

**“I AM NOT THE FINE MAN YOU TAKE ME FOR”
THE POSTMORTEM WESTERN
FROM *UNFORGIVEN* TO *NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN***

by

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ABSTRACT

The Postmortem Western is so named because, after having been buried for 15 years, the genre reappears with a pronounced self-awareness of its atrophied conventions and ideologies. As Jim Kitses and Alexandra Keller observe, today's Western is almost entirely revisionist. Chapter One delineates two broad revisionist cycles: those Westerns that re-imagine marginalized histories and those that deconstruct the genre's problematic influence on subject formation. This thesis is concerned with the latter, which may be likened to a postmortem examination of the Classical Western that reveals a systemic cause of death rooted in the Frontier Myth. While Richard Slotkin researches how the Frontier Myth has become symbolically encoded within American ideology, he does not attend to how it has also functioned as a prescription for masculine subject formation. Building from Michael Kimmel and Stephen Whitehead sociologies of masculinity, I elaborate how the Myth's perpetual retelling through the Western has worked to justify compulsive masculinities, incite disjunctive gender relations, and foster an illusory lone-hero mythology of mastery and wholeness.

Chapter Two is a literature and theory review that contextualizes the Postmortem Western within the genre's history of adapting to cultural and ideological change. It also establishes an historical, profeminist methodology to substantiate the connection between an ancestral pattern of frontier masculinity and a perceived contemporary crisis in masculinity. Chapter Three establishes the cycle's foundation insofar as *Unforgiven*, *The Proposition*, and *The Claim* depict masculinities constrained in rigid gender scripts and dysfunctional behaviours. These same themes thread through Chapter Four's analysis of HBO's *Deadwood*, whose epic scale is able to go much further by formulating a new mythic-historical script to cope with neoliberalism. Lastly, Chapter Five presents *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, *Down in the Valley*, and *No Country for Old Men* as a subset that deploy Western elements in a modern day setting in order to express another intricacy of this cultural condition. Their narratives and formal designs portray our moment of historical rupture with a palpable sense of loss, when culture feels increasingly disconnected from the meaning and national cohesion once glimpsed in the past.

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DEDICATION

For my mother and father.

Chapter One: Introduction

O you've seen that man before, his golden arm dispatching cards
 but now it's rusted from the elbow to the finger
 And he wants to trade the game he plays for shelter
 Yes he wants to trade the game he knows for shelter

– Leonard Cohen, “The Stranger Song”

The Western has an affinity with death that is unique among other film genres. It was already born in eulogy, signifying an heroic last stand before modernity rolled it over into the yellowed pages of history. Since then, it has been through many cycles of death and rebirth: between the mid-70s and 1990, it served its longest period of internment; for most of the 30s and during WWII, the ‘A Western’ had also disappeared; even by the 1910s, Tag Gallagher reminds us, they were deemed ‘old hat’ (266-7). Nonetheless, each new succession bore a more elegiac relation to its point of origin, as well as to the previous cycles that had become bygone texts about a bygone time. Accordingly, the post-90s resurgence in the Western exists largely on the condition that it recognize its own perishability, which is why so many of them appear more corpse-like, their heroes more dried out, with the flies buzzing around more audibly. This pervasive aura of death and dysfunction has significant implications for a genre that is chiefly concerned with masculinity: it encumbers the Western’s heroic mode with a sense of defeatism and heralds a transitional point for the masculine subject. Now is the time for the cowboy hero to lose, and never more so than when he ‘wins’ by accomplishing his goals. And yet, the genre’s habit of perpetual return reminds us that there may be deeply embedded issues intrinsic to the Western with which our culture must still wrangle. The paradoxical quality of death and resuscitation, dysfunction and recuperation, is what the Postmortem Western is all about.

Few filmmakers venture to make Westerns nowadays, and few viewers are keen to see them. Averaging at two per year (including independent productions), it is but a shadow of its

former glory in 1958, when as many as 54 Westerns were made (Pye, “Collapse” 10). Probably because of its past associations with racism, sexism, and imperialism, the genre looks about as uncouth to contemporary sensibilities as a brown-stained spittoon. Notwithstanding its stain and its small niche, the post-1990 revival has enjoyed remarkable critical success, earning fifteen Oscars, twelve Golden Globes, and eight Emmys for three Western features and one HBO series alone. This is quite a feat when one considers that the only feature Western to win a Best Picture Oscar before 1990 was *Cimarron* (Wesley Ruggles), and that was back in 1931! Hence, there has been a process of inversion whereby the genre has lost its mainstream status and is now relegated to the margins. With fewer films but more of them worthy of critical attention, its status has changed into a boutique genre specialized for ideological critique. Ironically, the stain acquired from its past associations has become the focal point in the Western’s recent resurgence.

Clearly the contemporary Western is severed from the social base of yesteryear. While, on the one hand, this enables it to better interrogate its prior mythic function, on the other, it enables trends and deviations that seem less rooted in a cultural purpose. For instance, critic Bart Testa observes that:

Many contemporary Westerns ... have assumed some of the paradoxical features associated with decadence – refinement and detachment, brutal directness and perfected spectacle – though their most telling feature is a hyper-attentiveness to laconic speech, recasting old habits of heroes’ hesitations and reticent sincerity with the elaboration of a code of laconism.¹ (“Request”)

¹ Testa is referring specifically to the films *Appaloosa* (Ed Harris, 2007), *Open Range* (Kevin Costner, 2004), and *3:10 to Yuma* (James Mangold, 2007). In the next sentence, I am referencing Dwight Yoakum’s *South of Heaven, West of Hell* (2000).

We might be going too far in accusing Costner, Harris, and Dwight Yoakum, who direct Westerns and cast themselves in the lead parts, of creating their own vanity projects. But the over-emphasis on the performative aspect certainly invites us to interrogate whether such films are deconstructing masculine personae in meaningful new ways or merely rehashing old forms for nostalgia's sake, tinkering with conventions like an old model train set recovered from the attic. This, of course, is not to mention the outbreak of pastiche and hybrid Westerns like *Quick and the Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1996), the sci-fi action comedy *Wild Wild West* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1999), and the kung-fu Western *Shanghai Noon* (Tom Dey, 2000). Whether a product of the industry's opportunism, the post-modern condition, or a bit of both, these films eviscerate the Western's inner form and lend no direction to the genre's longevity.

The Westerns that have shown more promise and captured the attention of critics constitute what some have dubbed a 'second wave of revisionism' (Kitses 14-31; Keller 30-32; Lusted 231), and can be broadly delineated into two cycles. The first cycle follows in the mould of *Dances with Wolves* (Costner, 1990) and takes the bastion of white Anglo-Saxon history as its object of critique. These films unscroll the canvas of the past wider to inscribe a spectrum of marginalized voices, including ethnicities in *Geronimo* (Walter Hill, 1993) and *Posse* (Mario Van Peebles, 1993), women in *Bad Girls* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1993) and *Bandidas* (Joachim Rønning, Espen Sandberg, 2006), as well as queer and transgendered subjects in *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) and *The Ballad of Little Jo* (Maggie Greenwald, 1993), respectively. Continuing a certain revisionist approach initiated in the 1950s and 60s, these Westerns often appear more like 'Shoot-outs at the PC corral', an epithet bestowed on the genre by James Ryan and echoed by Jim Kitses. Such films reflect the cultural yearning to apologize for a shameful history by fantasizing narrative scenarios where otherwise marginalized groups and alternate

ways of life are vindicated. Formally, however, they rarely do more than reverse the Western's fundamental binaries, re-positioning the marginalized as the good guys and the white male agents of civilization as savages. They also tend to be less conscious of the tendentious elements that they continue to adopt from the genre's intrinsic Frontier Myth. Such efforts smack of the Hollywood tendency to 'solve' socio-political problems through a benevolent liberal capitalism that typically envisions multiculturalism and diversity through white, male eyes.

Nevertheless, the PC tendency reveals two important things about the genre's present horizon of expectations: cultural sensitivity to race, gender, sexuality, and the need to deconstruct the Western's mythological sense of history. In the wake of developments in New Western history, historians have contributed immensely to exposing the conflation of myth and fact in the historical record of the West.² Coupled with the burgeoning discipline of social history, both have helped to encourage less mythological and more discerning cultural perspectives of the past, as well as expectations of greater historical verisimilitude in popular media. To be sure, political correctness and a great deal of caution are required in recuperating a genre whose legacy of films have, and continue to offend. When we look upon the Western of old, we may recall L.P. Hartley's adage: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there" (3).

Even so, there is an altogether different way to conceive the past, as William Faulkner does when he writes: "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (33). And it is this notion – the propensity for patterns, habits, and ideologies to root themselves in such a way that culture is ever forced to reconcile – that finds its way into an alternate cycle of revisionism, which I call the Postmortem Western. Earning its name from its self-conscious awareness of the genre's

² See Patricia Limerick's "The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century" and Richard White's "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill" as two seminal examples of New Western history.

cyclical death and rebirth, the Postmortem Western enacts a conspicuous resuscitation of old tropes and iconography for the purpose of complicating them through current perspectives. As such, they follow in the mould set by Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992) – the other pillar of critical and commercial success that stands apart from *Dances with Wolves*. If the PC cycle is chiefly concerned with meta-historical discourse and the representation of marginalities, the Postmortem cycle is concerned with deconstructing the insidious elements of the Frontier Myth that has for so long played an authoritative role in shaping American ideology. While the former cycle has had its fair share of criticism,³ the latter cycle has not, nor have any critics thoughtfully engaged with how the Myth is embroiled in this current revisionism.

As cultural historian Richard Slotkin has demonstrated, the influence of the Frontier Myth and its characteristic conventions are evident in nearly “every other genre in the lexicon of mass-culture production,” but foremost in the Western where the correspondence is most “observably direct” (25). The Frontier Myth promotes an ideology of progress in narrative form, which has greatly impacted matters of foreign policy. Further to espousing militaristic interventionism and economic imperialism, I argue that the Myth's prevalence has fostered a problematic model of masculine subject formation. It gives justification and support for compulsive masculinities to regenerate their sense of self through violence and aggression; it provides a homosocial safe space where men can turn their backs on the complications of domesticity and heterosexual relationships; and it authorizes a ‘lone hero’ mythology wherein men can narrativize their labours in the world as heroic projects that they alone must conquer. The Postmortem Western is the genre's unique way of critiquing the formative hold the Myth has had on masculine subjects.

³ See anthologies by Walker, Kitses and Rickman, and Buscombe and Pearson.

Several critics have noted *Unforgiven*'s decisive impact on the genre, calling it the "Western's last stand" (Berg 211), which has "surely changed the genre forever" (Loy 143). This is undoubtedly because of the way in which *Unforgiven* demythologizes the heroic cowboy, inverting his white-knighted code of honour and turning Warshow's "'gentleman' into a monster" (Alleva 21). But these critics rarely if ever delve deep enough to show how the film presents this process of demythologization as a problem in and of itself: while Eastwood divulges the dark side of 'cowboy' or 'frontier' masculinities, he also reveals how audience expectation is still very much conditioned to celebrate and justify its own blood-thirsty, Darwinian impulses. The film's slippery final scene at once embraces and reproves its protagonist's behaviour, and thus puts forward the question of whether culture is actually prepared to accept a complete transfiguration of the Frontier Myth and the masculinities it prescribes. This question and its various implications resurface in a cycle of Westerns that include *The Proposition* (John Hillcoat, 2006), *The Claim* (Michael Winterbottom, 2000), HBO's *Deadwood* (David Milch, 2004-6), *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (Tommy Lee Jones, 2005), *Down in the Valley* (David Jacobson, 2005), and *No Country for Old Men* (Coen Bros., 2007): taken together, these films constitute the subject material of this thesis.⁴ If other Westerns are dysfunctional for their outlandish formal experiments, or their pale neo-classicism, or their PC moralism, Postmortem Westerns are dysfunctional in a culturally productive way – they thwart their narratives with ambiguity and leave phosphorescent questions for the audience to ponder.

The ambivalent nature of these films as *Westerns* is the primary trademark by which we can come to identify their Postmortem designation. More specifically, the ambivalence is

⁴ For a full list of films that bear a fundamental thematic and formal resemblance to these films and which can further be classified as Postmortem Westerns, see Appendix A.

channelled into the way the viewer is meant to see each film's protagonist as torn, floundering, and discouraged in his ability to achieve his goals. What sets them apart from previous heroes like Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda) of *My Darling Clementine* (John Ford, 1946) and Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) of *The Searchers* (Ford, 1956) is that it is neither their motivations nor their virtue, but their very masculinity that is put to question. In other words, these films are character studies that deconstruct the ancestral pattern of cowboy/frontier masculinities. It is important to clarify, however, that this process of deconstruction does not entail a purely anti-Frontier Myth sentiment; it charts a middle course instead, veering in and out of the Myth's troubled waters, seeking to navigate safe passage by adopting both old and new strategies. These films identify with men who may perceive a widespread crisis of masculinity in which long-aculturated codes of behaviour are no longer functional. Therefore, this study is predominantly a character and theme-based survey of these films, leaving form and style to suffer less scrutiny. There is no doubt that each film's aesthetic, which we can broadly sum up as resembling a gritty, low-mimetic manner, starkly lit and suffused with concrete detail, does well to reflect the Postmortem Western's funereal disposition. Even still, a thorough examination of the cycle's visual aesthetic will have to be reserved for a study with wider scope; in this thesis, matters of cinematography and *mise-en-scène* are only touched upon, apart from chapter five where style plays a leading role in each film's formal design.

Chapter two's literature review both contextualizes how this cycle has come about and sets forth various theories as the basis of my methodology going forward. Summarizing some of the genre's foremost scholars, including Kitses, Wright, Pye, and Slotkin, this chapter also broaches some selected works on masculinity in the Western by Tompkins, Pumphrey, and others. Together, these authors reiterate the Western's engagement with the Frontier Myth, the

main ways it has adapted historically to comply with changing cultural attitudes, and its established tropes and vicissitudes in representing cowboy masculinities. The chapter also combines Stephen Whitehead's concepts of the masculine subject and masculine ontology with Michael S. Kimmel's research on masculinity spanning the past two centuries to help anchor this discussion in an historical, profeminist perspective. My methodology fuses this perspective with an historical conception of the Frontier Myth to give grounds for my claim that the Western has helped perpetuate material actualities in gendered performance that our culture continues to grapple with today.

The traces of these actualities are illustrated through close textual analyses in the next three chapters, beginning with three Western features (each produced in a different country), followed by an HBO series, and three more features that are set in present day America but incorporate patent Western syntax and semantics. Despite their varying nationalities, formats, and formal styles, each has a definite, if unspoken, connection to the Classical Western. In fact, the main focus of their critique can be likened to a postmortem examination of the Classical Western to determine its failings, and where, if anywhere, it still show signs of life. The Westerns of chapters three and four point up the particular tropes and codes of the old text that appear to be suffering rigor mortis under the light of present day perspectives. The masculine subject's traditional rite of passage through violence is complicated by his relationship with women and domesticity, thus calling for more nuanced and flexible gendered performance to free men from the piteous rigidity of old scripts.

