American culture.

A clear black-white contrast between American civilization and the culture of the 'other' helped to make the violent stories of the absolution myth relevant to the public and its leaders in the post-World War II period of struggle on a domestic and global scale.¹¹⁰ Cultural historian Richard Slotkin argues:

Many westerns [during the Golden Age] adapted the traditional mythology of 'savage war' to interpret modern forms of industrial, ethnic or ideological strife and to rationalize the development of the republican nation-state into an imperial Great Power.¹¹¹

The mythological war between the Indian tribes and white American civilization became a way of perceiving the contemporary struggle of the American nation. The Cold War was presented by American leaders as a black-white ideological conflict, just like the absolution myth presented the Indian Wars. The fight against communism called for a spread of American cultural values abroad, and thus the concept of Manifest Destiny as

¹⁰⁹ As articulated by American exceptionalism. See page 29.

¹¹⁰ Slotkin, 350.

¹¹¹ Idem, 353.

depicted in the absolution myth regained relevance. The development of the United States into what Slotkin calls an 'imperial Great Power' was necessary to adequately wage war against communism.

The fight over Europe exemplifies the necessity of extending the American sphere of influence abroad and consequently becoming an imperial Great Power in the Cold War. Devastated by World War II, Europe formed an important arena for the fight between the ideologies of 'freedom' and 'communism'. By increasing their influence on European nations both superpowers tried to expand their empire. Western-Europe welcomed American influence after 1945, because the United States was powerful enough to provide economic, military and political assistance.¹¹²

In 1946 American Secretary of State James Francis Byrnes explained to a delegation of United States senators the importance of the ideological war the United States waged in Europe. He said: "The nub of our program is to win the European people. It is a battle between us [the United States] and Russia over hearts and minds..."¹¹³ The promotion of American cultural values around the world was perceived by American leaders to be essential in order to contain communism and secure freedom. In this way the American government connected to the original ideology of Manifest Destiny that called for the spread of American civilization. The frontier was now extended beyond American borders, but had lost little of its ideological importance. Manifest Destiny as articulated by the absolution myth could be re-interpreted to fit the American society during the Golden Age. However, so could its ideas about white supremacy.

¹¹² Lundestad, 27-40.

¹¹³ Kendrick A. Clements, ed., *James F. Byrnes and the Origins of the Cold War* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1982), 127.

The second key theme in *THE SEARCHERS* is racism. The absolution myth supposes white superiority and the actions of protagonist Ethan Edwards correspond to this idea. Ethan is driven by hate against Indians and is willing to do everything to wipe them from the face of the earth. At a certain point he even starts killing large amounts of buffalo to deny the Comanche food. It is important to note that the hero of the film, portrayed by American icon John Wayne, harbors such feelings and does not overcome them in the end as he only allows Debbie to re-enter white society after the extermination of 'her' Indian people.

When Ethan finds out that the adopted son of his brother, Marty, is part Cherokee he is disgusted. He repeatedly stresses that Marty is no kin to him. However, when he hears that Debbie has adopted the Comanche as her people he makes a will in which he leaves everything to Marty because he has no blood kin. Marty says that Debbie is his blood kin, but Ethan answers: "Not no more, she ain't! She's been living with a buck!"¹¹⁴ Ethan's disgust for someone who chooses to belong to a non-white race is stronger than his dislike for what he calls 'half-breeds'.

Not only *THE SEARCHERS'* protagonist is racist, the film itself is racially prejudiced. Christopher Sharrett explains:

The basic assumption of *The Searchers* is that Indians, not whites, are the source of a problem, nasty hero or no. [Antagonist] chief Scar comes perilously close to being the reverse of the benevolent African-American characters who give whites their powers and show the white community its potential. (...) Overall, *The Searchers* belongs to the whites, not the Indians.¹¹⁵

The Indians are perceived to be the source of the problems according to *THE SEARCHERS*. At heart *THE SEARCHERS* is a film that supposes white supremacy. Even though white

¹¹⁴ *The Searchers*.

¹¹⁵ Sharrett, 6.

Americans are victimized in large parts of the story, they eventually emerge as the victorious nation.

As a product of 1956 society *THE SEARCHERS* sheds light on the racial tensions in the American collective thinking of that period. Not all races had the same rights and opportunities in post-war American society. An enormous middle-class was emerging, but not all races could benefit from it. Historian Mary Beth Norton argues: “The new middle-class culture largely ignored those who did not belong to its ranks. Race remained a major dividing line in American society. (...) Racial discrimination stood unchallenged in most of 1950s America.”¹¹⁶ Not all Americans actually practiced racism or discrimination, but many marginalized other races or ignored them altogether.

The Soviet Union pointed out that the United States could not represent the ideology of freedom abroad if it practiced racism and segregation at home. These accusations created a new awareness of race relations in American society. African Americans that had fought in World War II were determined to fight for equal rights and politicians like Harry Truman started to pay attention to black aspirations. However, progress on the Civil Rights front came slow and met with massive resistance in the 1950s.¹¹⁷ It would take until 1964 before the Civil Rights Act was passed that outlawed segregation and granted equal rights to non-white citizens. Although new racial awareness emerged during the 1950s, non-white ethnicities had no equal position during this period.¹¹⁸

It is therefore not surprising that the absolution myth could flourish during this era. The myth may have appealed to some white American citizens that dreaded colored emancipation because it celebrated white culture and reaffirmed an old order. Others may

¹¹⁶ Norton, 851.

¹¹⁷ Milton Meltzer, *There Comes a Time: The Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Random House, 2000).

¹¹⁸ Idem, 837-840.

have taken the white supremacy of the myth for granted without giving race relations much thought, simply because they ignored non-white ethnicities. *THE SEARCHERS* reflects as well as influenced the race relations of the era. Even though not all Americans were racist in the 1950s, it is only in a society that tolerates racism that the absolution myth can enjoy popularity. If contemporary society does not accept ethnical minorities, it almost certainly denies them a place in the stories that reflect the way of thinking of that society. The myth of the West as presented by the absolution myth gives non-white ethnicities an inferior position, but it does not limit itself to that group.

The third important theme in *THE SEARCHERS* is gender roles. As a narrative that can be defined as absolution myth *THE SEARCHERS* glorifies American white masculinity and marginalizes women in the process. The gender roles in the film dictate that the men are strong and full of initiative while the women are weak and passive. At the beginning of the film the Indians make use of the predictability of these gender roles. They steal some cattle knowing that the frontiers men will pursue them and thus lure the men away from the Edwards farm. The Indians return when the men are out to find the cattle thieves to slaughter the Edwards family. The murdered women and children and the kidnapping of Debbie serve as the catalyst for the remainder of the story. The women that need protection provide the white men with the opportunity to show their greatness and true masculinity.

The majority of the action in the film centers on the men of the frontier that set out to find Debbie and avenge the death of the Edwards family. Their masculinity may have been used against them at the start of the film; the men eventually regain the initiative and defeat the Comanche. The men represent justice in the West and in this way embody – a primitive form of – civilization. Because the West is depicted as an extremely

harsh and brutal place *THE SEARCHERS* shows that only men—and exceptional men at that—are able to survive. Women are unable to survive without the help of men and in this way the film rationalizes the marginalization of women.

The clear gender roles that *THE SEARCHERS* displays correspond to the popular image of the organization of middle-class American households in 1956. After the uncertain periods of the Great Depression and World War II many Americans sought fulfillment in private family life in the post-war era. Most people married very young and set up their own household conform the social rules of the time. The gender roles of the 1950s dictated a position of the man as sole breadwinner while women were expected to be home makers. Mary Beth Norton writes: “This division of labor, contemporary commentators insisted, was based on the timeless and essential differences between the sexes.”¹¹⁹ Not all women accepted the social dictation of these gender roles, but the majority of white women did.

The absolution myth that was prominent in the western genre during the post-war era was influenced by as well as influenced the social expectations with regard to gender roles. The gender roles that *THE SEARCHERS* presents as traditional are in fact the projection of 1950s social expectations of the American household. These projections did not necessarily correspond to the actual state of affairs. The absolution myth rationalizes and explains the restricted and marginalized role women have in this myth, by depicting the West as brutal place where women are in need of protection. However, just like traditional American middle-class families this is but a projection of social expectations.

THE SEARCHERS reflects the key characteristics of the absolution myth. The film uses the West as a stage for the ideological struggle between civilization and barbarism. By

¹¹⁹ Norton, 845.

victimizing the white frontiers people and telling the story from their perspective *THE SEARCHERS* rationalizes the actions of the whites against the Indians. The effect of victimizing the white conquerors is a winning of the West without guilt. In this way the absolution myth reflects a way of thinking that justifies the – sometimes violent – dealings with the Indian tribes.

The white settlers bring civilization to the West and try to make it a place where they can live. However, before that time can come the land needs to be what protagonist Ethan Edwards calls ‘cleaned from possible threats’. Even though this is not easy the homesteaders hold a firm belief in its positive outcome.

THE SEARCHERS reflects one of the major ideologies that characterizes the absolution myth; Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny has three important characteristics: virtue, mission and destiny. The virtue of Manifest Destiny supposes white supremacy and its mission calls for the spread of American values in the West. The destiny states that the white American people have a God-given right and even an obligation to spread civilization and with it Christianity.

By depicting white culture as superior while ridiculing Indian culture *THE SEARCHERS* qualifies as what Robert Rydell calls ‘white supremacist entertainments’.¹²⁰ The film is racist in its remarks about and its depiction of Indians while on the other hand overemphasizing the virtues of the white American nation. The white frontiers people in the film try to conquer the land and spread American cultural values at the expense of the Indian tribes. The prominent position of the Christian religion in the film indicates that their undertaking is blessed by God. Eventually the white settlers succeed in defeating the Comanche. The recovery of Debbie symbolizes victory in the ideological war between civilization and barbarism.

¹²⁰ Rydell, 6.

The themes of an ideological struggle and racial tensions were familiar to American audiences in the post-war era. The United States' foreign relations were characterized by a struggle between America's ideology of freedom and Soviet communism. The narratives of the absolution myth served as a metaphor for these conflicts. The new frontier lay outside American borders but the need for the spread of American cultural values was just as important as in the days of the Old West. Manifest Destiny may have had its critics in the 1950s, but the American government was determined to expand the United States' sphere of influence around the globe.

On the domestic front the Civil Rights' cry for equality became louder and created a new racial awareness that led to racial tensions. Some white Americans openly resisted black emancipation, while others ignored the problem. Racism was still prominent in American society during the Golden Age and it is therefore no surprise that *THE SEARCHERS* treated non-whites the way it did.

Not only non-whites are portrayed in a position of disadvantage in the absolution myth. An major emphasis on white masculinity marginalizes women in the narratives. As the position of women in *THE SEARCHERS* illustrates they solely serve to maintain the household and their depicted weakness provides white men with the opportunity to show their masculinity. By depicting the West as a dangerous place, the film rationalizes the marginalized position of women; a recurring characteristic of the absolution myth.

These gender roles correspond to the popular image of the American household in the 1950s. However, it is important to note that this image is a projection of social desire and the American middle-class family often only partly matched this ideal. The absolution myth as exemplified by *THE SEARCHERS* was influenced by popular social conventions as well as kept them in place.

The absolution myth reflects a try to absolve the white American nation from what are perceived since the 1960s as sins of the past. In the late 1960s and 1970s scholarship started to re-evaluate the myth of the West. Turning toward a narrative of conquest and genocide instead of a Manifest Destiny induced civilization of the land; scholars were beginning to recognize what they called the 'atrocities' committed by the American government. In the early 1990s American filmmakers followed this scholarship with the creation of a new myth in reaction to the absolution myth; the multicultural myth. This myth will be the subject of the next chapter.

5

-THE MULTICULTURAL MYTH-

At the end of the 1970s the western almost completely disappeared from Hollywood's 'A' productions. As veterans of the genre like John Ford, Howard Hawks, and John Wayne retired, the new generation of filmmakers largely failed to continue the American tradition of western filmmaking. Although the genre still had its advocates in people like Clint Eastwood, it never regained popularity during the latter half the 1970s and the 1980s.¹²¹ According to cultural historian Richard Slotkin Americans lost their interest in the myth of the West during the 1970s. Events like the defeat in the Vietnam War in 1973 and the Arab oil boycott of 1973-74 symbolized the growing concern that the United States was no longer exceptional among other nations.¹²² However, by 1990 the myth of the West enjoyed new popularity.