In chapter three, Janet Thumim's article on *Unforgiven* and certain observations Slavoj Žižek has made about constituent ideology in Hollywood serve as a framework for the discussion. Classical Westerns and Hollywood in general tend to circumscribe their narratives

within a safe homosocial space, repressing the antagonism of the Real that arises from the confrontations of sexual difference. Yet, *Unforgiven*, *The Proposition*, and *The Claim* blaze a new trail forward by depicting how women and domesticity impact the cowboy's masculine fantasy of competence and mastery, setting the template for the Postmortem Western's core issues. Chapter four explains how *Deadwood* exploits its series length and budget to enhance and expand upon these same issues. I further incorporate scholar Daniel Worden's analysis of *Deadwood* as national allegory to argue the show's significance as a new mythic-historical script for contemporary neoliberal subjects. In fact, *Deadwood* is the only Postmortem Western in our study that goes some distance in paving the way forward for masculinities because it is able to draw a more complex portrait of political, economic, and gender-related concerns over its three-season, thirty-six hour arc.

In chapter five, the Classical Western's postmortem condition is taken more literally, as each film self-consciously deploys the old text as a fable within their formal design. I elaborate upon Jacques Rancière's theory outlined in *Film Fables* to clarify the difference between our use of the terms myth and fable. While the myth refers to the Frontier Myth that still informs the narrative scenarios of myriad genre films, the fable here refers to the Classical Western's distinct formulation of the myth as it has come to be abstracted in the mindset of contemporary culture. In particular, the Classical Western fable has become identified with a cohesive national identity, a sound ethos, and harmonious gender identities and relations. *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, *Down in the Valley* and *No Country for Old Men* express the underlying sense that such fables are dead and buried and their recuperation is mere wishful thinking, but they yearn to resurrect them anyway. Because of the films' modern day setting and because of their more visible associations with death and burial, they may be further classified as Disinterred Westerns,

a subset of the Postmortem Western that longs to ‘dig up’ the Classical Western, for better or for worse. This discussion is reserved for the penultimate chapter because their formal designs contrast so dramatically from those of the previous two chapters. Not only does the change of setting threaten to undermine their status as Westerns, but it immerses viewers in a sense of historical rupture, a split-subjectivity, through which the Western’s complex set of meanings are seen with both reverence and aversion.

While film scholars have proven time and again that the Classical Western text is not a homogenous body of rose-coloured fables celebrating America’s foundational ideologies, *such is the way popular culture tends to remember it*.⁵ Therefore, it is not surprising that the Postmortem Western also regards the old text with the same sweeping misconception; in fact, their artistic productions thrive by having solid ideological bedrock to rub against, react with, and upturn. But a similar misconception has also blinded film criticism’s eyes to the genre’s potential for active ideological critique. As scholar Daniel Worden observes, there is a long-held assumption that the Western’s capacity as national allegory is limited to reaffirming the hegemonic order and legitimating conservative values (225). While this generalization may hold to some extent for the Cold War era Western, as Corkin has demonstrated in *Cowboys As Cold Warriors*, it is less sustainable in the contemporary Western. Instead, we should determine how the Western formula shifts historically and read it as a dialogue with our present moment. Thus, Worden’s analysis corresponds with my view that the Western has taken a turn in the past two decades and holds a very different relationship to contemporary social, political, and economic concerns.

⁵ See articles by Staiger, Gallagher, H. Cohen, and Peek, each of whom is later addressed in this discussion.

Still, neither Worden nor the aforementioned critics explain how the Western has acquired this new status, but three main reasons seem clear enough: the genre's small size, its past stigma, and its accustomed familiarity with the Frontier Myth. As scholars Slotkin and others insist, the Frontier Myth is alive and well today and readily identified in genres ranging from the cop-detective, comic book, sci-fi, fantasy, and other genres whose mass appeal hampers any proclivity for auto-critique.⁶ Perhaps the most topical example of this is James Cameron's latest blockbuster *Avatar* (2010), which espouses peace, environmentalism, and harmony with the universe, but must secure this condition through an all out savage war and a trial by fire for its male protagonist. The film reads uncannily like a sci-fi *Dances with Wolves*, since both films reverse the Western's binaries only to reinforce them.

The Western, on the other hand, cannot get away with the same degree of unselfconsciousness; even if *Dances with Wolves* does not critique the Western's mythology the same way as the Postmortem cycle does, it still mounts a revisionist project to honour an ancestry whose historical memory the Western has traditionally debased. So, too, are contemporary neo-classical Westerns critically ill favoured and soon forgotten if they adopt the Frontier Myth without following in our aforementioned revisionist moulds, as is the case with *Wyatt Earp* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1994), *Wild Bill* (Walter Hill, 1995), and *The Alamo*. By contrast, Postmortem Westerns have been well received critically, with gainful box-office success (apart from the independent productions, which have been less available to mass audiences).⁷ Their positive reviews are not surprising – such murky films teeming with

⁶ See Mark Cronlund Anderson's *Cowboy Imperialism and Hollywood Film* for a survey of contemporary Hollywood films whose narratives are driven by the Frontier Myth of Slotkin's description. Not surprisingly, the only contemporary Western that he names is *The Alamo* (John Lee Hancock, 2004). Though Anderson fails to address this fact and its obvious implications for the Western, it clearly demonstrates how the genre has taken a turn in its relation to the Myth.

⁷ See Appendix B for a proposed canon of post-90s Westerns with ratings from critics.

contradiction would naturally invite the curious critic. Hence, the time has come to rethink the Western as a more viable genre for alternative films, one especially suited for spawning debate, complicating portraits of gender and national identity, and attempting to voice the inarticulable conundrums of manhood.

Chapter Two: ‘The Past Is a Foreign Country: They Do Things Differently There’:

A Literature Review

In surveying the vast criticism of a genre as time-honoured as the Western, it is best to begin with a working definition. In her online article, “The Mythology of the Western,” Pat Dowell draws upon a range of sources to define a Western as “a cultural production in which the authority of gender and race, the regenerative power of violence, and the mythology of official American history are shaped and contested.” Several critics seem to agree that the primary mandate of the genre of late is to critique its racist heritage by presenting counter-histories. In doing so, the new Western burrows further into the substructure of the genre wherein Slotkin has argued lays the problematic Frontier Myth – a cultural production three-centuries in the making that communicates key aspects of America’s ideological history. In addition to the latent racism bound up with this myth are beliefs about the West as an escape valve from a society gone to spoil, the regenerative powers of violent confrontation in the wilderness and, I would add, an idealized (and compulsive) prototype of masculinity that secures the male sex’s claim on public and domestic power. The following literature review brings together several critics and theorists to discuss, in turn, the genre’s present state as a site of revisionism, its historical relationship to the Frontier Myth, and its roots in masculinity, in order to provide a methodology and a language with which to analyze the films themselves.

2.1 The Western’s Second Wave of Revisionism

In his 1998 book *The Western Reader*, Kitses observes that revisionist Westerns which “in whole or in part, interrogate aspects of the genre such as its traditional representations of history and myth, heroism and violence, masculinity and minorities, can be seen now to make up the primary focus of the genre” (19). He also remarks that the current trend is pronounced

enough to be considered a ‘second wave’ of revisionism, set apart from the first wave that caught our attention in the early to mid 60s and ended in the mid 70s with the genre’s so-called demise. Though the second wave is set apart in time, it is less clearly set apart in manner. We can readily see the similarities, for example, between pro-Indian themes in *Dances With Wolves* and *Broken Arrow* (Delmer Daves, 1950), or anti-generic impulses in *Deadman* (Jim Jarmusch, 1995) and *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn, 1970), or formalist pastiche in *The Quick and the Dead* and *The Good, the Bad, & the Ugly* (Sergio Leone, 1966). In many ways, the second wave seems to be picking up from where the first left off, simply updating the same revisionist program for a contemporary cultural horizon of expectations. This begets the question of how we choose to define revisionism and how to measure its presence from one film to the next. To complicate things, Tag Gallagher, Edward Buscombe, and Doug Williams all claim that revisionism has always been with the genre, citing examples from the early sound era, the early cinema, and the literary roots of the genre’s pre-history, respectively.⁸ If we go further and accept Philip French’s contention that all Westerns in one form or another ‘rewrite’ history, then by this logic all Westerns are in some way revisionist (24).

However, Buscombe’s observation of a handful of Westerns telling Native stories like D.W. Griffith’s *The Redman and the Child* (1908) or *White Fawn’s Devotion* (starring Native Lillian Red Wing and directed by her Native husband James Young Deer, 1910) is not the same as a succession of films which form part of an overarching movement, in the way that *Broken Arrow*, *Devil’s Doorway* (Anthony Mann, 1950), *Little Big Man* and several others band together to voice burgeoning civil rights issues. Similarly, what Gallagher perceives as the stylized revisionism of a film like *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939) which self-consciously exploits the

⁸ See Gallagher’s “Shoot-out at the Genre Corral,” Buscombe’s *Injuns!* and Williams’s “Genealogy of the Western.”

gags, motifs, and conventions of early Westerns to reinterpret the old West for contemporary minds (268), is a different kind of revisionism from Kitses', who speaks of "an ongoing stream of works that play off the traditional, push against the past, and erect a counter-myth" (19). Gallagher's point is still well taken: genre criticism tends to oversimplify earlier Westerns as unselfconscious and uncomplicated in order to bolster broad arguments about a linear evolution from a homogeneous classical mould to increasingly self-conscious forms. But our definition of revisionism need not be limited to self-consciousness or isolated instances of variation and experimentation. The meaning of revisionism I take from Kitses and pursue as a working definition, is the conspicuous deconstruction 'in whole or in part' of the genre's underlying Frontier Myth. In order to be culturally productive, moreover, there should be a sizable number of analogous films expressing this counter-mythic perspective, so that a threshold is reached where we can allege that the genre as a whole is undergoing a revisionist transformation. As mentioned earlier, we can broadly observe this revisionism as tending toward two cycles, critiquing either how the Myth has perpetuated a parochial sense of history, or how it has fostered a problematic masculine subject formation. In either case, there is a self-conscious awareness of the dangers of mythological thinking, and the Western – as the foremost genre for narrating American history – is predisposed to conflate myth and fact.

The ineluctable sway of mythological thinking is an important issue for historians and genre critics alike. Janet Walker's essay "Westerns through History" tries to set the record straight that genre criticism cannot have it both ways, claiming that the Western is purely mythical whenever it is convenient. Such claims are used to excuse the Western for the blatantly fanciful portrayals of Natives in *The Plainsman* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1936) and *Stagecoach*, for instance; but if the genre is so mythically innocent, why represent the white settlers' toil within

the historical trajectory of accurate events, times, and places? “Genre criticism,” Walker asserts, “has a tendency to recapitulate the bias it pretends only to reveal. It allows historical interpretation presented in narrative form to parade as mere myth” (10). The inverse is also true: when interpreting the ‘official histories’ of research institutions and museum exhibits, we take notice of how often the written record is selectively narrativized. Describing her own reading of the Buffalo Bill exhibit at the Gene Autry Museum, Walker noted the elision of many facts surrounding Sitting Bull’s death and the Wounded Knee massacre. Presumably, this was meant to downplay Cody’s own complicity, lest the truth cast a pall over his status as the heroic subject of the exhibit (10). For Janet Walker, history and myth are profoundly related and textual.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the Western viewing experience has in large part transitioned into a meta-discursive engagement with the genre’s history of ideological stupefaction. In this respect, Alexandra Keller distinguishes between the two waves of revisionism, claiming that the first set themselves against a “standing set of conventions in precisely that binary way the fact/legend opposition is typically understood to operate” (32). In contrast, this present wave distinguishes itself by its conspicuous proclivity to “announce” itself as revisionist, by recontextualizing the genre “in an environment in which the textualization of the image and the imaging of text is a prevailing condition” (31-32). In addition to Keller and Walker, Jim Kitses remains one of the few critics who helps to clarify the matter. In his view, the first wave were “ambivalent, irreverent, critical, often hostile works ... driven by the period’s counter-culture, a rupture marking an incipient post-modernism’s impact as a cultural movement advancing the goals of pluralism and heterogeneity” (18). By 1990, however, this post-modern sensibility had time to integrate and the heated passions of the counter-culture movement time to cool; the radical edge wore down as increased critical distance and irony set in. If the first wave

was an array of lightbulb films that constellated the margins of the genre, the present wave now *is* the dominant mode, welcoming contradiction and plurality while renouncing clear categories and linear models.

2.2 The Frontier Myth

Richard Slotkin's trilogy about America's Frontier Myth is probably one of the most insightful and comprehensive contributions to understanding the Western as an expression of the nation's 'exceptional' cultural history. Pouring over three centuries of American literature, folklore, rituals, historiography, and polemics, Slotkin discovers the evolution of a root mythic language, which has acquired an encoded symbolic resonance through its persistent re-telling. Shaped through the nation's history of Westward expansion, the prototypical American subject is positioned between two boundaries: the wilderness (and conflict with Native Americans) and the East (first with the 'mother country', then, after independence, the metropolitan regimes of the Eastern seaboard). "The compleat [*sic*] 'American' of the Myth was one who had defeated and freed himself from both the 'savage' of the western wilderness and the metropolitan regime of authoritarian politics and class privilege." In order to free up the wilderness for development, purge the land of political and social differences, and renew the democratic social contract, a 'savage war' of military intervention is necessary. Thus the Myth expresses an ideology of progress in narrative form, conceiving "the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, and *regeneration through violence* [*sic*]" (Slotkin 10-12).

Slotkin's analysis of the three-way relationship among ideology, myth, and genre describes the process of cultural production. As opposed to conceptualizing myth as a psychological expression of the collective unconscious (as in Jung) or as a structural/linguistic

formulation (as in Levi-Strauss), Slotkin's approach to myth is firmly historical. For him, myths do not spring from mental archetypes but are the product of human thought and labour; they constantly adapt and evolve to explain problems that arise in the course of historical experience. While most critics of the genre, such as Jim Kitses, Douglas Pye, Will Wright and John Cawelti, follow a structural/linguistic schema of some sort, Slotkin observes how myth adjusts to integrate ideological variation over time. Rather than focusing on how a cycle plays along a series of dichotomies, say, for example, whether civilization is embraced or rejected, Slotkin focuses on the expression of a national ideology, interpreting that same cycle as symptomatic of progressivism or populism.

By the late 19th century, the language of the Frontier Myth was ingrained in the lore of Western pamphlets, dime novels, and Wild West Shows. Moreover, it informed the sensibilities of historians and politicians like Frederic Jackson Turner and Theodore Roosevelt. When Turner delivered his famous thesis declaring 'the end of the frontier' in 1893, Americans had to re-imagine how to move forward despite the apparent end of limitless agrarian expansion. Roosevelt drew upon the Myth for his Progressive political program, envisioning a new stage of American expansion that supplanted small agrarian and mercantile systems with a centralized network of modernized, industrial economies. His political rhetoric was strongly influenced by the Myth's social Darwinian language, not only in his eugenicist conceptualization of a 'racially superior' Anglo-Saxon American, but also in his tacit belief in the conquest of 'pure-blooded' Americans over 'backward' savages (Indians), 'recalcitrant' workers (Union members), and the 'sentimental' liberal sympathizers. In the absence of a frontier, Roosevelt instituted national parks and wildlife hunting where men could regenerate their virility by immersing themselves in

some semblance of the ‘strenuous life’; he believed also that war, particularly ‘savage war’, was good for men’s spirit and that America should have more of them.