In March 1991 *DANCES WITH WOLVES* (Kevin Costner, 1990) showed that the western was ready to return by grossing over \$400 million—becoming the highest grossing western of all time—and winning seven Academy Awards including Best

¹²¹ For more information on the crisis of the myth of the West in the 1970s and 1980s see: Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).

¹²² Slotkin, 625.

Picture and Best Director.¹²³ Other westerns followed and the first half of the 1990s saw a resurgence of the genre. However, the popularity of the western during this period could never match that of the Silent Era or the Golden Age. The westerns of the 1990s also differed significantly from their counterparts of earlier eras.¹²⁴

As a reaction to what was perceived in the 1990s as decades of white domination and supremacy in the myth of the West, filmmakers presented a myth that focused on other ethnicities, especially Native Americans. Evolving scholarship had reinterpreted the myth of the West during the 1960s and 1970s and American filmmakers followed by questioning what academics called ‘the white conquest of the West’. Hollywood had tried to present a perspective of Native Americans in the West before with the release of *CHEYENNE AUTUMN* (John Ford, 1964) and *THE GREAT SIOUX MASSACRE* (Sidney Salkow, 1965). However, these films remained isolated productions, while during the 1990s a wave of westerns arrived that dealt with Native Americans.

Film scholars like Donald Hoffman describe these new westerns as revisionist myths. Hoffman states: “In the past decade [the 1990s], particularly interesting attempts to remedy the omission of ethnic minorities in westerns have been supplied by revisionist westerns.”¹²⁵ However, the revisionist myth supposes a balanced narrative of the West giving voice to the majority as well as minority groups. The myth of the West as presented by filmmakers in the 1990s failed to do so, and therefore it would be incorrect to define it as a revisionist myth.

The dominant myth that emerged during the 1990s should be called the *multicultural myth*, because it is—at least partly—created out of white guilt with regard to

¹²³ “Dances with Wolves (1990),” [1990] *BoxOfficeMojo.com*, 29-09-2011, <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=danceswithwolves.htm>

¹²⁴ Bordwell and Thompson, 685.

¹²⁵ Donald Hoffman, “Whose Home on the Range? Finding Room for Native Americans, African Americans, and Latino Americans in the Revisionist Western” *MELUS* 22, no. 2 (1997): 45-59, 46.

the past. The multicultural myth emphasizes the role of Native-Americans in the West and frequently depicts white Americans as villains. In this way the balance that is required for a revisionist myth is lost. The multicultural myth was expressed by multiple movies during the 1990s including; *THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS* (Michael Mann, 1992), *GERONIMO: AN AMERICAN LEGEND* (Walter Hill, 1993), *POCAHONTAS* (Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, 1995), and *GREY OWL* (Richard Attenborough, 1999).

By focusing on the perspective of Native Americans the multicultural myth presents a narrative of the West that accuses white domination. The Native American culture is presented as an alternative to white 'civilization'. Richard Slotkin writes:

[These films] remind the public of the Indians' significance as both fact and symbol in American history and culture and identified them as embodiments of a set of alternative values in sexuality, culture, and politics.¹²⁶

However, the multicultural myth not only presents Native American culture as alternative to white civilization, but actually *favors* it. The alternative values that Slotkin describes are depicted as morally superior to white American cultural values. In this way the multicultural myth is a reverse of the absolution myth, for it glorifies Native American cultural superiority and supposes white cultural inferiority.

A well known western that serves as a good example of the multicultural myth is *DANCES WITH WOLVES*. It was this film that sparked the 1990s resurgence of the western and is widely regarded as an influential movie. This position of influence makes it suitable for analysis in this chapter. *DANCES WITH WOLVES* will serve as example of the multicultural myth and demonstrate how this myth reflects American society of the 1990s.

The central theme of *DANCES WITH WOLVES* is the contrast between Native American culture and white civilization. According to French anthropologist Claude Lévi-

¹²⁶ Slotkin, 629.

Strauss, myth is a useful tool to address a contrast like this. He states: “the purpose of a myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction.”¹²⁷ Lévi-Strauss believed that myths and narratives serve to reconcile cultural contradictions and bring opposing forces and values together.¹²⁸ The multicultural myth is able to address the contradictions between Native American culture and white culture. However, before the film can be analyzed the multicultural myth needs to be discussed in more detail.

Two main theoretical discourses that influenced the multicultural myth will be discussed in the analysis of the myth. The first is the philosophical movement of postmodernism, as articulated by the deconstruction theory of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, which influenced intellectuals in humanities—and later filmmakers—in their thinking about society since the 1960s. The second theory is multiculturalism which is a ‘product’ of postmodernist thinking. The term ‘multicultural myth’ derives from this theoretical concept because the myth reflects its key characteristics. The perspectives on multiculturalism of American sociologists Alvin Schmidt and Avery Gordon will serve as examples of the debate about this theory. How do these two theoretical discourses connect to the multicultural myth? The structure of the analysis of the multicultural myth in this chapter will be formed by the discussion of the connection between the myth and these two theories.

Postmodernism

As the contrast between the absolution myth and the multicultural myth indicates, the nature of the created myth depends on which principles and motivations guide the narrative. This means that the created myth is subject to the interpretations of the narrator.

¹²⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 210.

¹²⁸ Robert Baird, “Going Indian: Dances With Wolves (1990)” in *Hollywood’s Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*, Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor, eds. (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1998): 153-169, 154.

In historical scholarship this awareness gained prominence under the influence of postmodernist thinking in the second half of the twentieth century. Filmmakers in the 1990s followed postmodernist historical scholarship in reinterpreting the myth of the West as a narrative of genocide and guilt. Postmodernism, as articulated by deconstruction, can be seen as one of the major influences on the multicultural myth.

French postmodernist philosopher Michel Foucault underlined in 1971 the importance of the critique and re-evaluation of existing ideas. He argues:

The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the institutions and ideas that appear to be both neutral and independent, to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence that has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them.¹²⁹

Foucault advocates a new awareness with regard to ideas that were regarded as neutral and self-evident in the past. The questioning of existing values and 'truths' is a fundamental characteristic of postmodernism. Applied to the myth of the West Foucault asks for a questioning of the dominant white male narrative that has been presented as 'real'. However, the concepts of 'real' and 'reality' are also re-interpreted by postmodernism.

French postmodernist philosopher Jacques Derrida believed that all reality is mediated through language and therefore an interpretation. He writes: "In what one calls the real life of these existences 'of flesh and bone', beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as text, there has never been anything but writing."¹³⁰ In other words, Derrida claims there is nothing outside the text, as even references to interpret a text are texts themselves. The concept of 'text' should be interpreted here in its broadest

¹²⁹ Michel Foucault and Noam Chomsky, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate On Human Nature* (New York: The New Press, 2006), 35.

¹³⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 159.

possible way to include the entire 'lived experience'. If all reality is interpreted through language, then all existing ideas and 'truths' are interpretations. Derrida advocated 'deconstruction' that seeks to make these interpretations in the text visible.¹³¹

Deconstruction's claim that everything is an interpretation presents the space for the questioning of existing ideas. American philosopher James Smith states:

[Deconstruction opens] a space to call into question the received and dominant interpretations that often claim not to be interpretations at all. As such, deconstruction is interested in interpretations that have been marginalized and sidelined, activating voices that have been silenced.¹³²

Deconstruction seeks to 'unmask' interpretations that claim not to be interpretations and in the process opening new voices that were marginalized before.

This is exactly what the multicultural myth does. It reflects a way of thinking that questions the existing self-glorification myth and especially the absolution myth and recognizes that these myths are white interpretations of the West. They are narratives told from the white American perspective and in favor of the white American population. As a reaction to these narratives, the multicultural myth reflects an interest in the marginalized interpretation of the Native Americans that seeks to activate voices that were silenced before.

The recognition of deconstruction's belief that everything is an interpretation has led French postmodernist philosopher Jean-François Lyotard to a distrust of meta-narratives. Lyotard defines meta-narratives as "stories that not only tell a grand story, but also claim to be able to legitimate or prove the story's claim by an appeal to universal

¹³¹ Derrida, 30-64.

¹³² James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 51.

reason.”¹³³ Thus a meta-narrative not only tells a story but makes claims about truth. The myth of the West as told by the self-glorification myth and the absolution myth is a grand narrative because it tells the story of the winning of the West and in doing so makes claims about the origin of the American nation. By opposing these existing myths the stories of the multicultural myth were presented by filmmakers as historically accurate narratives that moved beyond myth. However, given the ethnical representation that is largely restricted to Native Americans and the simplification of historical events the multicultural myth should still be defined as myth. The multicultural myth was inspired by postmodernism to distrust and question existing myths, but replaced them with another.

The questioning of the dominant myth under the influence of deconstruction led to the conclusion that all myths are interpretations. These interpretations possess some form of truth merely when perceived from a certain perspective. According to Foucault only after this realization an alternative to these ideas can be presented. The re-evaluation of the myth of the West led American filmmakers in the 1990s to the self-relativism of white American culture in the Western narrative. No longer was white culture perceived as superior or even desirable.

This new perception of white culture in the myth of the West created possibilities for the formulation of narratives that this thesis recognizes as multicultural myths, where the focus of the interpretation was on Native Americans. The self-relativism of the white culture paved the way for cultural relativism. The recognition of cultural relativism gave birth to the concept of multiculturalism. This concept is the second major influence on the multicultural myth.

¹³³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

Multiculturalism

The term multiculturalism has been used in a variety of different ways since it rose to prominence in the 1960s. During the culture wars of the 1980s multiculturalism was one of the main strands of thinking. However, multiculturalism is a term that answers to multiple definitions. British author Andrew Heywood makes a distinction between a descriptive and a normative use of the term.¹³⁴ As descriptive term multiculturalism refers to cultural diversity. As a normative term it corresponds to the definition as given by American sociologist Alvin Schmidt who writes that: "Multiculturalism is a Leftist political ideology that sees all cultures, their mores and institutions, as essentially equal. No culture is considered superior or inferior to any other; it is merely different."¹³⁵ Multiculturalism hence recognizes and embraces the different cultures present in American society, because all are considered equal.

Normative multiculturalists believe it is problematic to formulate a homogeneous American culture because the equality principle dictates that no single culture should dominate. However, according to multiculturalists the values that are proclaimed to be universal American values are in fact white Anglo-Saxon values and of no greater importance than the values of other ethnical groups. American sociologist Avery Gordon writes:

It is simply not possible to invoke an 'American Creed' of equality and democracy, for any such creed is in fact divided within itself. (...) Were there indeed a set of 'core American values' ready to assert unambivalent antiracism and democratic equality against their opposites in American life, we would not be in our

¹³⁴ Andrew Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 313.

¹³⁵ Alvin J. Schmidt, *The Menace of Multiculturalism: Trojan Horse in America* (London: Praeger, 1997), 3.

fourteenth decade of working toward racial Reconstruction of an America without slavery.¹³⁶

According to Gordon the American Creed has no value in a multicultural society, because the Creed harbors exclusionary attitudes and is founded on Anglo-Saxon values.¹³⁷ The racial inequality that lingers on in American society is proof, according to Gordon, that such a creed does not lead to recognition of all cultures.

The multiculturalist belief that no single culture should dominate society has led to a re-evaluation of the myth of the West. The self-glorification- and absolution myths that reflected a way of thinking that claimed to possess true American values were proclaimed false and undesirable because they merely reflected Anglo-Saxon ideals and—according to filmmakers of the 1990s—presented a distorted picture of the West. Multiculturalism argued for recognition of other nations and ethnicities in the myth of the West. The myths about national origin should give voice to all cultural groups in American society, not just the dominant one. Multiculturalism invoked a move away from the traditional American idea of cultural assimilation—the creation of a single American culture—that had been prominent in the myth of the West.

The focus of the dominant culture in society should no longer be the assimilation of minorities, but the recognition of cultural diversity. Multiculturalism advocated the metaphor of the salad bowl to describe American culture, in favor of the melting pot. In the salad bowl all ingredients have their place but remain intact, while in the melting pot

¹³⁶ Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield, eds., *Mapping Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 7-8.