Historians Richard Slotkin and Eric Foner would agree that a progressive consensus dominated much of the early twentieth century (*Story*, 141-61). Slotkin argues this consensus was less defined by whether the ideologies of greater centralization, government ownership, and massive productivity through industry were prevailing over more populist principles of decentralization, pro-labour concerns, and local traditions; rather, it was a consensus that these two ideological visions be debated, rehearsed, and framed in a common Frontier Myth rhetoric: “It is the existence of a common mythic language to which all sides can appeal that makes the conflict of progressive and populist interests a coherent political discourse – a political culture – rather than a clash of mutually uncomprehending and irreconcilable tribes” (24). In addition, the Myth has a tendency to displace or distort perception away from the problems of urbanization and class struggle by framing the discourse in terms related to race and the American creed. Slotkin’s research in the press and trade papers shows those suffering from social conditions were written about in a peculiar Frontier Myth discourse; those clamouring for worker rights were walking a fine line between an acceptable populism and an anarchy fast-associated with Indians, non-European immigrants, and any other groups whose ‘primitive, backward way of life’ put up resistance to forging a strong nation of ‘red-blooded’ Americans (Slotkin 36-52). Faith in the American creed meant getting on board the train of progress, though Foner reminds us that Roosevelt, still conceiving Natives as “savages” and blacks “not worthy of suffrage,” saw this train as especially reserved for ‘pure blooded’ WASPs (*Story*, 186).

As the dominant ideology, progressivism was guilty of quite merciless and racist domestic and foreign policy. Slotkin cites a number of atrocities during the Philippines

‘Insurrection’ of 1898-1902, which pro-imperialist press such as *Harpers Weekly* and the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* readily condoned as necessary repercussions of America’s new imperialism (109-13). However, the manifest pro-imperialist tenor cooled somewhat over the next few decades, as military intervention gave way to increased economic control through ‘dollar diplomacy’. But after WWII, America’s booming economy and new status as a military super power together engendered another kind of exceptionalism, one that imagined the nation as a first world exemplar to be emulated in the third world. This exceptionalism, Slotkin writes, “when fully developed in the 1960s – would constitute an ‘Americanist’ ideological program that Godfrey Hodgson has termed the ‘Liberal Consensus’” (421-2). The ideology behind this consensus, economically as well as in terms of foreign policy, continued the fundamentally elitist and imperialist progressive trajectory as conceived by Turner and Roosevelt, albeit with less overtly racist overtones.⁹ A national ideology of liberal cosmopolitanism grew to prominence, which dampened the nativism so redolent in the progressive era. Liberal cosmopolitanism revised its vision of the American Creed somewhat. As described by sociologists Jack Citrin et al. in his study “Is American Nationalism Changing,” cosmopolitan liberals’ version of the creed accorded with the melting pot thesis that all Americans, regardless of colour, can attain success provided they get educated and work hard.

The liberal consensus, founded in part upon the post-New Deal welfare state, also shared with progressivism its use of the Frontier Myth as a way of conceiving national identity. “The special conditions of American life (of which the old Frontier and the new productivity are the most prominent) were seen to have produced a history remarkably devoid of class consciousness or class politics of any kind” (Slotkin 422). Foreign policy strategies, like Kennedy’s ‘New

⁹ See Foner’s distinctions between progressive and modern liberalism as redefined in the 50s and 60s (post-war liberal consensus) (*Story*, 161).

Frontier' polemic, drew upon the Frontier Myth to frame the indigenous people of third world nations as frontier primitives, thus necessitating America's tried and true means to usher in the civilizing process. The State Department's 1965 "White Paper" coined the term "Nation-Building" to justify US involvement in Vietnam (Slotkin 493); such euphemisms would help the liberal consensus gloss over the racism and imperialism inherent in such policies. Slotkin's general perspective echoes Foner's, particularly the class and race-related hypocrisy that both historians see in the foreign and domestic policies of the liberal consensus period.

Spanning both periods of progressive and liberal consensus, Slotkin perceives two basic sorts of Westerns: the progressive/historical epic type and the populist, 'cult of the outlaw' type. Taken together, they were the genre's way of incorporating both ideological sides into a common Frontier Myth rhetoric.¹⁰ The progressive/historical epic, as seen in *The Covered Wagon* (James Cruze, 1923), *The Iron Horse* (Ford, 1924), and *Dodge City* (Michael Curtiz, 1939) celebrates the values of city-building, modernization, and higher rates of production, while 'cult of the outlaw' Westerns like *The Toll Gate* (Lambert Hillyer, 1920) and *The Gunfighter* (Henry King, 1950) focus on morally complex but virtuous heroes, shunned from a corrupt society and victimized by industrial and technological progress (286-303). The common link between both strains, however, is the presence of a white Anglo-Saxon hero whose moral purity and physical prowess is needed to stave off the degenerating threat of a menace who is coded as either a selfish, exploitative entrepreneur or an anarchic racial other.

2.3 Demythologization and The Genre's Erasure

Of course, the first major blows to destabilize the liberal consensus come from the civil rights movement, gay rights activism, and second wave feminism. These events coincide with a

¹⁰ Slotkin also classifies another sort, which he calls the "neo-classical," that it is more formalist-driven and plays both ideologies off each other, in turn (303-312).

burgeoning anti-Frontier Myth sentiment as well as the Western's first major wave of revisionism. To be sure, the more flagrantly racist representations and attitudes seen in the genre's first forty years waned gradually, as it became less socially respectable to be manifestly racist in American society.¹¹ Signs of increased tolerance and sympathy with race onscreen are visible in a smattering of Westerns before the Brown vs. the Board of Education, Rosa Parks, and Little Rock events of the mid-50s.¹² While this tendency became more discernable in what Buscombe has termed a cycle of 'Liberal Westerns', (including, among others, *Broken Arrow*, *Devil's Doorway*, and *Vera Cruz* [Robert Aldrich, 1954]),¹³ it is not until the 1960s, with the civil rights movement well-entrenched, that a pronounced revisionism takes hold and gains momentum as a movement unto itself.

Once again, Richard Slotkin's work proves useful for understanding how America altered its mythic-historical script during this period. The throngs of riots and demonstrations, civil disobedience, and widespread disillusionment prompted the Johnson administration to form a National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, which issued a report in June 1969. It was at this juncture that many scholars began to take an anti-Frontier mythology, which

¹¹ Eric Foner charts the beginning of the modern civil rights movement in WWII with the struggle against Nazi tyranny and its vision of a 'Master Race', which placed the issue of race back on the national agenda. He contrasts the Wilson administration during WWI, who denounced hyphenated Americanism, with the later Roosevelt administration, who advocated a pluralistic society. He says: "Certainly by the end of the war, racism as an intellectually respectable set of ideas had disappeared. It was no longer respectable to be overtly racist, which it was for many, many decades before that in American life" (Sydney).

¹² Some examples are *The Ox-Bow Incident* (William Wellman, 1943) and *Fort Apache* (Ford, 1948). In addition to the early cinema Westerns noted by Buscombe earlier, there is also *Chief White Eagle* (Romaine Fielding, 1912), which "dared to represent an Indian character who, although he gives way to lust and murder, is sympathetic and worthy of respect" (Woal 17). See Linda and Michael Woal's (1995) "Romaine Fielding's Real Westerns."

¹³ Additionally, television saw its spate of liberal Westerns on CBS. Critic Donald C. Bellomy has coined the 'Tiffany Western' for a select series of Westerns fostered under the liberal guardianship of William S. Paley. Bellomy discovers various left-wing writers who wrote episodes of *Rawhide* and *Have Gun, Will Travel*, interpreting their texts as increasingly tolerant to Native Americans and others of non-European descent, that is, provided they 'work hard and get educated'.

Slotkin describes as “an inverted Turnerism in which *negative* aspects of American national life and character (especially racial violence) [were] attributed to ‘[America’s] frontier heritage’” (556). The idea that the nation’s frontier history is the root cause of a ‘characteristically American’ form of violence and racism began to perpetuate itself within this anti-Frontier script. Even though several authors of the report took aim to demystify the country’s liberal and classless vision of itself and criticize its tendency of rationalizing social violence through its own exceptionalism, their efforts were largely thwarted by a simultaneous political agenda to vindicate some part of the Frontier’s value as a myth/ideology. Striving to salvage or revision some basis of the Frontier Myth, it went to great lengths to construe a moral distinction between ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ forms of violence, while maintaining the nation’s history of violence as regrettable, and even disproportionate at times, but necessary all the same.

Needless to say, Slotkin interprets the report as yet another instance of re-shaping the Myth to obscure more legitimate sources of metropolitan violence. Instead of tackling the complex effects of rapid political and social transformation, the origin of hostility is displaced by scapegoating the ancestors of “American national character” (558). Hence, the height of the liberal consensus had reached its apogee and would continue to disintegrate from the 60s onward. The Commission’s attempt to revision the mythic-historical script was one measure taken to augment the languishing image of national cohesion. Other measures, such as affirmative action and further civil rights legislation gave steam to multiculturalism as a rival ideology, which has continued until the present day to compete with liberal cosmopolitanism for hegemony.¹⁴

¹⁴ Citrin’s 1994 study shows that the high points of national cohesion in the 20th century were the 1950s first, and 30s second, while the lowest were the 70s, followed by the 90s. His analysis also tracks three competing ideologies (liberal cosmopolitanism, nativism, and multiculturalism) and finds that liberal

These historical contingencies are reflected in a spate of dystopic Westerns representing racial injustice, extreme violence, and anti-progressive ideology. Sergio Leone's 'Man with No Name' trilogy (1964-6) flatten character development and plot to expose the genre's lust for violence, and Sam Peckinpah's *Major Dundee* (1964) laid bare the roots of America as a nation by interrogating its national identity. While such films still exploit many of the standard conventions to win audiences with displays of regeneration through violence and compulsive masculinity, they nevertheless retain some avenue of critique to do with racism, imperialism, and/or aspects of violence and masculinity. It is during this period that the 'professional western plot' emerges. As defined by Will Wright, the category includes such films as *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969), *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid*, (George Roy Hill, 1969) and *Hang 'em High* (Ted Post, 1968). The professional plot enables a greater revisionism or post-modern incursion by re-modelling and de-centring the traditional concept of society. Society is no longer a place that attracts the Western hero, neither is it "particularly good or desirable" or worthy of the hero's help since it cannot even recognize him (Wright 85). Instead, there is an attraction to a group of like-minded professionals with a strength and independence shared by all its members.¹⁵ Their common bond is their commiserative alienation from society and nostalgia for times past.

Several scholars perceive this epochal turning point as a shift from belief in foundational myths to a greater concern with social transition (Calwelti 247; Pye, "Collapse" 168; Lusted 145-7). Yet Slotkin's analysis both complicates this picture and brings us closer to the kernel of what we mean by 'foundational myths'. Through Slotkin, we may perceive the Frontier Myth as *the*

cosmopolitanism has generally been the dominant ideology of the century, while multiculturalism has been making steady gains since the 60s.

¹⁵ Wright links the occurrence of the professional structure with the advent of an increasingly corporate, technocratic society under late capitalism. Thus, the source of meaning is found within the small clans of professionals and specialists that this new era necessitates (164-68).

foundation myth of America; despite its frequent revisions, the myth's deep structure has remained intact over the past three centuries.

What Wright classifies as the Professional Western, Slotkin might classify as the ideologically populist 'cult of the outlaw' form, now gripped with pessimism. Likewise, what the above-cited scholars refer to as the eclipse of the foundation myth, Slotkin sees as merely the eclipse of the progressive/historical Western (what Wright might liken to his 'classical western plot' designation). Hence, by 1962, Hollywood may have seen its last progressive/historical epic in *How the West Was Won* (Henry Hathaway, et al.). Not that Hollywood stopped making progressive Westerns, just fewer of them, and no longer on the epic scale. The progressive epic, which had been so prevalent until the 1960s, was to be dislodged by the populist, 'cult of the outlaw' form. *How the West...* follows four generations of Americans from their hunting and trapping beginnings through to their establishment in San Francisco as lawmen defending railroad interests. The final image is an aerial shot of the city's bustling freeways – a testament to the triumph of the American spirit by the progress attained in a few short centuries. Though it depicts the railroad men (such as Richard Widmark's character, Mike King) as ruthless and greedy capitalists, the film honours the overarching trend of continued progress and civilization, ostensibly rehearsing the central thesis of Theodore Roosevelt's 1894 book *The Winning of the West*, on which the film was loosely based. As the opening aerial shot drifts over the mountains, Spencer Tracey's narration pronounces that this vast land had to be "won – won from nature and won from primitive man." Despite the barely cloaked racist rhetoric, the film has an uncanny ability to evoke nostalgia by the clear simplicity through which it sees the world. It had this affect on me, at least (even as I also enjoyed snickering cynically at its rosy ideological hue).

Of course, this is precisely the point: after 1962 and the events following in that decade, such optimistic faith in progress seemed hopelessly naïve. Thus, *How the West Was Won* stands in marked contrast to all succeeding epics, including *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Leone, 1968), in which the progressive drift epitomized by railroad expansion, city-building, and large financial interests is depicted as unequivocally evil. The film is easily observed as part of Slotkin's populist, 'cult of the outlaw' stream, venerating a simpler way of life before progressive ideologies and modernity spiralled out of control. More importantly, its epic scale and its marked pessimism signify the overthrow of the progressive western's values by a new mythic-historical script. This new script strongly invokes the feelings of loss and despair, depicting the historic west as the Hero's final stand, a last refuge before modernity and corporatization rendered noble human efforts impossible. After Leone's film, the prospect of progressive/historical epics became more imponderable, and every epic venture since, from *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (Eastwood, 1976) to *Heaven's Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980) to *Dances With Wolves*, follows in the populist mould.

It appears, then, that the progressive western is more impervious to self-critique, which makes sense since its very reason for being is to celebrate America's foundation myth. Their forward-looking narratives imply a triumphal America, whose success is due in large part to those early frontier struggles. Slotkin postulates one reason why other genres like sci-fi are able to flourish despite their own progressive take on the Frontier Myth is that "they keep real historical referents at a distance"¹⁶ Since our own present day is not viewed as the same

¹⁶ For example, if we turn our attention to other generic successes that deploy the Frontier Myth, like the *Star Trek* television series, we notice the same progressive embrace of civilization's advance through expanded centralization and technology. Indeed, the core apparatus of the progressive version of the Myth is still thriving to this day, if the latest success of *Star Trek* (J. J. Abrams, 2009) is a fair indication. Over the course of the *Star Trek* series, however, there have been several 'corrective' conventions to the racist, sexist, and imperialist undertones of the progressive Western it displaced. Rodenberry's original

success story that the progressive and liberal consensus period was, it is natural we would find the progressive form outmoded. Consequently, it is the progressive western more than any other that has come to be associated with the Classical Western – that entity so reviled nowadays as retrograde and symptomatic of the nation’s celebration of white patriarchal hegemony.

At this juncture, we should make some observations on how the genre had restyled its formal and aesthetic characteristics after this period. Since these aspects are not explored at length within the following chapters, we can speculate here on some possible origins of the Postmortem Western’s characteristic look. Before we proceed, though, we should understand more precisely how the Classical Western’s formal and aesthetic design pulls off its effect; in other words, how it idealizes a formative period in U.S. history. In “Genre and Movies,” Douglas Pye argues that it aggrandizes the cowboy’s heroic feats while fleshing out the *mise-en-scène* with enough historical minutia and graphic imagery as to make it all believable. This success is achieved principally through a stylistic formula that balances romantic abstraction and concrete detail.¹⁷ Such is the crafty way the genre has succeeded to conflate myth with fact, instilling (particularly within American audiences) a mythological sense of history. Following Northrop Frye’s structuralist theory of myth, Pye interprets the Classical Western as a blend of romance fiction and low-mimetic manner (“Genre” 204, 209-15). By contrast, the revisionist

television series certainly tried to adopt aspects of racial equality and feminism through its multicultural casting and more politically correct plots. Additionally, in a 1967 episode titled “Return of the Archons” (Joseph Pevney), Captain Kirk (William Shatner) first stated the “Prime Directive,” Starfleet’s rule that there can be no interference with the internal development of primitive civilizations (i.e. those that have not yet developed warp technology). While the first wave of revisionism also critiqued racism/imperialism and implemented more politically correct conventions, they rarely (if ever) did so from within a progressive Western form.

¹⁷ To illustrate, Pye analyzes the dance scene from John Ford’s *My Darling Clementine* and the way that its focus on particularity – the homely faces, the inexpert musicians, and Wyatt’s distractingly odd shaky leg as he dances – anchors the scene in a tangible surface reality. By contrast, the idyllic Monument Valley backdrop, the American flag, the celebratory music, and the ritual consecration of the town’s first church all elevate the scene towards abstraction.

Western of late eschews romanticism while further intensifying the low-mimetic manner. Instead of superior masculine prototypes and quick-draw gunslingers, we watch ordinary men caught in dysfunctional relationships, struggling with guns that misfire (*Unforgiven*), villains that get away (*No Country for Old Men*), and heroes that shoot people in the back (*The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* [Andrew Dominik, 2007]). This effectively cracks the form's glossy sheen of myth and presents a grittier historical portrait.

As for how the formal and aesthetic shift appears in the revisionist films of the 60s and 70s, Richard Slotkin classifies three types of 'Alternative Western': formalist, neorealist, and counterculture (or "New Cult of the Indian") (628). The precursors of the formalist variety are the Sergio Leone films, which inspired abstract plots and flattened character depth and motivation in films like Clint Eastwood's *High Plains Drifter* (1973) and *Joe Kidd* (John Sturges, 1972). The neorealist ones try to represent a more historical portrait, cracking the glossy sheen of the Western's mythological façade with grittier, darker, and more violent depictions of cowboy life. Some examples he gives are: *Monte Walsh* (William A. Fraker, 1970), *Bad Company* (Robert Benton, 1972), and *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (Robert Altman, 1971). But Slotkin regards the counterculture Westerns such as *A Man Called Horse* (Elliot Silverstein, 1969), *Little Big Man*, and the 'Black' Western *Buck and the Preacher* (Sidney Poitier, 1971), as the most "politically important." Even though they are "well-meaning," he concedes, "most of them subordinated the particularity of Native American values and practices to a (mainly) White agenda of cultural revision which once again construed Native Americans as 'the Other', the opposite or negation of Anglo-American culture – only now that difference was seen as healthy opposition to a sick society" (630). The correlation between Slotkin's three types of Alternative Western and the cycles we have outlined in the post-90s Westerns should be plain to see. The

recent PC Westerns have their precursors in Slotkin's counterculture cycle and films like *Quick and the Dead* and *Shanghai Noon* have their homologues in the formalist cycle. Meanwhile, the Postmortem Western finds its roots in Slotkin's 'neorealist' Westerns: in addition to its grittier, harshly lit aesthetic, they also partake of the same sombre mood. If we think of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, for instance, and the way it eulogizes a man of great ambition whose flaws leave him metaphorically (and literally) exposed on the frontier, the same general disposition is threaded through our selection of Postmortem Westerns.

2.4 Masculine Subject Formation

While Slotkin delves into great detail about the ways in which the Frontier Myth structures aspects of the American subject's national ideology and sense of history, he has little to say about its impact on masculine subject formation. My hypothesis is that if identity formation is changing, so, too, is masculinity and gender generally, but what are the most appropriate theories to structure our discourse?

Both Stephen M. Whitehead and Michael S. Kimmel have made significant contributions to the sociology of masculinity. As profeminists, informed by a poststructuralist, postmodern perspective, each embraces the advances, challenges, and knowledge/power discourses brought on by feminism, perceiving in its developments new potentials and materialities for masculinity too. Profeminist men see in feminism not only an ethical imperative to change, but also the very conditions for that opportunity: "Feminism is about transformation, both for women and for men. ...For feminism promises the transformation of the relations between women and men: as it will set women free, it cannot help but liberate men" (Kimmel 120). In Whitehead's comprehensive theory of gendered subject formation outlined in *Men and Masculinities*, the categories of 'men' and 'women' exist, by definition, only in relation to each other. They are not

conceptualized in their biological essence, but as political categories, immersed in material actualities of public and personal power: “far from being a naturally given attribute, masculinity/manliness is revealed as historically variable and subject to change within and across social groupings” (15-16). Additionally, both theorists agree that rather than speak of masculinity in the singular, it is more appropriate to speak of a spectrum of performativities and possible masculinities. This makes sense in the wake of postmodernity when there is increased scepticism of traditional models (like sex-role theory and Parsonian structural functionalism).

The most important aspects of Whitehead’s work that I want to highlight are his concepts of the masculine subject and masculine ontology. Following the poststructuralist tenet that no individual can exist outside of discourse as well as Judith Butler’s notion of performativity, Whitehead’s ‘masculine subject’ contextualizes the male within the various gendered cultural knowledges and truths that shape how they live and perform *as males*. He writes:

The material actuality of masculinities emerges from the presence of the political categories of woman and man. In turn, the presence of these political categories sustains their materiality. However, the power that configures these categories is not structural and unchanging but circulatory and discursive. (209)

Another concept, which draws from the theories of Deleuze and Guattari, is Whitehead’s masculine ontology. This theory is founded upon the premise that the self is multiple, unstable and contingent, a fact that leads to existential anxiety about not having a biological essence or naturally endowed inner self. “Deleuze describes the Nietzschean ‘will to power’ as a will to become, an ‘inner centre’ of force that enables the body to be both differentiated and linked, spatially and temporally, to the social web” (Whitehead 211). Whitehead then prefixes gender

identification onto this struggle for an ontological security, labelling a man's process of becoming a 'masculine ontology':

For man to be and become that very category of being requires, then, constant management in those discursive practices of signification that suggest masculinity...[practices such as:] embodiment, language, sexual practice, emotional expression, bondings, work and leisure practices, intimate engagements and ways of relating – violently and non-violently – to loved ones and others. (212)

The benefit of Whitehead's theory is how it conceptualizes the male as structured by political power (public and personal entitlements) that are separate from his range of masculine performativities. Even while the two are separate, they form a feedback loop. This enables us to see how there can be changing performativities and a plurality of masculinities ranging over time and contingent with historical circumstances. The masculine ontology aspect explains where the drive comes from: a desire for inner wholeness that stabilizes the self's gender identity and leads one to define himself as a male with an essential inner character common to that sex. Hence, to the extent that we agree with Whitehead's perspective, we may understand the struggle to idealize and/or attain a singular masculine style as a fantasy stemming from inner lack, while the narrative of such an identity, as conceptualized in, say, the cowboy hero, is an illusory symbol of wholeness.

Various men's movements which include the Promise Keepers and the mythopoetic men's movement, among others, share in their belief that there is some *inner essence of masculinity*, either God-given and biologically ordained in the former, or accessible as universal and unconscious Jungian archetypes in the latter. Whitehead criticizes these movements as antifeminist mainly because, sensing men's essential masculinity to be in jeopardy, they

frequently seek to remedy the condition by establishing a segregated, homosocial sphere as a sort of protection against the further diminishing of their core masculine self.¹⁸ He observes that these movements are often less informed by the social sciences than theological and esoteric theories that remain unsupported by academic rigour. In this territory, we may encounter some reductive paradigms, such as when the concepts of ‘man/male’ and ‘masculinity’ are conflated as part of the same essential self, reinforcing the notion that there is an essential man with essentially masculine traits such as ‘manliness’, ‘ruggedness’, and ‘proneness to violence’.

In most respects, Whitehead and Kimmel are on the same page; they both posit that the drive for an inner essence of masculinity or manhood springs from a profound existential anxiety. This anxiety is often voiced, moreover, through the rhetoric of a ‘crisis in masculinity’, a cultural condition typically espoused by the aforementioned men’s movements, among others. One of the drawbacks of thinking in terms of a crisis in masculinity is that it generally presumes a singular, ahistorical masculinity, which is not circumscribed by class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality – indeed, it usually refers to the hegemonic standard of white, middle/upper-middle class, and heterosexual. What is also problematic is that such crisis rhetoric naturalizes masculinity while concealing the political dimension. Whitehead writes: “the ensuing belief that something is ‘fundamentally amiss’ with contemporary gender relations is only tenable if one assumes that a previous natural state of affairs has now given way to an ‘unnatural’ state” (61). Such misconceptions are refuted by historical evidence: as both Whitehead and Kimmel have shown, clamour about a ‘crisis in masculinity’ has been heard in almost every generation in the twentieth century. What’s more, Kimmel notes “‘fantasies of masculine retreat’ from

¹⁸ Whitehead argues that very few of the voices declaring a ‘crisis in masculinity’ are profeminist, noting Biddulph’s *Manhood: A Book About Setting Men Free* as one exception. He adds that other scholars such as Canaan and Griffin agree that the ‘men’s studies’ genre of Robert Bly and his ilk tend to be theoretically underdeveloped and antipathetic to feminism (55).

‘feminization and consumerism’ have been a key theme in writings on and by American men for over 200 years” (qtd. in Whitehead 58).

What Whitehead concludes is that there is no evidence to prove that there is a real crisis in masculinity today, though he falls short of defining what such a state of affairs might look like. He does concede, however, that the *moral panic* about the state of contemporary masculinity has emerged to some prominence, and *this* has very real material and political implications. He writes:

[A]cross many societies, most notably but not only in the Western world, the idea that men are facing some nihilistic future, degraded, threatened and marginalized by a combination of women’s ‘successful’ liberation and wider social and economic transformations has become a highly potent, almost common-sense, if at times contested, understanding of men at this point in history (50-51).

Our scholars would argue that these real material implications do not entail that men are facing a crisis of losing an inner, essentially gendered self, but evidence that they are grappling to invent and identify new masculinities to cope with historical changes.

Going forward, we should expect to see the traces of these changes played out, especially in the ‘manly’ genre of the Western, and we can also detect to what degree gender-essentialist fantasies are embraced and thwarted. In his essay, “The Cult of Masculinity: American Social Character and the Legacy of the Cowboy,” M. S. Kimmel devotes a lot of attention to a study of the late 19th century because this is when public discourse about masculinity – most often discussed in the terms of ‘manliness’ – seemed most prevalent. If there was ever a genuine crisis in masculinity in America, Kimmel says this era would best qualify. He identifies the 19th century’s last few decades as the high water mark for men’s perceived crisis in masculinity, due

to a plethora of national, economic, and domestic structural changes brought on by a national depression and sweeping modernization. Widespread urbanization and rampant proletarianization left the small farmer, the artisan, and craftsman increasingly dispossessed, while the Taylor system of management further alienated workers from the fruits of production. The average ‘workaday Joe’ was more and more becoming a factory machine, with neither property nor prospects. What’s more, feminism was gaining strength through the suffragettes, and the Social Purity and Temperance movements, as well as through rights acquired in the workplace and the political arena. Thus men began to fear their claim on public and domestic power threatened by newly empowered women also.

2.5 Frontier Masculinities

It seems quite logical, then, that when the clamour and concern over ‘manliness’ rang paramount at the end of the 19th century, the cowboy was first inaugurated as an heroic, masculine prototype. This is precisely the time when his actual role in the material world had turned from independent artisan to low-wage worker with the advent of the large-scale cattle ranching industry. Buffalo Bill Cody’s travelling Wild West Show first began in 1882, followed by the first rodeo in 1883, in Pecos, Texas. However, prior to the cowboy’s fictionalized appearance as a noble and virile knight errant, he was regarded as an unglamorous figure: “In the 1860s and 1870s, the cowboy was called a ‘herder,’ and he appeared in public prints and writing as rough, uncouth, shaggy, and dirty, whose behaviour was violent, barbarous, and rowdy. He was the brutal outlaw, not the good guy” (Kimmel 29). It is indeed a cliché to reiterate that from the moment of his inception, the cowboy represents a nostalgic look backwards, but in light of the context in which he was born, we may add to that cliché that he also serves to recuperate an ideal masculinity. The days of the frontier were not just the ‘good old days’ before

modernization, they were also when and where men were 'real' men. As a masculine discourse, then, the cowboy's purpose is twofold: firstly, he embodies in a monolithic prototype all those virtues that have been threatened by the age (strength, virility, access to the means of production, nature, sanctioned violence, and so on); secondly, his narrative provides a mythic escape for men from the feminizing clutches of the cultural condition.

This resistance to the perceived 'feminization' of culture is what Kimmel defines as a masculinist response to feminism (21). Three typical masculinist responses he lists are: strength testing, exclusion of women and minorities, and an escape to a homosocial world (either mythic or real). This manifested in several ways as "masculinists advocated separate educations and recreational outlets for males and females; keeping the sexes separate would retain manhood and maintain 'the mystic attraction of the other sex,' that is, serve as the hedge against homosexuality" (113). In this context, the Western became the masculinist retreat *par excellence*, a sort of 'safe space' from the domain of women as argued by Jane Tompkins in her book *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. In order to preserve and inculcate their masculine identity, Tompkins asserts that the cowboy narrative has to fundamentally dichotomize two domains through sex and gender. Of course, masculinism was only one response; there were early profeminist responses among men too. These took the forms of moral or just claims for individual rights (suffrage, etc.), claims for the liberation of the genders based on democratic and egalitarian principles, and also essentialist claims of the moralizing power of women to redeem the inherent callousness of men. It is only this last form of profeminism that contemporary profeminist scholars take issue with, as they see it perpetuating the essentialist myth even to this day, in spite of its 'positive' perception of women's innate attributes. As we

shall see, this myth crops up time and again in the Postmortem Western as a factor constraining the cowboy hero's masculine subjectivity.

M.S. Kimmel and Jane Tompkins generally agree that the traditional Western, as the mythic space of masculinist retreat, occurred as a reaction to the “dominance of women's culture in the nineteenth century and to women's invasion of the public sphere between 1880 and 1920” (Tompkins 44). Each provides separate historical grounds for that claim, citing women's increasingly active involvement in everything from child labour and sex education to agitation for Indian rights and working with immigrant populations in the inner city. While Kimmel concentrates on the Western as a discourse of masculine subject formation (the ‘strenuous’ life, anti-intellectualism, readiness to violence), Tompkins concentrates on how the Western is about man's fear of losing mastery, which leads it to jettison all things – from women and emotions, to religion and education – that threaten the illusion of control.

In some respects, Tompkins' work follows from the Levi-Strauss-based structuralism of Jim Kitses, Will Wright, and John Cawelti, who each hold, in their own turn, that the Western is constituted by a series of binaries held in productive tension. Where Tompkins distinguishes herself is with respect to the essential character of the Western: it is less about dramatizing the frontier/civilization dialectic than providing a gender-exclusive safe space wherein men can tirelessly reinvent their mannish identity and retain their fantasy of dominance. According to Tompkins, it is not about maintaining a productive tension between the genders as much as the systematic exclusion of the civilizing (read feminizing and moralizing) domain that is evidenced time and again in narratives that either “push women out of the picture completely, or assign them roles where they exist only to serve the needs of men” (39-40). Further evidence is seen in

the lack of authority afforded to religion, in the primacy of physical prowess over spiritual might, action over words, volition over emotion, and landscape over man-made structures.

Through critiquing the Western as a world constituted of absolute dichotomies, with all characters, props, settings, and tropes being circumscribed by sex and gender, Tompkins' thesis provides a template for the extreme end of masculinist Westerns. Subsequently, we can evaluate other Westerns in which these two spheres interpenetrate and transmute their gendered valuations, and infer these deviations as symptomatic of new and emerging models of masculinity and gender relations. For all its usefulness, it is important to remember that Tompkins' perspective remains locked in a rigid conception of the Western, and one established in the years of early cinema. Though she applies her methodology to some of the so-called psychological Westerns of the fifties and beyond, her selection of filmic examples betray an obvious bias to prove her point;¹⁹ as Wendy Chapman Peek (2003) and Hubert Cohen (2004) have shown, there are many other examples (even from the same films) that call her generalities into question.