¹³⁷ The American Creed that voiced the American cultural identity was written by William Tyler Page and adopted by the United States House of Representatives in 1918. American Studies scholars Seymour Martin Lipset has described the American Creed in five main terms: liberty, individualism, egalitarianism, populism, and laissez-faire.

all ingredients mingle and become one homogeneous product. The salad bowl expresses cultural diversity, while the melting pot stands for cultural assimilation.¹³⁸

The recognition of the equality of multiple cultures within American society and their introduction into the narrative of the myth of the West should have led to a revisionist myth in which both majority and minority cultures have their place. However, as argued above it is incorrect to perceive the westerns of the 1990s as revisionist myths. Why has multiculturalist critique on the myth of the West not led to a revisionist myth? The answer can be found in white guilt with regard to the past. The past actions of white Americans in relation to other ethnicities influenced the way advocates of multiculturalism—and with it filmmakers that created the multicultural myth—assessed white culture in relation to other cultures. Alvin Schmidt argues:

Many multiculturalists seem to be plagued by the white man's guilt—a feeling of remorse that many white Americans have regarding their nation's past sins, relative to the discrimination against racial minorities and women, for example. Many advocates of multiculturalism, most of whom are white, still feel guilty and see American culture as racist, sexist, classist, and oppressive.¹³⁹

The guilt with regard to the past white American multiculturalists felt has led to a negative portrayal of white culture in the multicultural landscape of the 1990s. Instead of recognizing all cultures as equal, a cultural landscape appeared in which white culture was perceived as inferior. Schmidt says:

Multiculturalists' writings do *not* honor *all* cultures. They commonly portray Western or Euro-American culture in a negative light, and they selectively ignore

¹³⁸ Christopher Newfield and Avery F. Gordon, "Multiculturalism's Unfinished Business" in *Mapping Multiculturalism*, Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): 76-115, 88.

¹³⁹ Schmidt, 7.

prominent cultural contributions made by groups that are out-of-favor with their ideology.¹⁴⁰

By advocating the acceptance of minority cultures multiculturalism ran the risk of ignoring the culture of the majority. In this way multiculturalism as appeared in the 1990s was to some extent a reaction to centuries of white cultural domination.

Like multiculturalism the multicultural myth also selectively honors cultures. The narratives of the multicultural myth focus on Native American cultures while white American culture is portrayed in a negative light. The multicultural myth favors Native American culture as a symbol for everything white culture is not. This reflects a broader trend in 1990s thinking about Native Americans. American historian David Rich Lewis illustrates:

During the last decades whites have embraced Indians, or their cherished image, as symbols for the counterculture, American environmentalism, and New Age spirituality and mysticism—symbols for a way of life in opposition to urban, white, Christian, techno-industrial society.¹⁴¹

Native American culture as symbol of counterculture is an important part of the multicultural myth. The Native American culture takes the place of white American culture. This indicates that the role of Native Americans in the myth of the West becomes the sole focus in the multicultural myth, disregarding white culture.

With the desire, inspired by multiculturalism, to recognize other cultures the multicultural myth presents what historian Gerald Nash describes as a new distorted myth of the West.¹⁴² The reaction to white cultural domination of the traditional myth and

¹⁴⁰ Schmidt, 11-12.

¹⁴¹ David Rich Lewis, "Still Native: The Significance of Native Americans in the History of the Twentieth-Century American West" in *A New Significance: Re-envisioning the History of the American West*, Clyde A. Milner II, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 213-240, 227.

¹⁴² Nash, 239.

a sole emphasis on Native American cultures creates what Nash calls 'reverse racism'. He argues:

The Indian myths are always portrayed as 'genuine' while the myths of Western heroes are invariably 'spurious'. In this form of reverse racism, moral and ethical judgments tend to become doctrinaire. [This focus] creates new stereotypes of both Indians and non-Indians. The former can do no wrong, and the latter can do no right.¹⁴³

The multicultural myth creates new stereotypes in the myth of the West although the roles are now reversed. No longer are the Native Americans portrayed as villains, but this role is assigned to the white American 'intruders' that have come to destroy a harmonious way of life. In this way the multicultural myth is the guilt-inspired opposite of the absolution myth. In its reflection of critique on the traditional myth of the West the multicultural myth creates new stereotypes that again lead to a Western myth that does not include all groups within American society.

As shown above, the multicultural myth is a product of the academic debates about ethnicity and culture of the 1980s and 1990s. But the myth of the West has always been part of the society it was created in. How does the multicultural myth relate to social developments and debates in American society of the 1990s? *DANCES WITH WOLVES* will serve as an example of the multicultural myth and will provide insight into the reflection of its societal context.

Case Study: DANCES WITH WOLVES

A brief overview of some main events of the 1990s create an historical context in which the multicultural myth will be considered. Later in the analysis these developments will be connected to the multicultural myth. The last decade of the twentieth century started

¹⁴³ Nash, 239.

with a severe economic depression. During the George H. W. Bush administration the American economy grew slowly or not at all. Thirty states faced financial problems in the early 1990s. Despite economic struggles President Bush implemented a tax policy that benefitted only rich Americans, thus widening the gap between rich and poor. In 1992 the number of poor people reached its highest level since 1964.¹⁴⁴ The economy improved during the mid-decade, but the recession left many Americans shaken.

The economic growth that ensued after 1992 reinforced the position of the United States as a major player in the global economy. The economic prosperity enhanced the process of globalization that had already begun during the 1970s and 1980s. Although it provided opportunities to American businesses, it presented a downside to American laborers. The relocation of production facilities overseas exported American jobs and sparked a decline in wages. With industrial facilities in Third world countries the United States entered an era in which its major focus was in on the service industry instead of on manual labor. Critics of globalization saw in the United States the thirst for imperial power to exploit and dominate economies around the world, while victimizing the American workforce in the process.¹⁴⁵

American society of the 1990s was characterized by a debate about ethnicity. As a reaction to the racial tensions in the 1980s, multiculturalism advocated cultural diversity—as outlined above—in the late 1980s and 1990s. One result of this was that the American nation sought to strengthen relations with Native Americans.

Historian Richard White states that this can also be attributed to the fact that many Native American groups had political power in the 1990s, both because they had money to spend in political elections and because treaty rights had been sustained. Additionally

¹⁴⁴ Norton, 954.

¹⁴⁵ Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1992), 138-146.

since the 1960s Native Americans made an effort to take control of their history, advocating another perspective on the settlement of the West.¹⁴⁶ These efforts appeared to bear fruit in the 1990s with the introduction of cultural texts that expressed what this thesis recognizes as a multicultural myth.

One of these cultural texts was *DANCES WITH WOLVES*. The film was hailed by critics as an artistic triumph and proved a commercial success.¹⁴⁷ *DANCES WITH WOLVES* introduced the general public to a new kind of myth by emphasizing the role of Native Americans in the myth of the West. The narrative does not depict the indigenous nations as faceless, barbarous Indians, but as sympathetic, culturally developed Native Americans. On the other hand white culture is portrayed in an unfavorable light.

This ethnical depiction is a clear departure from the ideologies reflected by the self-

glorification and absolution myths, and makes *DANCES WITH WOLVES* an expression of the multicultural myth.

DANCES WITH WOLVES tells the story of Lieutenant John Dunbar who is proclaimed a hero after accidentally leading Union troops to a victory during the Civil War. Instead of wanting promotion he requests a post in the West, because he wants to experience the frontier before it is gone. Dunbar meets a Sioux tribe and soon befriends

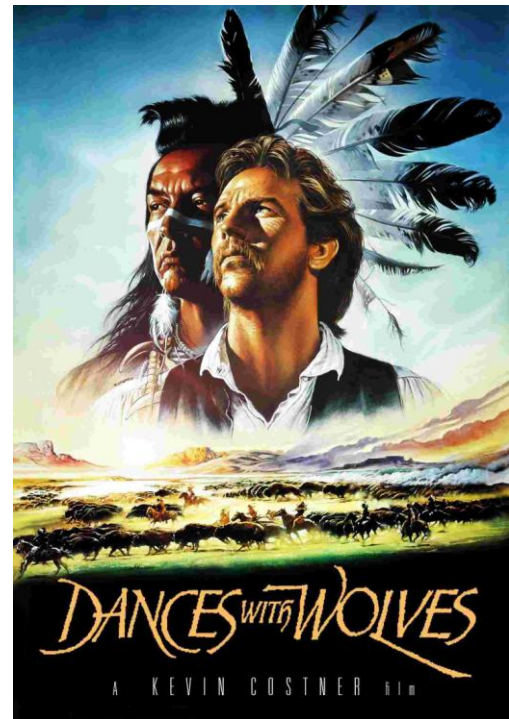


Fig. 3-1. *DANCES WITH WOLVES* theatrical poster. 1990. Courtesy of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios.

¹⁴⁶ Richard White in conversation with the author.

¹⁴⁷ "Dances with Wolves (1990)," [1990] *RottenTomatoes.com*, 11-10-2011, http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/dances_with_wolves/

them.¹⁴⁸ He meets Stands With A Fist, a white woman who was raised by the Sioux, and eventually marries her. Gradually Dunbar earns the respect of the Native American tribe and sheds his white cultural ways.¹⁴⁹

This analysis of *DANCES WITH WOLVES* will focus on three parts: the positive depiction of Native American culture, the negative depiction of white culture, and the eventual clash between the two civilizations. Additionally it will discuss the connection of these elements to American society of the 1990s.

The first element of this analysis is the depiction of Native American culture. The multicultural myth as exemplified by *DANCES WITH WOLVES* depicts Native American culture in great detail. In contrast to earlier myths, the Native Americans are not 'bloodthirsty savages' whose motives for violence are unknown, but a culturally developed people devoted to the protection of their tribe. The tribe John Dunbar encounters makes important decisions through a council and is engaged in the production of art and music. They fight wars with other tribes, indicating that Native Americans are not one homogeneous group, but diversified nations. This detailed depiction evokes audience sympathy for the Native Americans, a sympathy further enhanced by Dunbar's observations.

Upon his first encounter with the Sioux Dunbar writes in his diary that he thinks the Native Americans 'magnificent looking'. This shows open-mindedness toward Native American culture because Dunbar does not instantly label the warriors as 'barbarous'. Eventually he reaches the conclusion:

¹⁴⁸ The film uses the names Sioux and Lakota interchangeably. Lakota are a part of the Confederation of Sioux Tribes. This analysis will use both names as well.

¹⁴⁹ *Dances With Wolves*, Dir. Kevin Costner, Scr. Michael Blake, Act. Kevin Costner, Mary McDonnell and Graham Greene, 1990.

Nothing I have been told about these people is correct. They are not beggars and thieves. They're not the bogeymen they have been made out to be. On the contrary, they are polite guests and have a familiar humor I enjoy.¹⁵⁰

Dunbar makes this statement as a character within the narrative, but through it addresses the audience and comments on the image of the Native American in American popular culture.

A stark contrast is shown between *DANCES WITH WOLVES* and *THE SEARCHERS* when Dunbar finds Stands With A Fist, a white woman that has been raised by Native Americans. Where Ethan Edwards in *THE SEARCHERS* tried to return the white woman to white civilization, Dunbar returns her to the Sioux tribe she came from. Ethan tried to kill his niece when she would not shed her Indian customs, but Dunbar becomes part of the Sioux tribe to which Stands With A Fist belongs. The way the protagonists of both films deal with a similar situation summarizes the contrast between the absolution myth and the multicultural myth. The former tries to eradicate Indian culture while the latter embraces Native American culture and sheds his white cultural practices in the process.

DANCES WITH WOLVES most clearly expresses the multicultural myth when John Dunbar assimilates into the Sioux tribe. Paradoxically a myth inspired by multiculturalism—which advocates cultural diversity instead of assimilation—depicts assimilation into another culture. Dunbar is given his own tipi, dances around the fire at night, and receives an Indian name; *Dances With Wolves*. From this moment Dunbar starts to shed his white culture and turns into a Native American. *DANCES WITH WOLVES* subsequently idealizes the Native American culture as Dunbar writes in his journal: "I've never known a people so eager to laugh, so devoted to family, so dedicated to each other. And the only word that came to mind was harmony."¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ *Dances With Wolves*.

¹⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

The Sioux tribe in *DANCES WITH WOLVES* evokes the image of harmony, pureness and being one with nature. Dunbar is honored that he is part of this tribe. He writes:

I felt a pride I had never felt before. I had never really known who John Dunbar was; perhaps the name itself had no meaning. But as I heard my Sioux name being called over and over, I knew for the first time who I really was.¹⁵²

With Dunbar's devotion to the Sioux tribe his aversion to white civilization grows. Because Dunbar is the protagonist, this is the message the film evokes to the audience. In this way Native American culture becomes a symbol of counter-culture.