Therefore, Tompkins' diagnosis of the genre holds best when applied to the silent and early sound era films, up to and including the B-Western of the 1930s, so we ought to restrict her diagnosis to the Classical Western text. Before WWII, critics like Pumphrey, Peek and Cohen seem to agree that Westerns for the most part evinced 'absolute value-laden distinctions' between the masculine and feminine spheres, which aggrandized a model of masculinity untroubled and uncomplicated by threat of feminization. Several arguments have attempted to explain the historical causes responsible for the new themes and representations of masculinity in

¹⁹ Despite the mention of *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1954) and *Big Country* (William Wyler, 1958) her analysis does not penetrate how these films complicate her picture of masculinity in the Western. For the most part Tompkins' analysis is restricted to the novels of Wister, Zane Grey, and Louis L'Amour, and films like *My Darling Clementine*, *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948), *The Searchers*, and *True Grit* (Hathaway, 1969), where her generalities can be more easily verified.

the post-war period. Michael Coyne offers one such insight: “once the urgency of the late 1940s had abated, ... the Western’s principal thematic concern was not struggle for survival but the quality of life in U.S. society. Affluence harboured its own ills, and the genre avidly encoded these within a frontier setting” (67). In the following years of unprecedented consumer spending and mass migration to the suburbs, it is no surprise that the centre of focus shifted increasingly to the site of the family. Domestic partnerships and struggles no doubt exerted pressure on the intractable model of masculinity that had been held over from the turn of the century. The new dimensions and complications within the masculine discourse were perhaps reflected (most visibly) in the psychological Westerns of the 1950s.

Such conditions, as Pumphrey argues in his 1981 article “Masculinity,” revealed an ideal of masculinity founded upon fundamental contradictions, as it became increasingly clear that Western heroes needed to straddle two absolute and value-laden spheres. Expected to be “both dominant and deferential, gentle and violent, self-contained yet sensitive,” and so on, the cowboy must “bridge the ... anxiously guarded (ambiguously experienced) frontier between the two” (“Masculinity,” 181). As with Tompkins, Pumphrey maintains that there is a deeply entrenched gender essentialism dividing these spheres, which reduces femininity to a negative force against which masculinity is defined and tested. The key difference between the two critics, however, is in Pumphrey’s attention to the conflicting and paradoxical demands on the masculine subject as he tries to bridge these two spheres. Thus Pumphrey develops a more complicated depiction of masculinity, which he contends is symptomatic of the confusing and impossible signals of normative masculine behaviour perpetuated by movie and consumer culture in general.

One intricacy of these paradoxical demands is well illustrated in Pumphrey’s 1989 article “Why Do Cowboys Wear Hats in the Bath?” It sheds light on the dominant coding of the

cowboy's 'cleanness' in contrast to the grubbiness of lowly and less virile peripheral characters. Seen as yet another contradictory norm harnessing masculine behaviour, the cowboy hero almost always appears clean-shaven and unsoiled, though we rarely see him shave or bath; if we do, the scenes are invariably awkward.²⁰ To offset undue attention to personal grooming and beautification, the cowboy might puff a cigar in the bath, keep his hat on, or some such other garment.²¹ Contradictory demands therefore require he walk a tightrope of self-conscious performance: he must outshine the others without looking dandified (which is the mark of a villain); he must wash without getting nude; he must keep up appearances without being caught looking at himself, lest he be perceived as overly concerned with appearance, effeminate, and perhaps even homosexual. Such stringent codes of masculine performance, Pumphrey claims, were formative and instructional to men of his own generation, who grew up watching Westerns and who, in the 1980s, frequently felt at odds with the incipient style revolution in men's fashion. He observes the principle historical influence to be consumer marketing. As early as the 1950s, men were encouraged to conceive of themselves as consumers and their bodies as sites of consumer attention, hence the beginnings of a schizoid self-consciousness in one's own appearance. By the 1980s the trend became full-blown and, compounded with a more firmly established feminist discourse, an entirely new conception was projected to younger generations, one that acknowledged "identity (for men as well as women) as being fabricated and learned – contingent, historical, relational, constantly under negotiation" (61).

²⁰ Pumphrey qualifies this claim as most pertinent to Westerns before the period of sixties revisionism where Clint Eastwood and others made grisly beards and garments evincing numberless days of sweat and toil more faddish.

²¹ As a prime example of this awkwardness, the reader may recall Henry Fonda's Wyatt in his singular determination to have a shave after months out in the frontier corralling steer. His shave is rudely interrupted by a gunfight to which he heroically responds, much to the town's adulation, all the while half-shaven and still swathed with cream. Ford repeatedly frames Wyatt at odds with his own self-beautification: uncomfortable with the honeysuckle perfume with which the barber adorns him, catching glimpses of himself in the storefront windows, and yet, trying not to be seen looking at himself.

Here, Pumphrey's reasoning approaches the more fluid theory of masculinity adopted by Whitehead and Kimmel, but how might the latter two conceptualize the structural changes in male power over the past few decades? Throughout Kimmel's work is an ongoing project to show parallels with the turn of the 19th century's 'crisis of masculinity' and today. Though he never announces that there is a present crisis in masculinity he does point out that post-industrial America is going through several similar structural changes to post-bellum, industrial America. Writing in 1987 he says:

It is widely believed that American culture has entered a new era of feminization, opposition to military adventures in Central America, a deepening concern for the devastation of the environment, the impressive gains registered by the women's movement and the gay movement in challenging traditional sexual scripts, and a growing trend toward a surface androgyny. (101)

Interestingly enough, twenty years later in the new millennium, the cultural condition may be labelled more or less the same, (if we substitute the Middle East for Central America). He also notes similar responses to feminism at the turn of both centuries; men's movements betray their masculinist undercurrents while the same three strains of profeminist rhetoric ring down the corridors of culture. "Male support for feminist-inspired campaigns against prostitution and pornography...[which] often characterize men as impulsive, uncontrolled predators [against which] women's natural virtue... is the only possible salve" Kimmel argues, is inflected with the same moralizing rhetoric of the previous century (119). So, too, "in such campaigns for the ERA, women's right to choose, opposition to workplace sexual harassment, and the admission of women to all-male military colleges, men's support of feminism is framed in rhetoric of women's individual rights" (119). The following contemporary Westerns will be reviewed in

light of how they negotiate these different lines of rhetoric, locating their masculine discourse along a spectrum between masculinist and profeminist poles.

2.6 Women in the Western

There are two well-known opinions about women in the Western quoted by Budd Boetticher and Anthony Mann. According to Boetticher, “what counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one...who makes him act the way he does. In herself she has not the slightest importance.” Mann, on the other hand, says “a woman is always added to the story because without a woman the Western wouldn’t work.” Pam Cook takes these diverging views – women as peripheral and women as central – as two sides of the Boetticher/Mann coin (293). We could shed further light on this phenomenon by adding Whitehead to the mix, who analyzes the importance of the ‘heroic male project’ to the masculine subject. As he sees it, men’s public lives take place in a domain firmly rooted in mythological and heroic narratives. Such narratives invoke the image of man as lone hero caught in a cycle of departure and return and driven by a need to achieve that appears to come from deep within his psyche.²² Though this posits the rigours and dangers of the outside world as a (male’s) world far removed from the (female) comfort of home, this does not negate women’s necessary role in the process:

Despite their absence from the main scene, which such notions would suggest, women play a key role in the imagery of ‘man in his world’. They exist, usually, as the purpose, the vulnerable, the flight from, the prize, the sought after, the protected. ‘Woman’ is omnipresent, yet necessarily curtailed by the masculine mysteries invoked by the images of man doing ‘his own thing’. Woman is the

²² Whitehead astutely adds that this process is not however one of “self-aggrandizement or self-sacrifice. At an ontological level, the cycle of leaving serves to create the conditions and possibilities for alleviating the male’s ever-present existential uncertainty and self-doubt” (118).

Other that necessarily exists in order to allow man to assume his central role
(119).

This provides some reasoning behind both Boetticher and Mann's claims: yes, woman is central and without her, man would lose his umbilical to his purpose; and yes, she is also peripheral insofar as it is *man's* journey and *his* heroic project to win. The subjectivities of women are rarely allowed to disrupt or intrude upon this narrative logic, which underlies both the Classical Western as well as most other 'great men' historical narratives from Daniel Boone and George Washington, to Jack Kerouac and Jack Kennedy.

Blake Lucas also agrees that women are vital to good Westerns. He argues that the 50s era Western, particularly those of Mann, John Ford, and Raoul Walsh, position women as an indispensable influence on the hero's struggle. It is not so much that they are empowered with the authority to change his course of action, but rather they are vital to the narrative's gentle and reflective side, supplying an alternate tone to the cathartic violence. "This counterpoint of the two tones, and how well it is handled by a director," Lucas claims, "may be more essential to the Western than anything else" (307). Indeed, by portraying women characters in the Western the way Anthony Mann does, both the drama and the complexity of the cowboy's masculinity is greatly enriched. We notice in Mann's *The Naked Spur* (1953), for example, how the central complication in Howard's (Jimmy Stewart) path is not the rival Ben (Robert Ryan), but Lina (Janet Leigh), whose presence forces him to decide between two contrary motivations, each one manifesting as a different gender-performative track. He could follow his aggressively self-interested goal to bring Ben to justice and collect his reward, or he can submit to a more tenderhearted disposition and notice how he's putting everyone's lives at stake. He must adopt either the compulsive masculinity of the driven cowboy or the domesticated integrity required to

be a future husband to Lina. Above all, this gendered conflict that he constantly negotiates is the source of anguish captured in Stewart's clenched jaw and curled lips.

Since this important period in the Western's history, it seems to Lucas that revisionism has destroyed the women's vital importance to the Western, if not by concentrating overtly on masculinist themes (*Wild Bunch*) or satirical critique (*Little Big Man*), then by overdetermining the empowered women to the point of stripping all nuance and complexity from character interactions across genders. This is certainly symptomatic of such recent PC Westerns as *Bad Girls*, *Bandidas*, *The Quick and the Dead*, and *The Battle of Little Jo*. As Lucas puts it: "It is not politically correct to embrace any concept of the traditional woman, and feminist naiveté will only tolerate 'empowered' women who can masquerade as men or shoot it out with the boys...[F]or the ideologically conditioned Western heroines of recent years, power is a grail – the key to female identity" (313). By contrast, *Deadwood* (and these other films in my study) pick up from where Mann's cycle left off, positioning masculinity as their chief object of exploration, a goal best achieved through deploying women characters of substantial depth and plausibility. While *Deadwood* certainly empowers its women characters and fundamentally observes politically correct protocols, that is not its sole teleological end; their presence is significant in complicating gender relations as well, and (as we will later see) balancing out the profile of *Deadwood*'s citizenry as universal, neoliberal subjects.

2.7 In Summary

We may recapitulate that a strongly masculinist discourse cemented itself into the genre's thematic structure until WWII, after which more and more Westerns began to complicate and challenge the monolithic model. Two critics, Hubert Cohen and Wendy Chapman Peek, have each revisited the post-WWII Westerns while rethinking what Tompkins and Pumphrey have

said about them. Equipped with a more fluid model of masculinity akin to Whitehead and Kimmel's, what Pumphrey saw as a paradox inciting a crisis in masculine performativity, Cohen and Peek see as the successful and compatible bridging of gendered practices. Cohen, for one, takes issue with the *absoluteness* of the value-laden distinctions that Tompkins and Pumphrey observe separating the gendered realms. His 2004 article "Men Have Tears in Them" surveys several Westerns (all post-WWII) and proceeds to point out crucial moments of feminine-coded performance that directly challenge Tompkins' axiomatic template. Some examples are: Nathan Brittles (John Wayne) weeping in sentimentality when bestowed a retirement gift in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (Ford, 1949), Clay Blaisedell (Henry Fonda) tearing up after gunning down his friend in *Warlock* (Edward Dmytryk, 1959), and William Munny (Clint Eastwood) quivering in fear while rambling about his inner demons in *Unforgiven*. In these instances, the cowboy is not required to forsake his natural inner feelings (as Tompkins would have it), nor does his expression of these feelings pose a threat to his masculine self-image (Pumphrey); on the contrary, such moments enrich each film's narrative structure by playing against the stereotypical conceptions of the macho cowboy. In this respect, Tompkins' contributions still remain helpful for explicitly spelling out what these stereotypes are, for laying them down, as it were, as the genre's classical foundation. Yet, Cohen finds the rigid masculinity of the Western cowboy largely overstated and uncritically accepted. At one point, he goes so far as to say it is "arguable that [they] express their tenderest feelings and vulnerabilities more frequently than the tough-guy heroes in other genres" (75). Moreover, Peek's 2003 article, "The Romance of Competence," argues that some of the behaviours Pumphrey would mark as feminine can be masculine as well, and that the terms themselves that would compose a dilemma have relational as opposed to absolute value. "A major in the army can be simultaneously *dominant* over a

captain and *deferential* to a colonel,” as exemplified in *Fort Apache* (211 [emphasis mine]). Therefore, that which seems to elicit contradictory gender practice, Peek in turn shows as complementary strategies towards achieving a successful outcome.

These theories will arm us with a methodology to address masculinity in the contemporary Western, about which there appears to be a vacuum of criticism. My approach to this subject, then, will focus on each film’s conception of a masculine ontology, and how this ontology, or sense of an inner cohesive gendered self, responds to the narrative’s pressures and demands. As was mentioned in the introduction, the portrait of the contemporary Western has greatly expanded the canvas of female representation, reflecting the material traces of actual present day shifts in political power. Therefore, we can read these Westerns as inventing new masculine representations as their plots narrativize shifts in public and domestic power that correspond with our present day cultural horizon. As Steve Neale reminds us, genre films are constantly negotiating two horizons of expectations: cultural and generic. This review has contextualized these changing cultural expectations within the present genre, while also tracing shifts in the genre’s form. In bringing together these two disciplines, a socio-historical analysis of the Western and the latest theories in the sociology of masculinity, we are in effect appending gender as a seminal aspect of the changing mythic-historical script.

Chapter Three: The Impossibility of Being Ordinary

Women, if they are represented with any plausible degree of agency, spell death to cowboy masculinities, a fact that the Postmortem Western ardently exploits. The impetus of this discussion stems from Wendy Chapman Peek's argument: "by limiting the participation of women and their concerns (which, Jane Tompkins argues, is the genesis of the genre), Westerns become a 'safe space' in which to raise questions about masculinity, to perform different kinds of masculinities, and to explore the pleasures and perils of male bonding, with its flagrantly erotic rituals and homosocial dynamics" (210). Following Tompkins and Peek's assertions that the genre has served this cultural purpose (the necessity of the 'safe space' itself arising from the mythopoetic men's movement), I submit that this 'safe space' is increasingly foreclosed and complicated by the presence of modern empowered women. Focus on the cowboy's domestic partnership has had little running time within the genre historically; most pre-nineties Westerns appear to follow Tompkins axiom and "either push women out of the picture completely, or assign them roles where they exist only to serve the needs of men" (39-40).²³ Therefore, the field is transformed greatly when we notice the cowboy's honouring of the domestic partnership beginning to take precedence over his moral decision to 'do justice'. In the past there was no dilemma, 'a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do,' so he rode off and left the woman at home; now, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do, but he'd better check with his wife first.

The consensus among critics such as Peek, Cohen, and Pumphrey about the post-WWII Western is that a proliferation of new and unfamiliar representations of masculinity reflected an incipient 'new' man who needed to exhibit a more flexible gender performance to meet the widespread social transition. Peek argues that post-WWII Westerns show masculinity as a

²³ Of course there are a few notable exceptions that spring to mind such as *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1954), *Westward the Women* (William Wellmen, 1951) and *Johnny Guitar*. Nonetheless, they remain very few and far between.

“dynamic force... [which celebrates] those heroes who seek those answers, dramatizing their repeated success in opposition to an ‘ideal’ masculinity that is consistently represented as limiting, self-defeating, and ultimately sterile” (218). Postmortem Westerns complicate this dynamic force, however, by putting the very notion of a successful hero into question. Sure, these films retain the obtuse and ‘manly’ men as character foils, but the hero, despite his wider range of performativity, is seldom better off. Unlike the post-WWII cowboy, the Postmortem cowboy has not ascended the ladder of noble and exemplary man, but slipped down a rung or two closer to the abyss: the question of whether he comes to know something of value about his own soul, however, is the investigation of this chapter.

The Postmortem Westerns in this chapter do not aspire to new ideals of masculine performance; they deconstruct the root causes of these aspirations instead. Each film presents conflicting desires within the hero to attain, at different moments, ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’ states of being, which manifest as a domesticated man versus a ‘superhuman’ cowboy hero. In his article, “Hollywood Today: Report from an Ideological Frontline,” Slavoj Žižek underlines the curious Hollywood tendency to have the superhuman/ordinary man binary constituted by a third factor: sexuality. Using *Superman II* (Richard Lester, 1980) as an example, Žižek reminds us that Superman cannot consummate his love for Lois unless he first become a normal, mortal human. In Hollywood, masks turn ordinary guys into superheroes, but this process also renders them asexual; according to Žižek: “sex (making love to a woman) is incompatible with the power of the Mask.” The central thesis of Žižek’s article is that Hollywood film form is ideologically manipulated and distorted so that undesirable truths remain concealed; this tendency which he calls ‘constituent ideology’ flourishes in large part by circumscribing narrative within the “pre-Oedipal anal-oral universe where there is no death and guilt, just

endless fun and fight.” He exemplifies this claim with the image of Jim Carrey in *The Mask* (Chuck Russell, 1994) and his cartoon-like plasticity, as a sort of solipsistic withdrawal within the Imaginary order. As a rule, Hollywood upholds this regression into fantasy through negation of sexuality and/or simplification of woman characters since, for men, Žižek claims, “the true enigma which cannot ever be cracked is woman.” He adds: “What if sexual difference is not simply a biological fact, but the Real of an antagonism that defines humanity, so that once sexual difference is abolished, a human being effectively becomes indistinguishable from a machine[?]” We might see Leone’s Man with No Name cowboy (Clint Eastwood) or even the Leone-inspired protagonists like Sharon Stone in *The Quick and the Dead* or Mario Van Peebles in *Posse* as such machines. Asexual, almost cartoon-like caricatures, they aptly represent this flight from the Real by evading a Symbolic encounter with the Other. Conversely, the Postmortem Western ventures into this troublesome terrain – the unsettling and ineffable antagonism that threatens to disrupt fantasies of masculine wholeness – by having their heroes forgo the all-proficient, confident cowboy persona in order to be an ordinary and sexualized husband, who is invariably out of his element in the auspice of domesticity.

The three films of this chapter each come from different countries: Eastwood’s film is American, Hillcoat’s is Australian and set in the outback, and Winterbottom’s film is a British-Canadian co-production, set in the Sierra Mountains – all of the settings are circa 1880. We should note here that America’s claim on the Western is certainly not exclusive, as various other nations have used it to explore their own cultural histories and ideological roots, some recent examples being France’s *Blueberry* (Jan Kounen, 2004), Japan’s *Sukiyaki Western Django* (Takeshi Kitano, 2007), Brazil’s *House of Sand* (Andrucha Waddington, 2005), and Germany’s *Ulzhan* (Volker Schlöndorff, 2007). Because this chapter is predominantly concerned with

masculinity, we can leave aside aspects of national identity for the time being and focus on the three-way relationship between genre, masculine subject formation, and issues common to male subjects of the Western world. Some sociologists of masculinity have pointed out that there is a particularly close correspondence of influencing factors upon American, British, Japanese, German, and Australian masculinities (Whitehead 51,79). This chapter focuses on the similarities with which these three films dramatize a crisis in masculinity discourse that is not limited to America, but pervasive throughout the Western world.

3.1 Setting the Template for Masculine Dysfunction in *Unforgiven*

The story begins in a brothel in Big Whiskey, Wyoming, 1880. The prostitute Delilah inadvertently laughs at the size of Quick Mike's penis, so he, with the help of his fellow cowpoke Davey (Rob Campbell), cuts up her face with a razor. Sheriff Little Bill Daggett (Gene Hackman) dispenses punishment summarily by merely fining them, whereupon the affronted prostitutes put a bounty on the two perpetrators. This brings William Munny (Clint Eastwood) and Ned Logan (Morgan Freeman) and a young 'Schofield' Kid (James Woolvett) into town to assassinate them for the reward. William Munny has a crisis of conscience, however, because he has been "cured ... of drink and wickedness" through the help of his dear departed wife Claudia; but he follows through anyway and the two perpetrators are killed at the Bar T. Soon afterward, Ned is captured by a lynch mob and whipped to death by Little Bill (even though he didn't shoot anyone). Meanwhile, the Kid, ashamed at his own part in the killings, wants no more of it and rides home. The vengeful Munny then takes up the whiskey bottle, rides into town and kills Little Bill and all his deputies, as well as Skinny, the prostitutes' proprietor.

What would otherwise be a conventional Western revenge story is complicated by its own self-conscious reflexivity and, as a result, *Unforgiven* seems like two films seen through two

stylistic modes. In her article, “Maybe He’s Tough But He Sure Ain’t No Carpenter: Masculine In/Competence in *Unforgiven*,” Janet Thumim points out the simultaneous interplay between realistic and melodramatic axes within the film, which may be one feature of the “double-vision” William Beard has written about with respect to Eastwood’s films.²⁴ The aforementioned synopsis reads like any classic Western from *My Darling Clementine* to *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953) – the cowboy rides into town, his friend is unjustly murdered, and the murder is avenged. The melodramatic axis follows the Frontier Myth pattern: Munny is ‘isolated’ from the strictures of civilization, he ‘regresses’ to primitivism through drunken vengeance, and ‘regenerates’ his subjectivity by violently purging Big Whiskey of its morally reprehensible Sheriff.

If the melodrama rouses a hint of romanticism, however, it is quickly snuffed out whenever the axis shifts to the realist mode and focuses on the characters’ weaknesses and inglorious actions. We first see Munny as a ham-fisted pig farmer, who can’t shoot straight and struggles each time he mounts his horse. On the rainy trail to Big Whiskey, he catches a fever and laments the sins of his youth. When first confronted by Little Bill, who pistol-whips and kicks him across the floor of Greely’s,²⁵ we are surprised to see the deft and punishing fighter we’ve come to associate with Eastwood’s persona, here portrayed as a helpless and bullied weakling. Little Bill might be the alpha male of Big Whiskey, but he is also a lousy carpenter; the Schofield Kid is a fine shot provided his target is within twenty yards, but beyond that he is blind; Ned Logan doesn’t fare much better as an assassin either, having a change of heart when

²⁴ In *Persistence of Double Vision: Essays on Clint Eastwood*, Beard sees Eastwood less as an analytical than an intuitive-based director, whose best work is mired in contradiction. Regarding *Unforgiven*, Beard says: “The last contradiction of *Unforgiven* is that it too is an example of what it is questioning. Even the most deconstructive Eastwood film (and *Unforgiven* probably is that) retains what is deconstructed: the transcendental-heroic Eastwood persona... [It] presents both contradictory discourses side by side. [It] problematizes and does] not resolve” (64).

²⁵ Greely’s Beer Garden and Billiards is the saloon and brothel owned by Skinny.

the time comes for killing. The first assassination at the Bar T also cuts across generic expectations. Munny snipes Davey from a spot high in the hills and the scene is painfully drawn out as the killers watch the young man slowly die, afraid and pleading for water. Obviously, we are not accustomed to this type of verisimilitude in Westerns – the malfunction of guns, the life-threatening torrential rains, the relentless focus on the shameful and cowardly side of killing. We may call it a sort of neo-realist revisionism: the object of critique is not the white master narrative, but the nostalgic wash of the Western fable as set in a time of simplicity, communion with nature, black and white justice, and ‘clean’ kills.

The film’s storytelling motif adds to this revisionism by further deconstructing mythic notions of masculine prowess and incompetence. The main narrative agent of this discourse is W.W. Beauchamp (Saul Rubinek), the dime novel writer who comes to Big Whiskey as English Bob’s (Richard Harris) biographer. After Bob is beaten and banished by Sheriff Little Bill, Beauchamp latches onto the sheriff, who is not only the toughest guy in town but also the best person to disabuse Beauchamp of his false impressions of the Wild West. In their scenes together, Little Bill sounds off monologues about cowardice and reveals the ugly truth about Bob’s so-called noble killing of Two-Gun Corcoran. He tells Beauchamp that one wins a shoot-out not by a fast draw but by keeping a cool head and steady aim. Their discourse functions as a revisionist history lesson for Beauchamp and the audience as well. Through Beauchamp, the audience sees the way events are recorded, retold, and mythologized as they become attuned to the fact that this film is not only re-imagining the West, but the Western also.

The film’s preoccupation with showing men’s varying degrees of incompetence, moreover, divulges the genre’s role in masculine identity work. We are reminded that the classic Western is a ‘romance of competence’, a rather elegant phrase coined by Wendy Chapman Peek

by which she means “the man who demonstrates a range of abilities broad enough to address any perilous situation gets to be the hero” (208-9). She contends that “[b]ecause the Western is so manifestly about men, masculinity is of secondary concern”; those men who are caught up in ideals of phallic and hyper-masculinity therefore fail when up against men who are able to exhibit a range of gendered behaviours, some coded masculine, others feminine (209). I fully agree that the Western is a romance of competence – the failure of hyper-masculinity is a trope *Unforgiven* clearly reiterates through The Kid²⁶ – however, this does not at all entail that masculinity is of secondary concern. Quite the opposite, masculinity is largely defined by competent performance. According to Whitehead,

in the pursuit of being and becoming, desire becomes mediated by the ideal(ized) representations of gender that gravitate towards the discursive subject. In sum, for the masculine subject to become a man, it must appropriate the ‘ideal’ meanings of manhood circulating within that subject’s particular cultural settings and ‘communities’. (214)

Along with Foucault, Whitehead regards the process of self-production as a “work of art,” which pre-supposes that the male subject is striving toward an outcome of quality by embodying ideal representations. In other words, ‘being masculine’ is more than blindly adopting masculine-coded behaviours such as (within certain settings) chopping wood, throwing the football, and asserting physical dominance; the ‘masculine’ quality of such performances are quickly lost if not done proficiently. Granted, this is an essentialist view of masculinity, but this, too, is partly the point: an essentialist perspective proposes mastery, efficiency, and competence as masculine

²⁶ The ‘Schofield’ Kid is first presented with a puffed-up bravado, boasting dishonestly about his five kills. This persona eventually deflates after his first real kill, an ignominious shooting of Quick Mike who was sitting on the toilet.

traits.²⁷ In the historical west of *Unforgiven*, being masculine is all about whether men can shoot well, can ride well, are able pig-farmers or carpenters, and, of course, whether they can keep their cool in a showdown.

SCOFIELD KID. You don't look like no meaner than hell cold-blooded damn killer.

MUNNY. Maybe I ain't.

This film is all about watching men *trying to be men*: Beauchamp watches for the fastest gunhand, the Kid watches Munny, the audience watches both of them and watch other characters *through* them, as well. Finally, director Clint Eastwood is watching the audience, well aware of what they expect and desire to see. The audience should be partly aligned with the Kid, who also serves as their stand-in, not for a history lesson as with Beauchamp, but for a moral tutelage about false ideals of masculinity. In aspiring to be a “goddamn killer” himself, the Kid is initially drawn to the quick and deadly Munny of legend, but is soon disillusioned of glorified violence upon seeing its horrible repercussions. On the other hand, it is important that the audience share in his initial frustration with Munny, and are equally appalled at the latter's flailing dysfunctionality. This has a reverse psychological effect, of course, engineered to generate audience desire for the *real* William Munny to emerge as the fearsome Eastwood persona they've come to know and love, making the final outburst of vengeance that much more cathartic. Thus the film's realist axis spells out the genre's ethical problems, spurning violence

²⁷ The question of whether competence has gender-specific connotations can be complicated by the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Certainly, gender ontology applies respectively to biological females who are equally encouraged by the social to engage in feminine-coded performances *optimally*. Though we may have heard charges through the media or judiciary of a woman being ‘incompetent as a mother’, the term ‘competent’ or lack thereof, is rarely used to describe a woman's performance that strays, for instance, from a ‘ladylike’ ideal of femininity. The notion of competence is more so connoted with one's aptitude in the workplace, where we are more likely to see the term applied equally, regardless of gender. Thus, the term takes on gendered undertone if we take the concept of hegemonic masculinity as largely representative of a global, corporate or “transnational business” masculinity (Connell 15-17). For example, when women or men are deemed ‘incompetent’ at their job, there is the underlying prejudice that they have failed at the implicitly ‘masculine’ practices that global, corporate culture requires.

and doubting moral clarity, while the melodramatic axis inexorably pulls our emotions along. When Eastwood finally delivers what the audience ‘wants’ in the final scene – “the last repeat of the Western melodrama’s tragic chorus” (Thumim 348) – audiences should recognize their own complicated subjectivities, their moral perspective at cross-purposes with their desire, especially if they struggle to justify Munny’s vengeance so they can be at ease with their own adrenaline rush.

This self-conscious aspect “is impossible to ignore” as Thumim argues: the film “demands that its audiences consider the politics of storytelling as well as its consequences for culture and history – for social formation” (350). The important thing, not to be missed, is the audience’s recognition of their own complicity in structuring and regulating ideal meanings of manhood, and how these meanings constrain the behaviour of fictional anti-heroes like William Munny. (If the audience fails to recognize this, the prominent placement of the American flag behind Munny as he rides away from a ravaged Big Whiskey might remind them.) Likewise, Whitehead reminds us: “The subject can never know oneself as a man, nor indeed feel masculine, other than through the gaze and reception of the Other and through its own narratives of self, which serve to render it individualized” (216). Munny’s constant narration to himself and others, saying, “I ain’t like that no more,” constitutes his reformed self, one pole within his masculine ontology at odds with the “meaner than hell” killer that audiences expect and desire. But the principle force upholding the reformed ideal is Claudia, dear departed, and ever *watching over* William Munny. Hence, he is caught between two conflicting gender protocols: the ordinary man constituted by the acceptance and rejection of Claudia as Other, and the extraordinary cowboy constituted by the acceptance and rejection of the Other as the homosocial community.