In the 1990s Native American culture enjoyed heightened popularity. The multicultural myth reflected as well as influenced this trend. The myth enjoyed popularity partially because the image of the Native American living in harmony with nature, appealed to white Americans in an industrial society. In this way the multicultural myth functioned as escapist entertainment. But this is not the only reason. Inspired by a white guilt driven multiculturalism Native American culture was embraced on a large scale by mainstream American society in the 1990s. The redefinition of Native Americans led to the perception that they represented the 'True Americans', a notion reflected by the multicultural myth.¹⁵³

The popularity of Native American culture in the 1990s led to an increase in numbers of self-declared Indians. On the census questionnaire of 1990 people were asked to self-identify their race, and according to American demographer Jeff Passel, "there has been a clear trend for increasing numbers of those people to answer the race question as

¹⁵² *Dances With Wolves*.

¹⁵³ Baird, 154.

American Indian.”¹⁵⁴ Additionally Native American roots came to be treasured. American historian Robert Hine writes:

By the 1990s an estimated seven million Americans who identify themselves as ‘white’ also claimed descent from at least one Native American ancestor—as President Bill Clinton did when he remarked, during a televised discussion in 1997, that one of his grandmothers had been a quarter Cherokee.¹⁵⁵

Although many Americans—including President Clinton—could not prove such ancestry, these claims reflected a desire to possess Native American roots and to somehow be connected to the American continent. Demographer Ross Baker said in 1991: “It has sort of become neat to be a Native American.”¹⁵⁶

The new popularity of Native American culture not only resulted in claims of ancestry, but also found its way into American politics. In 1990 Congress passed legislation that required all American museums to make an inventory of Native American human remains, sacred artifacts, and cultural objects. Important items would then be returned to tribes that filed a claim for them. Several museums were required to turn over items that they ‘permanently borrowed’ from Native American tribes.¹⁵⁷ Legislation like this reflects an effort of white Americans to reconcile themselves with the Native American Nations. The multicultural myth inspired as well as reflected the changing attitudes of the American nation toward Native Americans. However, the negative aspect of the increased appreciation of Native American culture proved to be the depreciation of white culture.

¹⁵⁴ Dan Frost, “American Indians in the 1990s,” *American Demographics* 13 (December 1991): 21-30, 28.

¹⁵⁵ Hine, 536.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁷ Susan Hazen-Hammond, *Timelines of Native American History* (New York: Perigee Trade, 1997), 305.

The second element of this analysis focuses on the vilification of white culture in the multicultural myth. As a narrative that can be recognized as multicultural myth *DANCES WITH WOLVES* focuses on Native American culture while presenting white culture as antagonist. This is demonstrated by the depiction of major Fambrough—among other instances—who appoints John Dunbar to his post in the West. Fambrough is almost constantly drunk—he is not the only white soldier portrayed drunk in the film—and hereby shows the decadence of white leadership. The major automatically assumes that Dunbar is an ‘Indian fighter’ because he wants to be stationed at the frontier, and puts into words the thought that all white soldiers come to the West to fight Indians. All white characters that John Dunbar encounters in the film hate the Indian tribes. Because the film evokes sympathy for the Native Americans over the course of the narrative this automatically presents the encountered whites as antagonists.

The film elaborates on the viewpoint of the Sioux toward white civilization. Indian warrior Wind In His Hair states at the council:

[The whites] are no Sioux and that makes them less. When I hear that more whites are coming, more than can be counted, I want to laugh. We took a hundred horses from these people, there was no honor in it. They don’t ride well, they don’t shoot well, they’re dirty. They have no women, no children. They could not even make it through one winter in our country. And these people are said to flourish? I think they will all be dead in ten years. The whites are a poor race and it’s hard to understand them.¹⁵⁸

Spoken by one of the main supporting characters in the film these words paint an inferior picture of white civilization. In contrast to this description of white culture, Native American culture is superior. This is a perspective that is predominant throughout the film—and an important characteristic of the multicultural myth—as Dunbar comes to share the claim that whites are inferior. Although *Wind In His Hair* underestimates the

¹⁵⁸ *Dances With Wolves*.

danger of the white race for Sioux survival, Dunbar does not. He recognizes that white domination and greed will eventually consume the Indian tribes.

An example of this is given when Dunbar and the Lakota hunt for buffalo. They chase a large herd, but they eventually arrive at a plains littered with buffalo carcasses. The carcasses are stripped of their hide and tongue. John Dunbar writes: "Who would do such a thing? The field was proof enough it was people without value and without soul. With no regards for Sioux rights. My heart sank as I knew it could only be white hunters."¹⁵⁹ For the Sioux the buffalo were their source of life, not only providing food, but also hides for tents and clothing, and bones for weapons and tools.¹⁶⁰ The white hunters killed large numbers of buffalo only for their hides and tongue to sell. *DANCES WITH WOLVES* leaves little doubt that white greed will be the downfall of the Sioux.

The negative portrayal of white culture reflects white guilt present in American society of the 1990s, but this is not the only cause. The developments American society faced during the 1990s undermined the trust in the dominant white culture. As outlined above, the severe recession at the start of the decade which widened the gap between rich and poor, and the American role in the process of globalization—victimizing American blue collar laborers—made Americans question the superiority of white culture. In this way white cultural superiority—already questioned by multiculturalism—was undermined even further. The multicultural myth connected to these sentiments that were present in American society of the 1990s. This depreciation of white culture in American society inspired the negative portrayal of white culture in the multicultural myth.

These occurrences in American society presented a picture of greed and decadence of the dominant white American culture. It is not surprising that during the 1990s that

¹⁵⁹ *Dances With Wolves*.

¹⁶⁰ Hazen-Hammond, 203.

were characterized by initial economic decline and complicated technology driven globalization, many Americans longed for a simpler life. The multicultural myth presented this simpler, harmonious alternative to white civilization in the glorification of Native American culture.

The final element of this analysis is the clash between Native American- and white civilization. *DANCES WITH WOLVES* can be perceived as multicultural myth when, in the clash between Native American civilization and white culture, John Dunbar takes the side of the Sioux to fight the white soldiers. This indicates that Dunbar favors Native American culture over his 'own' white culture. Because subsequently Dunbar is perceived as Indian the white soldiers take him prisoner. After a failed attempt to explain his situation Dunbar resolves to speak Lakota to the soldiers. He eventually escapes with the help of his Native American friends and is hunted by the American army. However, Dunbar is concerned for the safety of the tribe if he stays with them, but Sioux Chief Ten Bears says: "The man the white soldiers seek doesn't exist anymore. There is only the Sioux that is called Dances With Wolves."¹⁶¹ This indicates that Dunbar has no ties to white civilization anymore and that the white soldiers have become his—as well as the Sioux'—enemies. The theme of turning against white civilization is frequent in the multicultural myth. In this way the myth reflects a contemporary way of thinking that distances itself from white ancestors that made the West a place of conquest and genocide.

When the Native American warriors have killed white soldiers that threaten the tribe, Dunbar states that this was a good thing. He writes in his journal:

I had never been in a battle like this one. There was no dark political objective. This was not a fight for territory, or riches. There had been fought to preserve the food

¹⁶¹ *Dances With Wolves*.

stores that would see us through the winter, to protect the lives of women and children and loved ones only a few feet away.¹⁶²

Dunbar comments on the contrast between the white wars of conquest and greed, motivated by 'dark political objectives', and the justified struggle for self-defense. In contrast with the absolution myth which depicts whites as fighting out of self-defense, it is the Native American nation that fights out of self-defense and for survival. This is a one-sided depiction because historical evidence points out that the Native American tribes occasionally did fight a war of aggression against white Americans. For instance, during the Indian Massacre of 1622, members of the Powhatan Confederacy slaughtered 347 white American settlers in Virginia over a trade disagreement.¹⁶³ This illustrates that not all Native American battles were fought for survival and that wars of conquest were fought by Native Americans as well.

The multicultural myth showed to the American public in the 1990s the 'other side' of the story about the conquest of the West. Although solely emphasizing Native American culture the myth succeeded in creating a new cultural understanding of this civilization. Sioux activist Russell Means comments on the importance of this late twentieth century development: "We alerted the entire world that the American Indians were still alive and resisting. That fact alone is so stupendous it cannot be measured. We're still here, and we're still resisting. John Wayne did not kill us all."¹⁶⁴

DANCES WITH WOLVES is a typical example of the multicultural myth; a white man who falls in love with Native American culture eventually turns on his own white civilization.

¹⁶² *Dances With Wolves*.

¹⁶³ Frederick J. Fausz, "The 'Barbarous Massacre' Reconsidered: The Powhatan Uprising of 1622 and the Historians" *Explorations in Ethnic Studies* 1 (January 1978): 16-36.

¹⁶⁴ William Plummer, "Hearing His Own Drum: Activist Russell Means Dances with Hollywood" *People Magazine* (Los Angeles, CA), Oct 12, 1992.

This myth was created by American filmmakers under the influence of postmodernist thinking and multiculturalism. Postmodernism as articulated by French philosopher Jacques Derrida's deconstruction called for a re-interpretation of existing truths and values. This re-interpretation led to recognition of multiple cultures in American society and the articulation of the concept of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism proclaimed all cultures equal, possessing truth when regarded from a certain perspective.

So how does the multicultural myth reflect American society of the 1990s? Above all, the multicultural myth reflected a changing perception of ethnicity in American society of the 1990s. The re-evaluation of American culture brought new attention to Native Americans and *DANCES WITH WOLVES* reflects as well as inspired this trend. Film scholars called the film a revisionist western because it re-evaluated the conquest of the West and countered decades of white supremacy in the myth of the West. However, the multiculturalism that inspired the multicultural myth—and with it films like *DANCES WITH WOLVES*—is partly created out of white guilt with regard to the American nation's past, and the new westerns reflected this thinking. A sole emphasis on Native American culture, while antagonizing white culture, was the result. Therefore these narratives should be called multicultural myths.

As the narratives of the multicultural myth illustrate, the myth reflected a critical reaction to earlier myths, especially the absolution myth. The brutal West of the self-glorification- and absolution myths was substituted for a place of beauty and harmony. The struggle of Native Americans versus whites, Nature versus Industry, and Sacred Homeland versus Manifest Destiny was now depicted from the viewpoint of the Indian tribes.

The Native Americans as protagonists of the multicultural myth evoked the sympathy of the audience while white culture as antagonist was vilified. The

multicultural myth presented the Native Americans as fighting out of self-defense and the protection of their Sacred Homeland. The Indians as symbol for Nature are depicted as counterculture to white industrial civilization. A counterculture that was not only relevant to American audiences out of white guilt, but also in the light of scandals and problems in American society in the 1990s. The idea of a simple culture of 'noble savages' that lived in peace and harmony appealed to many Americans.¹⁶⁵

However, the emphasis on Native American culture created what Gerald Nash has called 'reverse racism' where all white culture is condemned. The multicultural myth creates new stereotypes in the myth of the West although the roles are now reversed. In its reflected critique on the traditional myth of the West the multicultural myth also presented a picture of the Western myth where certain groups of citizens are marginalized. Only after this realization could a true revisionist myth be attempted that gives voice to multiple cultures in the West, without over-emphasizing a single one. The next chapter will discuss this revisionist myth which appeared in the twenty-first century.

¹⁶⁵ The picture of the 'noble savage' stems from late nineteenth-century ideas that romanticized primitivism.

4

THE REVISIONIST MYTH

At the start of the twenty-first century the myth of the West was at decisive moment in cultural history. The intellectual establishment devoted much time and energy to the critique and demystification of the old myths. The westerns this thesis recognizes as the self-glorification-, the absolution-, and the multicultural myth came to be recognized as unbalanced narratives and therefore undesirable. Cultural historian Richard Slotkin writes: “We are in the process of giving up a myth/ideology that no longer helps us see our way through the modern world, but lack a comparably authoritative system of beliefs to replace what we have lost.”¹⁶⁶ According to Slotkin the giving up of a mythology without replacing it with new beliefs creates a void, as American society will lack—mythical—stories that explain its past and cultural identity. However, Slotkin believes, Americans will never give up their mythology.

History shows that mankind has never ceased to mythologize and mystify the origins of its societies. Critique on existing myths is therefore merely a process of revision

¹⁶⁶ Slotkin, 654.

in which a new narrative will be presented that adapts to modern society.¹⁶⁷ Slotkin argues:

In the long run our choice is not between myth and a world without myth, but between productive revisions of—which open the system and permit it to adjust its beliefs (and the fictions that carry them) to changing realities—and the rigid defense of existing systems, the refusal of change, which binds us to dead or destructive patterns of action and belief that are out of phase with social and environmental reality.¹⁶⁸

The question of choice between the revision of old myths and the defense of the existing systems was answered by the Hollywood western in the twenty-first century. The western was revised once more to the most balanced Western narrative yet attempted by American filmmakers. Although there was no notable decline in the popularity the genre enjoyed during the 1990s, a new myth evolved that differed from the multicultural myth, signifying a new era in the western genre.

The dominant myth that emerged during the first decade of the twenty-first century was the *revisionist myth*. The revisionist myth is defined as a narrative of the West that presents a balanced perspective on the culture of the majority as well as the minority, and seeks to remedy representations that contemporary scholarship perceived as inaccurate. Television series produced by major Hollywood studios became instrumental in popularizing this myth and films followed in its wake. The revisionist myth was expressed by a number of works during the first decade of the twenty-first century including: *DEADWOOD* (David Milch, 2004), *BROKEN TRAIL* (Walter Hill, 2006), *THE ASSASSINATION OF JESSE JAMES BY THE COWARD ROBERT FORD* (Andrew Dominik, 2007), and *TRUE GRIT* (Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, 2010).

¹⁶⁷ Slotkin, 654.

¹⁶⁸ Idem, 654-655.

The revisionist myth reflected contemporary thinking that re-evaluated several aspects of the myth of the West. A major element of revision was the role multiple ethnicities play in the narrative. After the sole emphasis on white culture in American society reflected by the self-glorification- and absolution myths, and as societal reaction to this the focus on minority cultures—especially Native American culture—reflected by the multicultural myth, the revisionist myth reflected an ethnical consideration that walked the fine line between multiple ethnical cultures. Although the revisionist narrative depicts both the majority as well as minority groups, it does not close its eyes for past events that came to be recognized in the twenty-first century as errors committed against minority groups by the white majority. However, neither are these events the exclusive focus of the revisionist myth.

The revisionist myth reflects the critical American perception of the way white Americans have treated Native Americans, but on the other hand leaves room for the glorification of the achievements of the white people that helped settle the West. Native Americans are not elevated to the status of martyrs but neither are they portrayed as villains. This revisionist myth not only provides an adjusted representation of the encounters between whites and Native Americans, but also includes other minority groups like Asian Americans and Mexican Americans.

However, the depiction of ethnicity in the West was not the only aspect that was revised in the new myth, American filmmakers also reconsidered gender. The revisionist myth included strong roles for women. For the first time in the western genre women occupied a central position in the narrative. Even the multicultural myth—that reflected in many ways reactionary thinking with regard to earlier myths—did not redeem women from their status as catalysts for male action. In the revisionist myth women participate in the action, guiding the narrative instead of passively watching it unfold.

The American westerns that this thesis recognizes as revisionist myths preferred realism over romanticism, and this meant a re-evaluation of the traditional glorification of violence in the western. Although the multicultural myth condemned violence, it only did so as a part of white culture of oppression. The revisionist myth shows that violence not only devastates the victim but is destructive to the perpetrator as well. Furthermore its distrust of romanticism led the revisionist myth to a frequent depiction of anti-heroes, and criticism of masculine figures, big business and the American government.¹⁶⁹ Just like American filmmakers had done since the beginning of the western genre contemporary filmmakers attempted to move beyond the concept of 'myth' and present a historically accurate narrative. However, this proved to be an illusion as the revisionist myth simplified just like all other myths had done before.

An example of the revisionist myth is the television mini-series *INTO THE WEST* (William Mastrosimone, 2005). This series tells the myth of the West from multiple perspectives, thus trying to include minority groups alongside the majority. Produced by Steven Spielberg, one of Hollywood's leading filmmakers, *INTO THE WEST* quickly gained recognition among the American public and this makes the series suitable for analysis in this chapter. Within the academic discipline of Film Studies television series are a neglected field of research, therefore little to none has been written about *INTO THE WEST* yet. This thesis seeks to remedy this by presenting an analysis.

In order to adequately analyze *INTO THE WEST* it is necessary to examine the revisionist myth in further detail. Two main intellectual debates influenced the creation of the revisionist myth. The first is a re-interpretation of multiculturalism after the turn of the millennium. As an example the critique of American sociologists Alvin Schmidt and Brian Barry on 1990s multiculturalism will be discussed in this chapter. This critique has

¹⁶⁹ An anti-hero is a flawed protagonist that is in at least some regards the opposite of the archetypal hero.

been an important factor in the re-interpretation of the concept. An essay of American studies scholar Paul Lauter sheds light on what he believes to be the re-interpreted focus of multiculturalism. The second major influence on the revisionist myth is the feminist critique on the myth of the West. Articulated in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the feminist critique paved the way for a western that revised the representation of women. Susan Armitage is one of the leading scholars of the feminist debate about the West and will be discussed in this chapter. What is the relation between these two theoretical discourses and the revisionist myth? The analysis of the revisionist myth in this chapter will provide the answer to this question. It is structured according to these two theoretical discourses.

Multiculturalism Re-interpreted

The revisionist myth evolved from the multicultural myth without an apparent stop in the production of Hollywood westerns. This is no surprise as one of the main debates that influenced the multicultural myth and subsequently the revisionist myth evolved as well. By the end of the 1990s the white guilt inspired multiculturalism was the subject of increased critique. At the dawn of the twenty-first century this critique was a major influence on the re-interpretation of multiculturalism, which subsequently inspired the Hollywood interpretation of the myth of the West.

The critique of American conservative sociologist Alvin Schmidt serves as an example. Schmidt wrote as early as 1997 about what he believed to be the ‘menace of multiculturalism’. He believed the cultural relativism of multiculturalism undermined the ability of the American people to appeal to universal truths and values. Schmidt writes:

Multiculturalism’s values clarification, or multi-morality, is both wrong and dangerous. It preaches that ultimately any behavior is acceptable, as long as it has some group or subcultural support. Thus no group’s or culture’s behavior may be

criticized, much less penalized. The end result of such a system is moral anarchy.¹⁷⁰

According to Schmidt, multiculturalism's perception that all culture is true from a certain perspective leads to a dangerous situation of moral anarchy in which no behavior can be criticized.

Because multiculturalism has always been a liberal ideology it is not surprising that a conservative intellectual like Schmidt disagrees with it. However, at the start of the twenty-first century the sounds of liberal voices critiquing multiculturalism became louder. Important examples are the writings of British sociologist Brian Barry. This prominent liberal critic of multiculturalism recognized the danger of cultural relativism signaled by Alvin Schmidt. Barry attacks cultural relativism by arguing:

It is clear that some societies have created more valuable ideas and artifacts than others. In the same way, we are bound to judge that some cultures are better than others: more just, more free, more enlightened, and generally better adapted to human flourishing.¹⁷¹

It is important to note that a liberal intellectual like Barry recognizes that some societies have more value than others, because they create better conditions for human life. He does not immediately claim that white western culture is superior, but merely signals what he sees as the error of cultural relativism. Additionally, Barry claims that universal values like equality and justice transcend cultural boundaries and are rooted in universal philosophical thinking.¹⁷²

This liberal critique on cultural relativism opened the door for a move beyond white guilt. It became acceptable to recognize the value of white culture for human

¹⁷⁰ Schmidt, 187.

¹⁷¹ Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 267.

¹⁷² Idem, 300-305.

flourishing, without condemning all other cultures or claiming moral superiority. It also removed the need for a sole emphasis on minority cultures and condemning of white culture.

This understanding was influential on the myth of the West and inspired a move away from the multicultural myth to the formulation of what can be recognized as the revisionist myth where white culture can exist alongside minority cultures. A twenty-first century assessment of white culture in the myth of the West shows certain actions against other cultures as wrongdoings. However, it also leaves room for the glorification of great white achievements. According to Richard Slotkin the required new discourse is simple: "praise the achievements, apologize for the injustices."¹⁷³ Re-instating a positive view on white culture in the myth of the West was an important step towards a narrative where all American citizens were included.

The formulation of such a narrative required a move away from 1990s multiculturalists' promotion of cultural diversity. According to critics like Schmidt and Barry, this promotion of cultural diversity revived old prejudices that led to a fragmented society. Barry believes that it is impossible to promote cultural diversity while insisting on universal egalitarianism. He does not mean to say that multiple cultures should not be recognized in society, but only that the way multiculturalism deals with them is undesirable.¹⁷⁴ Barry believes that all cultures within American society should consent to a common law based on universal values, and he rejects the multiculturalist belief that there are no universal cultural truths and values. By recognizing common truths and values distinctive cultures are united by a common principle, which serves to unite American society.

¹⁷³ Richard Slotkin in email-conversation with the author.

¹⁷⁴ Andrew Wright, "The Politics of Multiculturalism" *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 23 (2004): 299-311, 303.

The critique on multiculturalism has been an important influence on the re-interpretation of the concept, for it allowed an appreciation of both majority and minority cultures. American Studies scholar Paul Lauter signals a shift in focus in the debate of multiculturalism at the start of the twenty-first century. Although this shift became explicit after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks it probably was already underway before that event. Multiculturalism's focus shifted from a preoccupation with questions about identity to the problem of immigration. Lauter states:

The issue of multiculturalism was identity: Who are we, and who am I? The issue of immigration is integration and separation: Of what are we—am I—a part, and who decides? The issue is not what constitutes an identity that needs to be respected, but what constitutes a viable political community.¹⁷⁵

Although the questions about identity in a national environment remain of interest, they are now subject to the questions about immigration and the creation of a community in a global environment. This re-interpretation has given an opportunity not to focus on what divides on a national level, but what constitutes and unites a community in the international arena. Although this re-interpreted multiculturalism has led to new forms of exclusion—like the vilification of citizens from countries that are perceived (potentially) dangerous to the United States—it also opened a door for the defragmentation of American society. It no longer focused on diversity in cultural identities, but on the questions of a shared American culture as opposed to the rest of the world.

In the articulation of this shared American culture the revisionist myth plays an important part, and in this way it fulfills its only societal functionality for it serves to unite the American people. Other than to create a shared cultural tradition myths have no

¹⁷⁵ Paul Lauter, "Multiculturalism and Immigration" in *American Multiculturalism after 9/11: Transatlantic Perspectives*, Derek Rubin and Jaap Verheul, eds. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009): 23-34, 23.

societal functionality.¹⁷⁶ Sharing similar stories invokes a sense of cultural belonging and ‘sameness’. The creation of a myth of the West that includes everyone and the acknowledgement of common values invokes the idea of a shared cultural tradition and the sense of a common American identity, the loss of which had been lamented by conservative authors in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁷⁷ This does not mean that the shared cultural tradition as expressed by the revisionist myth closes its eyes for past occurrences which today are considered injustices, nor does it mean that all—in the eyes of contemporary culture—misrepresentations are automatically corrected, but an all-inclusive narrative can serve to create the belief that all Americans are part of a larger whole.

As outlined above, the re-interpretation of multiculturalism influenced the revisionist myth and has led to a more balanced representation of ethnicity than in earlier myths. However, contemporary scholarship has noted that in addition to ethnical minorities, women also were marginalized—and as feminist scholarship claimed; under-represented—in the old myth of the West. The revisionist myth reflected feminist scholarship that sought to expand the role of women in the myth of the West.

Feminism and the West

As previous chapters have argued the myth of the West has always been dominated by the white American male. Up until the multicultural myth women featured in small roles and functioned as catalysts for male action. In their focus to correct the unbalanced representation of ethnical minorities the westerns of the multicultural myth neglected the position of women in the Western myth, that was already considered by feminist scholars as marginalized and stereotypical. Influenced by feminist critique that started in the late

¹⁷⁶ See page 13.

¹⁷⁷ Jaap Verheul and Derek Rubin, eds. *American Multiculturalism after 9/11: Transatlantic Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 9.

1980s and early 1990s, the revisionist myth reflected an attempt to remedy what feminist scholars believed to be the distorted picture of women in the myth of the West.