Compounding the pressure is the fact that Munny is older in years with habits more ingrained, which makes these protocols more static and his ability to cope with them more inflexible. Frequent reference to the past is given through reportage and the audience learns that Munny used to run with a posse of outlaws, robbing trains and killing folks, sometimes even women and children. It is as though he had already lived the plot of a Western movie, indeed, one that looks like Will Wright's 'professional' variation. We might imagine *Unforgiven* as a kind of sequel to a film like *The Wild Bunch*, supposing the posse had lived and went on their separate ways in anonymity. But a man like Munny could not transition to ordinary life, it seems, were it not for someone like Claudia, who he says, "straightened me up, got me clear of whisky and all." He even tells his children: "Used to be I could cuss an' hurt an animal... til your departed mother, God rest her, showed me the error of my ways." Claudia embodies the woman as a moralizing force, which follows from the assumption that women have inherent moral qualities that are needed to save men from the cruelties and excesses that accompany masculinity in crisis. M.S. Kimmel notes this as an *early* profeminist response to first wave feminism, manifesting in men's support of the Social Purity and Temperance movements (106-15). The viewer is invited to reflect on this – the transformative influence of women and their ability to sustain permanent change in men – through Munny's in/capacity to remain straight for more than two years past her death. It is only the belief in Claudia's spirit watching over him, a surrogate for God or the super-ego, which can bind this man in his will to be straight.

'Now this here horse is gettin' even on me ... for the sins of my youth'

– Munny

As it turns out, however, the film doesn't really buy this moral transmission between the genders – not one bit, in fact. Munny's recurrent struggle to mount his horse is an apt

condensation of the problem. On one level, like all of Munny's signs of incompetence, it reveals his struggle to function as an ordinary man and keep his family from starving. On another, the fact that such motifs (falling off his horse, flailing in the pigpen, shooting poorly) are equally played for humour reveals the audience's disbelief that this 'changed man' is the real Eastwood hero at all. The disbelief arises not only from the durability of Eastwood's persona, but also from the ingrained ideology that gender-laden spheres are unbridgeable within the genre, which dictates that the female sphere of influence has a negligible hold at best over the cowboy hero's actions. The real violence in the movie, therefore, is an expression of the gap between the sexes. This is not only portrayed in the slashing of Delilah's face, but also in the deliberate marginalization of the women's screen time and the muting of their voices. The sole female characters are Claudia who exists only through reportage, Sally Two Trees (Ned Logan's Native wife) who never says a word, and the prostitutes, who are merely, as Alice says, 'rid and branded like horses'. Skinny is only concerned insofar as he is compensated for his "investment of capital," as stated in his contract of ownership. The inciting action revolves around Little Bill's summary justice, which all but ignores the prostitutes' subjectivities.²⁸ Munny's gang is motivated purely by self-interest and the women's call for justice is only a convenient pretence; in and of themselves, women are utterly disregarded by the men.

What should be explored, then, is the attitude toward these blank and ignorable pillars that pass for the film's women. Is *Unforgiven* hostile to the profeminist notion of women as a moralizing force? Or perhaps its reflexivity helps alleviate that disposition through critical

²⁸ Interestingly, the only one who expresses empathy beyond his own interests is Davey, when he brings an extra pony from the Bar T for Delilah to help make amends. However, Alice abruptly refuses the gesture on her behalf, throwing rocks and mud at Davey and Quick Mike as they turn their horses over to Skinny. This one moment of possible reconciliation is quickly overturned and the film resumes the regressive ideology of violence as a corrective to misogyny.

distance, thus perceiving misogyny as an inherently generic issue. The film revolves around these questions, gesturing toward them but not providing easy answers. To be sure, the notion of women as a moralizing force not only partakes of a belief system based in biological and essential differences between the sexes, but also, Kimmel claims, “fails to address men’s capacity for change within the first place. Such a position is often overly dismissive of men’s ability to change, and unforgiving of men’s clumsy and inconsistent efforts to do so” (120). A profound doubt of such profeminist rhetoric seems intuitively seeded in David Webb Peoples’ script, which germinates a suspicion within the audience that Munny will abandon his commitment and exhibit his innate compulsive masculinity. Indeed, the fact that his masculinity snaps back to old habits makes murky any possibility that man is capable of ‘positive’ transformation on his own. And the fact that the film is titled ‘Unforgiven’ ultimately circumscribes the film at this level; with Claudia’s utmost disapproval hanging over him, it serves to sustain the supposition of essential moral differences between sexed and gendered subjects. Through its critique of the Western, the masculine subject is harnessed to two conditions, and can only either submit to female-induced transformation and become an incompetent, emasculated, ordinary fellow or, alternatively, follow the Frontier Myth prescription of masculinity and thereby shun, and eternally be shunned, by the world of women.

3.2 ‘Are You Going to Shoot Your Wife as well, Captain?’ in *The Proposition*

The same fundamental question of women as a moralizing, tempering force is introduced and further complicated in *The Proposition*. The story begins when Captain Stanley (Ray Winstone) is called to Australia from his native England to ‘civilize the land’, which means controlling rebel Blacks and jailing the terrorizing Burns gang. In the first scene, Stanley captures two former gang members and presents them a proposition: Charlie (Guy Pearce) has

until Christmas to find and kill his brother, the savage ringleader, Arthur Burns (Danny Huston). If Charlie carries out this undertaking, both he and his younger brother Mikey (Richard Wilson) will be freed; if not, Mikey will be hanged. Roger Ebert likens Stanley and his ‘civilizing campaign’ to Captain Ahab and *Moby Dick*. Indeed, Stanley’s success is impossible for several reasons – his men don’t like him, his boss Eden Fletcher (David Wenham) meddles with his plan, and even his wife Martha (Emily Watson) questions his methods. Once they all find out about Stanley’s secret proposition with Charlie, the town wants blood and Mikey (a rather blameless simpleton) is flogged to death. On Christmas day, the Burns gang, along with Charlie, storm the Stanleys’ home, beat the Captain within an inch of his life, and proceed to rape Martha.²⁹ At this point, Charlie kills the rapist Samuel (Tom Budge) and shoots Arthur who was overseeing. The gut-shot Arthur then staggers out the door to watch the sunset before he dies, while Charlie joins him in the film’s final moments.

Another issue that needs qualification is which protagonist to focus on: is this Captain Stanley’s story or Charlie’s? Obviously, it can be both, but the meaning of the story changes dramatically if we shift the narrational authority from one to the other. Typically, audiences would see Charlie as the central hero and Stanley as an exponent of society, reading the film in the vein of Will Wright’s *Vengeance* variation (59, 154-63).³⁰ Charlie, initially outside and against society, must roam the desert and his own moral landscape until he realigns himself with the civilizing project. Critic James Rose reads it the same way, positioning Charlie within a long

²⁹ It is never revealed if the rape fully proceeds before Charlie shoots Samuel, although the horror is equally evoked one way or the other. That the audience is left uncertain, however, is an interesting choice on the director’s part considering Stanley’s pivotal decision to side with his wife, which we will later discuss.

³⁰ In the *Vengeance* plot, the hero is known to society but outcast at the start. His special skills are then needed and, after killing the villains and giving up his own vengeance, he is enfolded back into the social project.

line of “revisionist Western hero[es]” like William Munny, “neither good nor bad but imbued with a strong sense of moral code...[who searches] himself for redemption in the most violent of acts.” While this is partly true, it does not change the fact that Charlie’s character is flat of arc and his interiority is as stolid as a block of stone; as such, he is little more than a wheel in the plot’s machinery. In keeping with Wright, we might also read the plot across the grain as a Transition Western (74-7).³¹ This positions Captain Stanley as the good guy who must fend off frontier savagery in the name of civilization while the whole town turns against him, as in *High Noon* (Fred Zinneman, 1952). To me, the latter reading is warranted, and Rose’s article misses the point entirely. Centring our focus on Stanley provides a much richer understanding of the new pressures on cowboy masculinities, and is much more in league with the Postmortem cycle as predominantly character studies.

When applying Slotkin’s Frontier Myth analysis to the film from this angle, we might wonder right away how Stanley is ‘regenerated’ through this kind of violence. But answering this rather complicated question first requires that we unravel the film’s complex portrayal of gender and sexuality. From the outset, Stanley makes every attempt to keep his public and private lives separate. The two spheres are demarcated by gender and starkly counterposed: the masculine work of marshalling his oafish deputies to the cause of law and order is a world apart from life at home, where Stanley yields to the feminizing effects of Martha’s tender care, her well-appointed domicile, and tea-times served with pricey English china. Like a Victorian dollhouse imported from England and plopped down in the Australian outback, the Captain’s home

³¹ Wright summarizes the gist of the Transition plot as a direct inversion of the classical plot: “Rather than being forced into fighting the villains against society, the hero is forced to fight against society, which is virtually identified with the villains of the classical story. Finally, the woman whom the hero loves no longer serves inevitably to reconcile him with the society; instead, she joins him in his fight and his separation from society” (74-75).

is miles removed from the town and jailhouse where he works – a remove meant to ‘protect’ Martha’s sheltered eyes from the goings-on there. Despite Stanley’s Samsonian efforts to keep these pillars upright and separate, a sense of moral duty as well as concern for her husband’s wellbeing impels her to pry into the Captain’s day-to-day activities. The pillars start to wobble whenever she visits him at work or confronts him about his business – both of which she’s been ‘told’ not to do – and Stanley’s composure (hitherto assured with the classic cowboy’s resolute taciturnity) begins to slip. Martha’s presence at Stanley’s work disrupts the smooth functioning of his plan, just as the troubles arising from his work spill into the home. The gradual interpenetration of these spheres is dramatically rendered through *mise-en-scène*, especially in the details of setting, props, performance, and costume.

Captain Stanley’s body is the locus of this impossible balance; his anguish is signalled by the nasty migraines he suffers and the beads of sweat that drip non-stop down his face. In one scene, he must discipline his officer with physical threats. Such alpha-male performance is the only language that Sergeant Lawrence (Robert Morgan) would understand, being a hyper-masculine lout prodded by the basest impulses of fear and pleasure. The warning works to sustain the pecking order until Martha enters the scene unannounced. “Martha?!” says Stanley, nonplussed. She stands in the jailhouse entranceway, radiant in her Victorian dress. He walks over to his wife, sneaking a glance at the officer who spots a chink in the Captain’s armour, “Martha, you shouldn’t have come here.” In moments such as these, Stanley’s subtle slips evince a bumbling uneasiness beneath his icy demeanour. Within the Western’s ingrained codes of masculine identity, such cues threaten to signify weakness and incompetence. At least, they seem incompetent to the subordinating officers in his outfit like Sergeant Lawrence, who is yet

another instance in the Western's pantheon of static masculinities – dirty and thick-minded, lecherous around women, and always sizing up the hero for possible advantage.

The function of such characters is obviously to leaden the masculine fraternity, to make heavier the demands and expectations of what has become normalized male behaviour. Another function is to show the severe effects of frontier life: tough men with feet of clay turn out as little more than brutes shoved hither and thither by the elements. This portrait is acutely rendered in a scene with Sergeant Lawrence and the other deputies, pissed drunk and blustering how they all want to “fuck Stanley's wife.” The room is thick with flies and smoke and a palpable unconscious hostility. Is the hostility because the men are so sex-starved and unused to the sight of a pretty woman? “If I was married to that bucket of pig's tripe you call a fuckin' wife, I'd want to fuck her too,” jeers one to another. The tension is carried over into a following scene when we see Martha strolling the thoroughfare. The lengthy tracking shot is intensely unnerving as everyone, men and women included, turn their head. Martha's impeccable Victorian dress, with her parasol, draped overskirt and rustled underskirt, clashes with the context of her environment. In such a homely town with everything dust-covered and sun-baked, anything colourful, let alone clean, seems abnormal. Perhaps the hostility stems from class-consciousness, a sense of uppityness or shelteredness that affronts their humble living conditions. Is the rape impulse, then, a fantasy of degradation, to equalize class through physical domination? It may also be the men's way of getting back at Captain Stanley. Sergeant Lawrence raves to the men that the Captain's weak, and it is surely the latter's effort to regulate both severely and humanely that compromises his strength in Lawrence's eyes.

Stanley's marriage is what humanizes him: it seems the only fount of regeneration, if you will, in a parched landscape of disorder, rebellion, and impossibly dense masculinities. What is

unique about this film from traditional Westerns is that he actually listens to her and changes for her. Their relationship is also made more complex by the allusions to class and feminist values, which, in some ways, is analogous to Munny's offscreen relationship with Claudia. The opening credits of *Unforgiven* supply some important context:

Of good family, albeit one of modest means, [Claudia] was a comely young woman and not without prospects. Therefore, it was at once heartbreaking and astonishing to her mother that she would enter into marriage with William Munny, a known thief and murderer.

As implied earlier, the Social Purity and Temperance movements likely informed Claudia's moral disposition, and her more civilized manner and slightly elevated class-status became the *raison d'être* for Munny's reformation. Likewise, Emily Watson's performance demonstrates attentiveness to the historical conditions that would have probably shaped her character. As an upper-middle class, educated Englishwoman, she would be well aware of the emerging Feminist movement in Britain and the United States, including women's suffrage and active engagement in the public sphere. We see such values imprinted on Martha's countenance – that it is her right as a morally responsible citizen that she not only stay informed but actively participate in public matters. Just the same, we would expect the Captain to advocate feminist values if their marriage were to work at all. “A clever and well-bred woman, your wife,” says the unctuous Eden Fletcher, “You did well for yourself Captain.” The compliment is vaguely back-handed, speculating that Stanley married above his class. This subtext is corroborated in an interview with Winstone in which he tells of the back-story that he and Watson invented together about their characters. As their back-story goes, the disapproval from Martha's family and social circle became too much to bear, motivating them to start afresh in Australia. While the decision was a

testament to their bond, Stanley felt greatly indebted. Naturally, the repugnant conditions of their new location would only intensify his need to compensate her.

The pivotal turning point in the film comes when Captain Stanley realizes his officers have betrayed him – the secret of his proposition is out and the town is in uproar. Fletcher, backed by an angry mob, orders that Mikey be publicly lashed 100 times. The Captain is ready to guard against this disastrous decision with his life, declaring that any man who steps foot in the prison will be shot. “Are you going to shoot your wife as well, Captain?” says Fletcher, and lo and behold, Martha emerges from the crowd. Like Grace Kelly in *High Noon*, she sides with the town against her husband. He tries to reason with her: “Martha, if this flogging goes ahead... it will be our death sentence.” Her final justification is that if it were she who was raped and murdered would *he* not demand retribution? Now, quite *unlike* Gary Cooper’s Marshall Will Kane, Stanley surrenders and the flogging proceeds, which directly results in the catastrophic final scene.

By playing against generic expectations in this way, the audience is more than likely to reflect on why Stanley chose to side with his wife, knowing that it would lead to both their ruin. We have already considered a few possible motivations: from Martha’s status as a moralizing force, to Stanley’s need to compensate her, to the actual bond of love between them that probably trumps them all. But it is not so much the answer to the above question than a matter of what the film believes. The stakes are raised so high against Stanley that it is high time, in the plot and within the genre, that the will of the cowboy be broken. The film wants to dramatize the impossibility of a successful negotiation of the public and private, of balancing domesticity with the onslaught of hegemonic masculinity, of abiding politically correct protocols while still doing what needs be done. Additionally, there is the virulent perspective that can observe the final rape

scene and say, “so much for your moralizing faculty, Martha, now suffer the consequences of not listening to your husband.” (We will revisit the dark assumptions underlying such opinions when we look at a scene from *Deadwood*, which tackles this issue head-on.)