Until the twenty-first century women had a marginalized role in the Western myth. This may have led to the assumption that few females were present in the American West. American feminist historian Susan Armitage notes:

The gender bias underlying the Western story has led us to believe that the West was built by stalwart men and incidental, unimportant women. The men are so dominant that the women have been all but crowded off the stage.¹⁷⁸

A narrow focus on the white American male may create coherent stories; it also overlooks the complexity of the West. The marginalized role of women in the myth illustrates this fact.

According to feminist scholar Jane Tompkins these male dominated narratives of the West developed in reaction to the domestic, female books that enjoyed great popularity in the Eastern United States at the end of the nineteenth century. Tompkins was one of the first scholars to point out the ongoing importance of women's fiction in the consideration and explanation of American culture. She writes that these women's books "culturally and politically (...) establish women at the center of the world's most important work [spreading Christianity] and assert that in the end spiritual power is always superior to worldly might."¹⁷⁹ A male dominated Western narrative was a reaction to these Eastern female novels according to Tompkins. As the film western was greatly influenced by western novels the male dominated perspective prevailed in the western film genre until the dawn of the revisionist myth.

¹⁷⁸ Armitage and Jameson, 7, 10.

¹⁷⁹ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 38-39.

The consequence of the marginalization of women in the myth of the West should not be overlooked. By excluding women from the myths of national origin, their voice is silenced. If the Western myth is to provide a shared cultural tradition for all Americans it is vital that not only all ethnicities are equally represented, but also both sexes of the majority and minority groups. Only a narrative that includes everyone can serve as a uniting factor among the American people. The revisionist myth attempts to fulfill this uniting function by introducing strong roles for women.

This does not mean that the representation of women in older westerns lacks every connection to the reality of American society. Susan Armitage acknowledges that stereotypes are sometimes partly rooted in reality. She writes: “realizing that every stereotype contains a grain of truth, one can usefully rethink the stereotypes from a women’s perspective.”¹⁸⁰ Although the stereotypes may bear some relation to reality, limiting the representation of women in the West to these depictions contains the risk of simplifying—or indeed over-simplifying—their existence in the West. A rethinking of these stereotypes from a women’s perspective will create more depth in their representation and leads to a more complex understanding of the West.

Armitage stresses that the feminist critique is meant to change the Western narrative and the way the American people think about the myth of the West.¹⁸¹ In resembling this critique the revisionist myth has answered the call to create a myth that includes both sexes in a more balanced representation than earlier myths. Women share the stage with men in the revisionist narrative of the West and thus neither sex is over-emphasized. This revision may be in need of further refinement in due time, but an important first effort is made.

¹⁸⁰ Susan Armitage, “Through Women’s Eyes: A New View of the West” in *The Women’s West*, Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, eds. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987): 9-18, 12.

¹⁸¹ Idem, 4-6.

With the revision of women's roles and a balanced ethnical representation the western genre has changed a few elements of the mythical West that are considered misrepresentations in the twenty-first century. The myth of the West is now more inclusive than ever before. However, how does the revisionist myth create a shared cultural tradition for the American people? And how does it relate to American society of the twenty-first century? An analysis of *INTO THE WEST* will illustrate the revisionist myth and its societal connection.

Case Study: INTO THE WEST

A brief overview of the main developments in twenty-first century American society is relevant for this analysis. These developments will be connected to the revisionist myth later in this chapter. American society in the first decade of the twenty-first century was characterized by international struggle and economic hardships. On September 11, 2001, the United States entered a new era as suicide attacks by militant Muslim extremists killed nearly 3000 citizens. This proved to be the biggest terrorist attack in American history. President George W. Bush retaliated with a War on Terror in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, not all Americans supported Bush' War on Terror and especially the Iraq war was extremely controversial, dividing the American population.

The September 11 attacks and following wars re-ignited the debate about ethnicity, American identity, and multiculturalism. As outlined above, it made explicit a shift in focus of multiculturalism that was already underway before 2001. The United States in the twenty-first century were more ethnically diversified than ever before. In 2007 the American population included 3 million Native Americans, 40 million African Americans,

15 million Asian Americans, and 46 million Latino Americans.¹⁸² Together these four minority groups accounted for 34.5 percent of the American population. In a society this diversified a debate about ethnicity was inevitable. That this debate was fruitful and that American society made progress with regard to the questions about ethnicity was illustrated by the 2008 election of Barack Obama as the first African American President of the United States.

However, other difficulties ensued as the American economy tumbled into crisis in 2008 igniting a worldwide economic decline. The economic struggles were preceded by and existed alongside growing American concerns about the environmental destruction the American economy caused. These developments did not paint an optimistic picture for the future and—perhaps instead—some Americans turned to the nation's past for inspiration.

In 2005 one of the Hollywood titans, Steven Spielberg, made a venture into the western genre. He produced the television series INTO THE WEST. This groundbreaking narrative—as well as other narratives that qualify as revisionist myths—was presented as a television series. At the start of the twenty-first century Hollywood executives had grown weary of taking huge financial risks on experimental films and television



Fig. 4-1. INTO THE WEST television poster. 2005. Courtesy of DreamWorks Television.

¹⁸² David Mauk and John Oakland, *American Civilization: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 94, 100, 105.

stepped in to produce groundbreaking work.¹⁸³ Therefore a mini-series instead of a film will serve as an example of the revisionist myth in this chapter.

As a television series INTO THE WEST has the advantage to be able to tell an epic narrative from multiple angles. The series depicts the story of two families in the American West. One is a white family of wheelwrights, aptly called the Wheelers, and the other is a Lakota family. These two families experience the settling of the West between 1820 and 1890. As more white settlers arrive in the West and change its original surroundings, the Native American culture is overwhelmed and ultimately reduced to a shadow of its former existence. Perceived through the eyes of white settlers as well as Native Americans, INTO THE WEST tries to present a balanced narrative, without ignoring actions by both cultures that today qualify as wrongdoings.¹⁸⁴

The revisionist myth contains many elements of earlier myths in a modified form. This analysis of INTO THE WEST will interpret the series in terms of the revisionist myth. It will focus on four key themes of the Hollywood western and the way they are revised; ethnicity, white achievement, conquest, and gender.

After the exclusive emphasis on white culture in the self-glorification and absolution myths and the emphasis on Native Americans in the multicultural myth, the revisionist myth offers a more balanced depiction of *ethnicity* than earlier myths. In INTO THE WEST the Lakota and Cheyenne tribes are carefully depicted in great detail. The Native American characters speak their own dialect and spiritual customs as well as cultural customs of hunting, courting and making war receive attention. For instance, the Lakota frequently make war with the Crow tribe. This shows the diversity among Native

¹⁸³ It is easier to make a television series profitable because of extended international syndication and home entertainment profits.

¹⁸⁴ *Into the West*, Dir. Robert Dornhelm, Tim van Patten et. al., Scr. William Mastrosimone, Act. Matthew Settle, Tonantzin Carmelo, Michael Spears, and Rachael Leigh Cook, 2005.

Americans and undermines the assumption that they are one homogeneous people. The development of Native American characters invokes the audience's sympathy and creates an understanding for Native American culture.

Instead of solely focusing on the development of Native American culture, INTO THE WEST as revisionist myth focuses on white American culture as well. By depicting the same cultural practices with both Native American and white culture a deeper understanding of both cultures is reached. For instance, in the first episode the custom of a family dinner is depicted. During both meals a young man stands up to his grandfather but is silenced by other family members. By showing that whites and Native Americans do not differ with regard to these small things INTO THE WEST creates an understanding that both ethnical groups have more in common than they initially may have thought.

In addition to the depiction of the two main ethnicities in the West—Native American and white—INTO THE WEST also acknowledges the role of other minorities in the story of the West. For example, the wagon train that sets out to settle new lands in the West contains a black former slave family and Irish immigrants are shown helping the construction of the transcontinental railroad. Where THE IRON HORSE as self-glorification myth ignored Asian Americans in the process of building the railroad, INTO THE WEST revises this representation and develops several Chinese characters. Asian Americans are also shown as part of the 1848 California Gold Rush. In this way the revisionist myth of the West includes multiple ethnicities.

At the same time INTO THE WEST shows the racism that was common in the West. Some whites call Native Americans 'Godless savages' or 'heathens', while Asian Americans are perceived by Irish immigrants as 'half-made men'. A group of Chinese believes that Indians eat humans and a Native American character calls the whites weak, and lacking masculinity. INTO THE WEST always makes an effort to present multiple

perspectives on ethnicity. For instance, when some whites are racist, others are not. In this way the series makes mention of racism in the West, but condemns it by voice of other characters. Additionally it shows that racism was not only present among white settlers, but among other ethnic groups as well.

By making an effort to present a balanced picture with regard to ethnicity the makers of INTO THE WEST tried to create a story that includes as much Americans as possible.¹⁸⁵ This is demonstrated by what one of the main characters, Jacob Wheeler, says: “You can’t forget we’re all part of the same wheel, the hubs and the spokes and the felloes. You break one, and you break the wheel.”¹⁸⁶ The emphasis on unity and interdependence enhances the idea that the narratives that this thesis recognizes as revisionist myths can serve as a shared cultural tradition to unite the American people, instead of creating division.

At the start of the twenty-first century the revisionist myth—in contrast to earlier monocultural myths—was relevant to contemporary audiences because, as discussed above, the American population was more diverse than ever. Because of this substantial cultural diversity a shared cultural tradition with common truths, values, and myths could serve to unify the American people. In the decades to come the United States will presumably become a nation of minorities, where no single ethnicity dominates. In this environment it is important to seek elements that unite a diversified American nation. The re-interpretation of multiculturalism after 2000 as discussed above illustrates this belief and the revisionist myth connects to it as well. Although still in its early stages the myth tries to speak to contemporary American citizens by presenting a narrative of inclusion, instead of exclusion. It may be so that the revisionist myth leaves much to be desired, but the all important first steps toward inclusion are taken.

¹⁸⁵ Director Timothy Van Patten in an interview that aired on TNT, July 22, 2005.

¹⁸⁶ *Into the West*.

Part of this inclusion means the re-acknowledgement of *white achievements* in the narrative of the West. After the condemning all white culture in the multicultural myth, the revisionist myth allows for a revaluation of white progress. In INTO THE WEST this white American progress is symbolized by the wheel. Wheels bring the wagon trains of the early settlers to the West. The series acknowledges that the settlers overcome impossible odds to reach California and their eventual success is perceived as a great triumph.

Wheels are also essential to the success of the transcontinental railroad. The completion of this railway is a source of glorification in INTO THE WEST. When the transcontinental railroad is finished one of the overseers proclaims: "We are a great people and we can accomplish great things!"¹⁸⁷

However, where the self-glorification myth celebrated only white American contributions to the settling of the West, the revisionist myth acknowledges the work of ethnic minorities as well. In the case of the transcontinental railway the work of Asian Americans gets attention. In this way white progress becomes part of *American* progress that includes ethnicities other than white.

According to Richard Slotkin it is this American progress that makes the myth of the West in its revised form relevant to the American people after 2000. He argues: "The revisionist western's persistence is a sign that American culture is still invested in the vision of progress through the discovery or invention of rich new resources, and triumph over enemies."¹⁸⁸ In its celebration of American achievements the revisionist myth is part of a larger trend in American society in the twenty-first century and in this way connects to the society of its time.

After 2000 the celebration of past American progress has frequently found its way into American political rhetoric. For example, President Barack Obama commented on

¹⁸⁷ *Into the West*.

¹⁸⁸ Richard Slotkin in email-conversation with the author.

September 22, 2011, on the need for infrastructure improvements to rebuild the American economy. He said:

We used to have the best infrastructure in the world here in America. We're the country that built the Transcontinental Railroad, the Interstate Highway System and the Hoover Dam. How can we now sit back and let China build the best railroads? And let Europe build the best highways? At a time when we've got millions of unemployed construction workers out there just ready to get on the job, ready to do the work of rebuilding America.¹⁸⁹

Obama refers among other examples to the transcontinental railroad to praise American ingenuity. He draws on the myth of the West to reinforce his contemporary position on infrastructure. Historian Richard White recognizes a trend in Obama's speeches to use the transcontinental railroad as an example or metaphor. He writes: "In Obama's rhetoric the transcontinental railroad stands for American ingenuity, it stands for American initiative and it stands for the American ability to go ahead against all odds."¹⁹⁰ Obama's use of the myth of the West is but one example from contemporary American politics showing that American achievements from the past are worthy of praise.

However, the revisionist myth does not merely praise white American progress as part of American progress, but it also presents a more complex perspective on it. The self-glorification myth ignored negative aspects of progress in the West, but the revisionist myth does examine these aspects. In *INTO THE WEST* the episode about the railroad is titled 'Hell on Wheels', referring to the mobile towns that existed around the railroad construction sites. Jacob Wheeler says: "Carnivorous swarms followed the railroad workers every step of the way, devouring their weekly pay faster than grasshoppers"¹⁹¹ This illustrates that the series examines the corrupting influence of progress in the West

¹⁸⁹ "The White House Blog" [2011] *Whitehouse.gov*, 02-11-11, <http://m.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/09/22/president-obama-its-time-build-economy-lasts>

¹⁹⁰ Richard White in conversation with the author.

¹⁹¹ *Into the West*.

and this contrasts with the self-glorification myth about the railroad, THE IRON HORSE. Additionally, the series depicts the destructing influence of greed and corruption on white families during the California Gold Rush and the environmental destruction white progress brings.

This sentiment of the revisionist myth connected to the rising awareness among the American people in the twenty-first century that progress had its price and its limits. Progress in transportation and technology erased the geographical boundaries that used to protect the United States—as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and international cyber crime of the twenty-first century illustrated. The greed of bankers and American businesses led to a severe economic crisis in 2008, and growing concerns about the environment showed that American progress—although from one perspective desirable and admirable—endangered a sustainable future. This does not mean that all American progress—past and present—should be condemned, but a complex understanding of it is needed and the revisionist myth reflects this understanding. The winning of one thing—for instance, technological progress—may mean the loss of another—like safety and a sustainable future.

This duality of the West is particularly evident in the theme of '*conquest*' of the West. From a white perspective the winning of the West is a magnificent achievement that expanded and settled American soil. However, from a Native American point of view the 'winning' of the West is a tragic loss. Richard White comments on this complexity in the narrative of the West, saying: "Not everyone can succeed in the West, nor is it necessarily the best for all concerned if one party succeeds. The West is much more complicated than that."¹⁹²

¹⁹² *The West*.

White illustrates that the West was never a place of true egalitarianism, because contradicting interests ultimately resulted in conflict and eventually conquest.

INTO THE WEST incorporates perspectives from Native Americans and whites to show that the possibilities for one group often mean the end of possibilities for another. The gradual domination of whites in the West spells out the downfall of Native American tribes. The series can be seen as a revisionist myth because it does not present a black-and-white perspective on this conquest of the West, but attempts to construct a nuanced picture. In this way it differs significantly from the absolution myth and the multicultural myth.

INTO THE WEST does not place the blame for the violence between whites and Native Americans on a single ethnicity, but holds racists or irresponsible individuals accountable for the violent clash of cultures in the West. Cheyenne chief Black Kettle sums up the way INTO THE WEST perceives the American-Indian Wars when he says: "There are bad white men, and there are bad Indians. Bad men on both sides. They have brought about this trouble."¹⁹³ This is exemplified by an occurrence when the United States cavalry massacres an entire Native American village because a drunken interpreter fails to adequately translate the conversation. INTO THE WEST does not close its eyes for the violence in the West, but never blames an entire culture for the actions of individuals or groups it considers reprehensible. For example, the series acknowledges that the American government has mistreated the American Indians, but makes clear that not all white individuals approved of this treatment of the indigenous population.

This nuanced perspective on past American conflict was relevant to audiences in the first decade of the twenty-first century, because after 9/11 the United States became engaged in several controversial wars. President George W. Bush started the Afghanistan

¹⁹³ *Into the West*.

War in 2001 followed by the Iraq War in 2003. These conflicts deeply divided the American population as their justness was disputed. This was no war fought along clear-cut ideological lines. President Bush was blamed for demonizing large groups within the Muslim world as well as damaging the American image abroad.¹⁹⁴

Many postmodern Americans made a distinction between militant organizations and the countries they operated in or the religion they used to justify their terrorist acts. The condemning of the former did not mean an automatic aversion to the latter. Critics of the wars made an effort to proclaim to the world that the Bush administration did not represent the viewpoint of all American citizens and that a nuanced perspective on the United States was required.¹⁹⁵ The revisionist myth connected to post- 9/11 American society because it showed that—just like contemporary American conflicts—the narrative of the West is a complex one in need of a balanced perspective. It also demonstrated that it is possible to create a national myth that presents a balanced perspective on past events, and that eventually individuals or groups will be held responsible for their actions.

Because the makers of the revisionist myth attempted a more complex myth of the West the simplicity of traditional *gender* roles was modified. Creating a narrative of inclusion meant that the American male had to share the stage with women. Although masculinity is still an important part of the myth of the West the revisionist myth included strong female roles.

In INTO THE WEST two types of women have a central role in the narrative. The first is a self-reliant woman that has much in common with the western male heroes. An example of this type of female role is the Native American woman Thunder Heart

¹⁹⁴ Jim A. Kuypers, *Bush's War: Media Bias and Justifications for War in a Terrorist Age* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 182-189.

¹⁹⁵ Idem, 190-197.

Woman, who is married to protagonist Jacob Wheeler. When Jacob is forced to leave home for a while she opens a business for gold prospectors. When men behave rude or fail to pay their debts she disciplines them with a shotgun and in this way resembles traditional male gunslingers.¹⁹⁶

The second type is the re-interpretation of a domestic stereotype. Clara Wheeler, Jacob's Cousin, runs a household and part-time teaches white and Native American children. She is not self-reliant but depends on her husband to provide for her. However, by developing her character and presenting her perspective on the events in the American West, a female viewpoint is added to the Western myth, making it more complex. In this way *INTO THE WEST* resembles the critique of Susan Armitage who advocated this rethinking of women's stereotypes.

With a revised depiction of women in the West the revisionist myth connected the myth of the West to female audiences in the twenty-first century. Women had already emancipated to a large extent in the twentieth century through three waves of feminism. The first wave of feminism in the 1920s had secured women's suffrage, while the second wave in the 1960s and 1970s focused on women's reproductive rights. The third feminist wave that arose during the late 1980s challenged traditional notions of femininity. These waves of emancipation—especially the latter—redefined American family structures. For instance, at the start of the twenty-first century one third of all American children were born to unmarried women.¹⁹⁷

Many emancipated American women took up jobs outside of the traditional domestic sphere. In 1975 46 percent of the American women over 16 years old participated in the labor force, and in 2005 this number had risen to 59 percent. Nearly 66

¹⁹⁶ *Into the West*.

¹⁹⁷ Norton, 977.

million American women were employed in 2005.¹⁹⁸ Yet despite these forms of emancipation the role of women in the myth of the West had always remained small. INTO THE WEST demonstrates how the revisionist narratives alter the traditionally marginal representation of women and give them a place in a national myth of origin.

INTO THE WEST offers multiple perspectives on the settling of the American West, and as such it is a good example of the revisionist myth. Inspired by a re-interpreted multiculturalism and feminist thinking with regard to the West the revisionist myth presented a myth of the West that included as many Americans as possible. In doing so it revised familiar themes that were present in earlier myths.

An important revision was the balancing of ethnicity. After the white supremacy of the self-glorification- and absolution myths and the sole emphasis on Native Americans in the multicultural myth, the revisionist myth reflected a perspective on American society that advocated the coexistence multiple ethnicities, both of the majority as well as the minority cultures. By presenting a balanced ethnical perspective on the narrative of the West the revisionist myth showed that no entire culture should be condemned because of the actions of certain groups or individuals that contemporary society considers morally reprehensible. In this way the revisionist myth added depth and complexity to the understanding of the West.

The re-interpretation of multiculturalism allowed for a move beyond white guilt and a revaluation of white achievements, making it part of not specifically white, but *American* progress. Although the self-glorification myth also celebrated American progress the revisionist myth offers a more complex understanding of it. The self-

¹⁹⁸ "Employment Status of Women and Men in 2005" [2005] *United States Department of Labor Homepage*, 08-02-2011,
<http://www.dol.gov/wb/factsheets/Qf-ESWM05.htm>

glorification myth merely celebrated white achievements, while the revisionist myth not only includes and glorifies the action of non-white Americans, but presents a perspective on the negative aspects of progress as well.

The revisionist myth does not ignore negative aspects of white presence in the West. For instance, the narratives of the myth comment on what they perceive as the ill treatment of Native American tribes. However, this treatment is not necessarily the responsibility of the American nation as a whole, but rather what the revisionist myth considers to be the poor judgments of individuals or organizations.

One of the last major representations the revisionist myth altered was the position of women in the myth of the West. Often marginalized or ignored, women received more elaborate treatment in this new myth. Strong female roles served to expand the perspective on the West, connect the myth to contemporary female audiences, and create a more complex understanding of the West.

The myth of the West is still relevant to contemporary American audiences. For instance, the theme of American progress in the West is often used in American political rhetoric in the twenty-first century. The revisionist myth's complex understanding of the negative aspects of progress connected to contemporary growing concerns about safety, greed and environmental destruction. It is not surprising that the western regained popularity in the twenty-first century as this was an uncertain period for the United States with regard to its future and self-image. The western served as America's ultimate origin myth and proclaimed the concept of the United States as a country of rugged individualists as an enduring one.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁹ Sarah Hughes, "Return of the TV Western," *The Independent*, 22-11-2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/return-of-the-tv-western-6262188.html>

A complex understanding of the myth of the West reflects to the complexity of American society of the twenty-first century. American society was more ethnically diverse than ever before in American history and this diversity enhanced the cry of intellectuals for a shared cultural tradition to connect and unify Americans. The revisionist myth can fulfill this role by creating a narrative of inclusion and thus becoming important to and staying relevant for the American people. Richard White states:

There are stories that become more American than other stories because we tell them as stories which can include all of us. It's the sense that, in a country where there's so much that divides us, there can be some experience out there which we all share. It may be an illusion—it probably is an illusion. There is no single experience in the West or any place else. But we fight so much about those stories because those stories deeply matter—not because of what happened in the West, but what happens right now, what matters right now. That's the important thing.²⁰⁰

In this way the myth of the West still has an important function in collective American thinking at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

²⁰⁰ *The West*.

~~CONCLUSION~~

It has been more than a century since the myth of the West was first introduced on film. During four periods in the genre's history the western was part of the 'A' productions the American film industry released yearly: the Silent Era: 1903-1931, the Golden Age of the western: 1939-1973, the 1990s, and the Post 9/11 Era. Influenced by theoretical discourses and societal developments Hollywood's depiction of the the myth of the West during these four periods evolved. But how has Hollywood's interpretation of the myth of the West and its reflection of American society changed? What was the impact of societal debates and changing cultural values on the development of the western? Important in the debates that influenced the evolving western genre are questions about assimilation and integration. As the four cultural texts discussed in this thesis indicate, the changing cultural values—especially with regard to integration and assimilation—are reflected by the western genre. As representatives of four different myths these cultural texts are signifiers of evolving cultural values and developments in American society.

This thesis sought to introduce and defend a model which allows the evolution of the Hollywood western to be categorized into four major myths. Each of these myths is connected to one of the periods in which the western enjoyed heightened popularity.

Examining the western genre through this model sheds new light on the American cultural values that inspired and are reflected by the various myths.

The *self-glorification myth* that rose to prominence during the Silent Era celebrated white American achievements on the frontier. It resembled Frederick Jackson Turner's belief that the frontier had the potential for the display of American cultural values. The frontier tested the self-reliance of the people living there. Self-reliance as articulated by Turner is one of the elements of the concept of American exceptionalism that inspired the self-glorification myth. American exceptionalism emphasizes the uniqueness of the American nation and the self-glorification myth can be seen as the visualization of this theoretical concept.

THE IRON HORSE illustrates this myth as it glorifies the construction of the transcontinental railroad. By showing the sheer scale of the undertaking the film celebrates American achievement. The railroad is a symbol of progress, industrialization, and modernity the American people bring to the West. The film ignores negative aspects—for instance, environmental destruction or the corrupting influence of old style European power that the railroad brings—of the coming of progress to the West, lest it should detract from the glory of the American nation.

With this celebration of progress THE IRON HORSE reflects American society of the 1920s. This period was characterized by technological advancement in the United States. The railroad in the film can be seen as metaphor for the progress in American society. American industry exchanged the steam engine driven machinery for that powered by electricity. Progress showed as the United States emerged out of World War I as the world's largest economy. For the first time in history the United States had surpassed Europe in economic power. The self-glorification myth which celebrated white American

achievement and stressed American exceptionalism resounded well with American audiences during this time of advancement.

However, THE IRON HORSE is selective in its celebration of the American people, as only *white* American achievements were celebrated. THE IRON HORSE ignored the contributions of non-white ethnicities to the settling of the West. This is true for all narratives this thesis recognizes as self-glorification myths. The omission of non-whites in the self-glorification myth reflects the social circumstances of ethnical minorities in the 1920s. Racism and segregation was very present in 1920s United States. The self-glorification myth reflects an American society that was not willing and ready to accept non-white ethnical minorities among its ranks. If contemporary society does not accept ethnical minorities, it almost certainly denies them a positive place in the stories that society tells about its past.

Questions about assimilation and integration became even more apparent in the *absolution myth* that was dominant during the Golden Age of the Western. The absolution myth depicted the West as the stage for an ideological struggle between the white American civilization and the ‘barbarous’ Indians. The Indians in this myth are a symbol of all cultures that do not resemble white Anglo-Saxon culture. A major influence on the absolution myth was the ideology of Manifest Destiny, which served to rationalize and justify the manner in which white settlers dealt with Native American tribes.

THE SEARCHERS is an example of the absolution myth. The narrative of a girl kidnapped by Indians and her uncle who pursues in order to bring her back to white civilization symbolizes the ideological struggle between non-white and white culture. The whites in this story, among which protagonist Ethan Edwards, are victimized and as such invoke the audience’s sympathy. Edwards is racist and does everything in his power to

eradicate Native American culture. The audience sympathizes with Edwards and thus the message of *THE SEARCHERS* becomes one of white cultural supremacy.

THE SEARCHERS reflects American society of the 1950s in different ways. First, the Cold War struggles made the film relevant to American audiences in the 1950s, as this war proved to be an ideological struggle as well. The 'battle' between American capitalism and Soviet communism called for a spread of American cultural values around the globe in order to contain communism. The concept of Manifest Destiny is as applicable to this era as it was in the Old West. The United States, convinced of its cultural superiority, fought the spread of communism by promoting—its own—civilization abroad.

Second, with its white supremacy sentiments *THE SEARCHERS* reflects the racism and segregation that still prevailed in American society on the eve of the Civil Rights era. *THE SEARCHERS*, as well as other narratives that can be recognized as absolution myths, reflects a clear statement about who belongs to the American society. Non-white ethnicities cannot assimilate or integrate into white society, because they will never be fully like white Americans. If the reality that is American society does not accept ethnical minorities it will not give non-white minorities a positive place in the myths that explain that society. Ethnical minorities in these myths functioned only as the 'other' against which white superiority could be measured. The absolution myth reaffirmed white superiority and—implicitly—justified the way American settlers had dealt with Native Americans.

Postmodernist thinking with regard to ethnicity paved the way for a new myth that contrasted with the multiple decades of white supremacy in the myth of the West. In the early 1990s Hollywood introduced the *multicultural myth*. Influenced by post-

modernism the multicultural myth questioned the grand narrative of the West and depicted the West from the viewpoint of Native Americans.

One of the examples of the multicultural myth is *DANCES WITH WOLVES*. In many ways this film is the opposite of *THE SEARCHERS*. Where *THE SEARCHERS* is concerned with white cultural supremacy, *DANCES WITH WOLVES* argues Native American cultural superiority. This is manifested in the way the protagonists behave. For instance, in *THE SEARCHERS* the protagonist tries to 'rescue' a white woman from an Indian tribe, while in *DANCES WITH WOLVES* the protagonist returns a white woman he encounters to the Native American tribe she grew up in.

In earlier myths—including *THE SEARCHERS*—Indians were usually depicted as antagonists that threatened the success of the white American undertaking in the West. In *DANCES WITH WOLVES* the Native Americans are depicted as a culturally developed people and eventually white Americans become antagonists.

The contrast between *THE SEARCHERS* and *DANCES WITH WOLVES* signifies the changing perception of ethnicity and views on integration in American society in the 1990s. *DANCES WITH WOLVES* reflects the multiculturalist thinking that was predominant in American society of the 1990s. Multiculturalism was a major influence on American self-perception during this period. It sparked a new appreciation of minority cultures, especially Native American culture. For instance, many Americans claimed to be related to Native American tribes. Another example is that the United States government issued legislation which required museums to turn over sacred Native American artifacts to Indian tribes.

DANCES WITH WOLVES' theme of a white protagonist that joins the Native Americans to fight his own white civilization reflects the attitude towards white culture in the 1990s. The film resembles multiculturalism, and this theoretical discourse was

inspired by white guilt with regard to the nation's past. This guilt, which DANCES WITH WOLVES reflects, led to an exclusive emphasis on Native American culture and subsequent condemnation white culture. It creates a narrative where the Native American culture could do no wrong, while white culture could do no right. Gerald Nash calls this 'inverse racism' which creates new stereotypes of both groups and that led to what he calls a distorted picture of the West. Many white multiculturalists of the 1990s recognized Native Americans as part of American society, but were reluctant to include the majority culture for fear of white cultural domination. The acceptance and integration of minority groups into American society meant the exclusion of majority culture by members – white multiculturalists – of that majority culture.

In the 1990s Native Americans became a symbol of counterculture and everything white culture was not. During this period white culture faced several problems. The decade started with a severe economic crisis. When economic growth finally ensued it enhanced the process of globalization which victimized part of the American workforce. Additionally, the American government was plagued by problems in the early 1990s and scandals in the latter half of the decade. These events undermined the feelings of white cultural superiority that existed during the Silent Era and the Golden Age. This depreciation of white culture is reflected by the negative portrayal of white culture in the multicultural myth. Many Americans found in Native American culture a simple and harmonious alternative.

The *revisionist myth* that became prominent at the start of the twenty-first century presented a narrative that included many Americans. Inspired by a re-interpretation of multiculturalism the revisionist myth presented a more balanced and complex perspective on ethnicity in the West than earlier myths had done. This meant the

inclusion of both white Americans and Native Americans as well as other minority groups.

American society was more ethnically diverse than ever at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Yet, minority groups had equal rights and were more or less integrated into American society. The revisionist myth reflected these social developments by presenting a narrative that included everyone. In this way the myth fulfilled its only societal functionality which is to unify the American people in a shared cultural tradition. The revisionist myth consisted of key themes of the western in a modified interpretation to suit modern audiences.

The television series INTO THE WEST is an example of what this thesis recognizes as revisionist myths. The series tells the story of the West from the perspective of both white culture as well as Native American culture. INTO THE WEST reflected a move beyond white guilt in American society, which created the possibility for a revaluation of white achievements. That American society in the twenty-first century was ready to move beyond white guilt was also illustrated by the frequent use of the theme of American progress in the West in American political rhetoric. However, this time in the celebration of past achievements—both in political rhetoric as well as in INTO THE WEST—ethnic minorities were recognized as well, thus making white progress in the West part of *American* progress, which includes everyone.

With a balanced ethnical perspective on the West INTO THE WEST does not ignore actions committed against minority groups considered in contemporary American society as ‘white atrocities’. The series comments on these events but never blames the entire white culture for them. Rather the erroneous treatment of minority groups is blamed on individuals and organizations. INTO THE WEST demonstrates the complexity that lies behind the deeds committed by some whites and some Native Americans. It presents a

complex perspective on the settling of the West where the opening of possibilities for one group means the end of them for others.

This complex perspective of the revisionist myth—as illustrated by *INTO THE WEST*—on the conquest of the West reflects the complex perspective many Americans had on contemporary conflicts in which the United States was engaged. Many American citizens moved beyond an ideological simplification of wars and conflicts and instead developed complex perspectives on them.

Finally, *INTO THE WEST* altered the representation of women in the myth of the West. The traditionally male dominated Western narrative made room for stronger female representation. Influenced by feminist critique on the Western myth, *INTO THE WEST* included strong roles for women. It shows women on the frontier that are self-reliant and re-thinks female stereotypes. Both types of female representation ensure more screen time for women and a more complex perspective on the West. With the inclusion of strong women roles *INTO THE WEST* connected the revised myth of the West to an emancipated female audience of the twenty-first century. Although women always were a part of American society the myth of the West now reflected their assimilated and emancipated position.

The model presented in this thesis shows how the Hollywood myth of the West has evolved over time and has eventually become more inclusive with regard to ethnicity and sexes. Additionally it shows how the Hollywood western increasingly communicates a more complex understanding of the West. The model reflects the changing perception of identity, integration, and assimilation in American society. Although in most cases the western did not spark this change in perception—for the myths reflect societal or academic debates—it did strengthen these sentiments. The film western—as a mass

medium—was able to bring the evolving myth of the West to a wide audience, and thus served as a popular cultural expression of theoretical debates.

As of 2012 Hollywood's myth of the West is very much alive. Recent successes of *3:10 TO YUMA* (James Mangold, 2007) and *TRUE GRIT* (Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, 2010) have illustrated that the American people are still invested in the Western myth. Hollywood studios are keeping up with demand as this year multiple western television series are set to air. NBC has ordered three, while other major networks have at least one on their slate.²⁰¹ Several influential Hollywood directors are currently directing westerns, among them; Quentin Tarantino who works on *DJANGO UNCHAINED*, set for a 2012 release and Gore Verbinski, directing a 2013 release of *THE LONE RANGER*.

The western genre has always evolved and a continuation of the production of westerns will mean a further evolution of it in the decades to come. New academic debates and societal developments will modify the current revisionist take on the myth of the West. American society continues to change and as historian John Lenihan states; "the western has seldom been far out of step."²⁰²

Further research on the western could focus on this continuing development of the Hollywood western. The model presented in this thesis can serve as a starting point for the consideration of the westerns in future decades. However, this model need not be limited to the film western alone. If refined and expanded it can be used to analyze other cultural expressions of the myth of the West, like photography, literature, and theater. The terminology introduced here can be useful in presenting a new perspective on the representation of the West and the American cultural values it reflects.

²⁰¹ Hughes.

²⁰² John H. Lenihan, "Westbound: Feature Films and the American West" in *Wanted Dead or Alive: The American West in Popular Culture*, Richard Aquila, ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996): 109-134, 133.

This re-examination of the myth of the West is important in order to gain a greater understanding of the relation between American culture and national myths. As the myth of the West has never been nor will it be static, the research with regard to it is never finished. Richard White comments: "This revisioning and reimagining of the West is never complete and we must continue to examine critically the region, its mythical representation, and its multiple relations with both nation and world."²⁰³ The American West has been a place of drama, progress, and myth for the American people and as such carries a tremendous emotional weight. It has become the repository of all the dreams, hopes and aspirations of the American people and symbolizes the belief that somewhere over the horizon it is going to be better than at the present place. The West still has this mythical characteristic and this makes it unique in American history.

²⁰³ White, 629.

-APPENDIX-

This table shows the evolution of the main themes of the myth of the West as depicted in various myths of the Hollywood western.

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Self-glorification myth</i>	<i>Absolution myth</i>	<i>Multicultural myth</i>	<i>Revisionist myth</i>
Ethnicity	Main focus on white ethnicity while ignoring non-white minorities.	White supremacy, vilification of non-whites, especially Native Americans.	Focus on Native Americans, vilification of whites.	Balanced perspective, focus on white as well as Native American culture and the inclusion of other minorities like Asian Americans and Mexican Americans.
White American achievement	Sole focus on white American exceptionalism while ignoring contributions made by minorities.	White cultural superiority, while actively depicting minorities as inferior.	Ignored or vilified.	Acknowledgement of white achievements, alongside contributions of minorities. Additionally an assessment of negative aspects of progress.
Conquest of the West	Primarily by means of progress. Limited violent action against other cultures.	Victimization of whites, placing violence against Native Americans in a context of self-defense. Result is conquest without guilt.	Victimization of Native Americans, and vilification of all white violence.	Complex perspective acknowledging wrongdoing by both Native Americans and whites. Taking blame for eradication of many Native American tribes.
Gender	White American male as bringer of progress and achievement. Marginalization of women.	White American male as harbinger of Manifest Destiny and civilization. Marginalization of women.	Male dominated narrative. Marginalization of women.	Introduction of strong female roles. Men share the stage with women.

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