The anti-feminist hostility captured in such thinking is not the film’s perspective, however, nor does the film support the (now outdated) form of profeminism that advocates essential moral differences between the sexes, even if such notions are portrayed for the sake of historical accuracy. Soon after Mikey’s flogging, a shattered Martha apologizes to Stanley, saying, “I just wanted to protect you. I had an idea about justice and...for the town, for the country...for you. And now...I don’t know.” This scene alone disabuses the audience that women are merely symbolic of morality in this film, and the final scene need not be read as a necessary overkill. This being so, there is every possibility that Stanley would not reverse his pivotal decision to concede to Martha even if he could. Foreseeing the future bloodshed, the motivation would certainly not be to ‘teach Martha a lesson’, and not even because he might suspect her morally in the right. The motivation stems from Stanley’s masculine ontology, which is foremost identified with devotion to his wife. Even though yielding to her spells catastrophe, the value for Stanley lies precisely in the yielding and not in the repercussions that are finally beyond his control. This is where Roger Ebert’s analysis falls short: likening Stanley’s impossible civilizing endeavour to Captain Ahab’s hunt for the whale is fitting, but only up until a certain point. Ahab never submits; Stanley, so importantly, does.

Therefore, it is not that the film denies feminist values; on the contrary, through Stanley, it fully espouses them. It is more accurate, then, to say that while such values would have been salutary in 19th century England, this Australian town is far too uncivilized to acculturate them. By centring on the couple and their complex dynamic within this primeval spot, where everyone

both inside and outside society is a hair's breadth away from turning on decency like a wild jackal, the film dramatizes the immense pressures on the masculine subject's *process of becoming*. The graphic violence in the film is an emanation of this turmoil, which stems from the gap between the sexes that bars understanding and harmonious integration, not only of couples, but society too.

This is why everything that Stanley attempts is always already frustrated by its own undoing, as he anxiously toes the line between being a husband and a lawman, being both humane and severe. More than anything else, this is the dominant theme of the film, the spark that animates every action as an accident waiting to happen. The unnerving undercurrent provides the added value of pathos in the details of the Stanleys' home, such as the fake snow imported from England to adorn their Christmas tree, the feeble fence around their plot of land and the rosebushes so tenderly arranged. All of this trepidation culminates in the final moments of the film and is dramatically channelled into Stanley's unsteady hand as he carves the Christmas turkey. While the couple do their utmost to celebrate a quaint Christmas dinner, they must try equally hard to ignore the loaded shotgun sitting at the table. Moments before the Burns gang bust down their door, beat Stanley and rape Martha, she unwittingly says grace: "For what we are about to receive...may the Lord make us truly thankful." Since they are both still living at the end, I suppose they *would* be thankful. But this is where the story ends, and how the Stanleys manage to carry on together afterward is difficult to ponder, indeed. Ending on this open-ended question mark is the film's ambiguous response to whether its violence is actually redemptive.

What is somewhat clearer is the prospect that Stanley is redeemed through his marriage. Despite their immense suffering together, they have upheld and presumably strengthened their

bond. The value of being a devoted husband ranks highest in Stanley's masculine ontology, and the gendered process of becoming within the story purges him of competing drives so that this one value is made plain to see. By contrast, the redemptive power that men find in women is put to question in *Unforgiven*; William Munny may have initially found redemption through his marriage, 'curing him of drink and wickedness', but this was an altogether different story, a back-story against which Munny turns his own back in the course of the plot. As we shall see, *The Claim* is a rather interesting balance between the two because, like *The Proposition*, it dramatizes the realm of domesticity as a site of redemption for the masculine subject while, like *Unforgiven*, it frustrates the subject's positive transformation as the hero's masculinist patterns prove too difficult to overcome. It is as though Winterbottom's film chooses to dramatize the offscreen back-story of Eastwood's film, but takes on a more tragic dimension because its protagonist is not able to enjoy, even the temporary redemption attained by Munny.

3.3 When a Man Loses Heart in *The Claim*

The Claim begins when a young man, trudging through the Sierra Mountains searching for gold, comes upon a claim owned by Mr. Burn (Tom McCamus). Though the claim is bountiful, Mr. Burn has grown weary. "There's no pleasure in it," Burn says, "A man loses heart. Even if he makes a strike, he loses heart." Notwithstanding, the rash and ambitious young man proceeds to trade his wife and infant daughter for the claim. And so Mr. Burn decamps with his new family while the man carries through on the claim and makes it rich. Years later in 1867, the man, Daniel Dillon (Peter Mullan), lords over the town of Kingdom Come, which has since sprouted up around his claim. When Donald Dalglish (Wes Bentley), a surveyor for the CP railway, comes to town to examine the railway's best route of passage, the fate of Kingdom Come depends upon his decision. Arriving simultaneously is Elena Burn (Nastassja Kinski) and

her daughter Hope (Sarah Polley), the wife and child that Dillon traded up years ago. Mr. Burn had since passed and left them penniless, and now Elena, who is sick with consumption, has returned to ask Dillon for money. Dillon presently cohabits with a beautiful madame named Lucia (Milla Jovovich), but he is crestfallen, just as Mr. Burn before him. Thus, when Dillon learns of Elena and Hope's arrival, he sees it immediately as his chance for redemption. He cuts his connection with Lucia and makes a public show of marrying Elena, and the wedded couple keep their past a secret in the meantime, even from Hope. Soon afterward, Elena dies and things worsen for Dillon: Dalglish decides not to pass the railway through Kingdom Come, there is a mass exodus of the townsfolk to where the new tracks will be laid, and Hope, after learning of her father's awful secret, abandons him too. Having nothing left to live for, Dillon sets fire to the empty town and freezes to death, blind drunk and alone, in the snow.

The story is loosely based on Thomas Hardy's 1886 novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and follows a similar plot trajectory while relocating the setting from rustic England to the American West. Yet there are some important changes in the characters, most noteworthy of which is that Dillon is not quite the cruel and conniving character that is his counterpart (Michael Henchard) in Hardy's novel, and neither is Dalglish the purely virtuous man that is the novel's Donald Farfrae. Although the plot initially portrays them this way, Winterbottom complicates both portraits to present a story that is less about good prevailing over evil than a study of the trials and pitfalls of compulsive masculinity. Michael Kimmel defines compulsive masculinity as the common characteristics of "violence, aggression, extreme competitiveness, a gnawing insecurity... [which leads to] a masculinity that must always prove itself and that is always in doubt" (93). Dillon is not a particularly crazed or malevolent character as much as one who suffers from this condition. Whatever sense of lack or gnawing insecurity prompted him to trade

his family for a fortune was likely the same impulse that prompted him to become lord and ruler over Kingdom Come, and also what drew him to woo Lucia, his young, talented, and devoted girlfriend, so coveted by other men. Yet all these things he's acquired, just like the family he bartered, are revealed as an outward show that brings him no solace.

Therefore it makes sense that Dillon would attribute his disheartenment to that unpardonable sin of his past. He has convinced himself that making amends for that is the key to his inner peace. Occupying the role of the town's judge, jury, and administrator of justice seems to drain his soul, though it seems a role only he can handle. There is a scene in which a card-cheater must be punished, and so Dillon dispenses a public flogging. With each lash the town hollers hungrily for more, while Dillon subtly signals his disgust. Even as he is applauded by all as the paragon of frontier masculinity, his subjectivity is harnessed by having to play to the savage and unruly crowd. Shortly thereafter, the eponymous Hope appears to deliver him a glass necklace from her mother, a token to signify their return to Kingdom Come. It is as though a bolt of lightning passes through him: "Hope?!" he shouts, as she briskly departs into the thoroughfare. The scene is framed like a moment of grace peaking through the cracks of Dillon's dull weariness – 'hope' has returned at last to his horizon.

It is interesting to note that *The Claim*'s violence is wielded almost exclusively by Dillon, the foremost purveyor of governmentality in Kingdom Come. Foucault's discourse on governmentality explains the way that order is disciplined through self-policing and the threat of punishment. The whipping scene demonstrates this most vividly in Dillon's measured restraint, in the crowd's zealous validation, and in the punished man himself, who voices his assent: "I know what I did was wrong" he declares before the crowd, "and deserve to be punished." As opposed to Big Whiskey's dysfunctional governmentality as directed through the whip of Little

Bill who either lashes too sadistically or not at all, or the town in *The Proposition*, which is overrun by mob contagion, the order of Kingdom Come is upheld through the deft hand of Dillon. It is ironic, therefore, that his execution of violence is controlled in matters of state, but rash and erratic when it comes to his personal wants and needs. As opposed to our previous two films, the representation of violence in *The Claim* is quite different, most notably in the lack of violence against women. We may read this absence as a symptom of man's 'benign mistreatment' of women as opposed to the other two, whose graphic imagery expresses a repressed hostility within sexed and gendered relations. The violence in *The Claim*, on the other hand, is a direct function of a compulsive masculinity. Dillon cannot but regress to a primitive savagery when his grip on things begins to falter. Sensing that the railroad will be re-routed, he threatens Dalglish to either bring the railroad to Kingdom Come or never come back, a threat which later results in a shoot-out and Dillon's merciless slaying of two sleeping men. In the end, when there is nobody over whom he can exercise control, the violence is turned toward the world of material things, as he sets his house, and later the town, ablaze. Lastly, the violence is directed inward against himself, through suicide by excessive drink and exposure.

In light of this, the manner in which Dillon seizes upon his chance for redemption through Elena and Hope is deeply revealing. He has a mansion built and fully appointed with furniture that would cost a fortune to import. Next, in an act that would equal a pharaoh, he deploys every able-bodied man and a team of horses to pull the house miles across town through the snow. He then has a band serenade Elena from outside her hotel window, revealing the house to her as an engagement present. This megalomaniacal display of power, an act of overcompensation to equal the depth of his shame, epitomizes the nature of compulsive masculinity. Dillon's grandiose romantic gestures, his extraordinary marshalling of will and

strength, all stem from the need to prove something to himself through the eyes of others. Sadly though, it is too little, too late, for the ailing Elena, and their married time together is fleeting and empty of meaningful relating. With all his wealth and power, Dillon can only sit idly by and watch while she and the prospect of his redemption swiftly fade away.

The enormous gap between the sexes is a persistent theme in the story, which is underscored by the frontier landscape. The harsh wintry weather is an irrepressible force in this film. The many long shots of bundled-up men labouring through the snow dwarf the human scale; the biting cold and howling winds bear down on each and intensify their loneliness. In such conditions, it is not surprising that men and women are yoked first and foremost in the brothel, the base outpost of human contact employing all of the story's women characters, save Elena and Hope. The latter two, along with the brothel's madame Lucia, embody an altogether different set of gendered connotations: custom dictates that they be treated as 'ladies' while the prostitutes require neither affectation nor decorum. In one scene, there is a tightly framed two-shot of Hope and Lucia traversing the thoroughfare, which pulls back to reveal a crew of men using planks to suspend them from the snow. As the men trundle back and forth bringing the end plank to the front to keep pace with the women, viewers are witness to an amusing picture of chivalry, which is perhaps as antiquated to contemporary feminist perspectives as the men's labour is inefficient.

It is not just that *The Claim* reiterates this dichotomous lady/whore trope in such scenes, but in striving to illuminate the real subjectivities behind these labels, it further reveals how this binary perspective structures the way men see – and fail to see – women. Lucia strikes us as a modern empowered woman who is able to love and financially prosper autonomously and, rather unconventionally for a Western, the plot does not persecute her for her pre-marital relations.

Even so, she is dumped without a moment's hesitation by Dillon and is passed over by Dalglish, except for sex. So, too, does Hope's subjectivity seem to be overlooked by all the other men including Dalglish, who "seems curiously unable to articulate any romantic interest in her" (Allingham). The most maligned and disregarded subjectivity is, of course, Elena's.³² When the young Dillon tells Burn that he owns nothing "but her," she retorts "you don't *own* me!" – a politically correct affirmation – and yet she is curiously mute when the men spit and shake hands. Whereas Martha and Claudia signified strong moralizing women who effected significant changes in their husband's masculinity, the most we can glean from Elena is a meek and lukewarm demeanour. She is only mildly impressed with Dillon's marriage proposal; she is contented insofar that Hope will be looked after but beyond that there is no sign of love or feeling for Dillon. As such, the focus of the story is thrown back squarely on the false consciousness behind Dillon's subjectivity, as the realm of marriage and domesticity wherein he would find salvation turns out to be nothing more than an empty stage.

With nothing, neither women nor marriage, neither wealth nor power bringing Dillon any salve, the audience is induced to look at the man himself, not only for the cause of his rash and overzealous behaviour, but also for the answer as to what would ever fulfill him. The answer is obviously not seen in Mr. Burn who, in trading gold for another's family, was presumably not much better off. Nor is it easily seen in the remaining cast of male characters, with the possible exception of Dalglish, Dillon's foil. Dalglish wins the heart of Hope early on: when a rowdy

³² Looking through the glass the other way, the film presents the one prospect of genuine relating between the sexes arising from the least expected source, the brothel. The many (paid for) hours that Francis (Julian Richings), Dalglish's right hand man, spends with the prostitute Annie (Shirley Henderson), develops into a tender bond of affection that leads to their engagement. This raises the eyebrows of the other prostitutes, who all doubt Francis' sincerity; Dalglish, too, wonders if Francis is out of his mind marrying a prostitute. Despite these public perceptions, they get married and their brief scenes together are the only occasions in the film when men and women relay their heartfelt emotions and concerns back and forth.

makes a pass at her, Dalglish straightaway punches him out. He is gallant and soft-spoken and cannot be bribed – hence, we are set up to think that he and Dillon will have their row, good versus bad. But the turning point happens midway through the story, when the audience is partly won over by Dillon’s act of repentance while Dalglish, as his name implies, is shown to be little more than a dog leashed to the railroad. We glimpse the latter’s impassivity when a gruesome accident occurs when out surveying. He is curiously untroubled having to re-route the railroad, knowing that several lives will be disrupted. He starts an affair with Lucia after having made romantic overtures to Hope. In all conceivable ways, he is the opposite of Dillon: Dalglish is owned and controlled by the railway whereas Dillon is a pioneer and risk-taker. And yet, Dalglish is tempered and his mistakes are misdemeanours compared to Dillon’s blunders, which are as colossal as his ambitions. But since we never delve too far beneath Dalglish’s skin, we do not know what the future holds for him and Hope, who set out together in the final scene. As the townsfolk pick through the ashes from the fire, several seem despondent about Dillon’s demise, including Dalglish, who expresses to Hope: “They’re like kings... pioneers, people like Dillon. They came out here when there was nothing, built these towns and ruled them, like kings.” The film simultaneously reproves and admires the compulsive masculinities of our pioneering ancestors, portraying them as a tragic necessity who have helped forge civilization’s way forward, but have seen their day. In Dalglish, the film offers forth a new masculinity, one less glamorous but also less rash, bound to corporate structures and less free to navigate their destiny. Dalglish’s is a more ordinary masculinity with ordinary flaws, but he is also capable of apologizing (as he finally does to Hope) without the hankering need to prove himself.

3.4 Home on the Range

For the subject to ‘create itself as a (masculine) work of art’ it must reach for those ideal(ized) representations of gender that surround it. These idealized expressions will remain just that: ideal, largely symbolic and out of permanent grasp. Consequently, despite its importance for the subject’s ontology, being masculine must be constantly engaged with, worked at and explored. (Whitehead 216)

Each of these films demonstrates the passage above by showing masculine subject formation as a process constantly in flux, a process in which women play a vital complicating role. But in spite of their added importance to the story, the women have little range of subjectivity in and of themselves. This might lead us to conclude, then, that little has changed in the aforementioned Tompkins axiom: maybe these films don’t ‘push women out of the picture completely’, but their assigned roles still seem ‘only to serve the needs of men’. However, it would be more accurate if we augment Tompkins’s axiom to say that women still exist only to serve: not the needs of men, but the needs of a new type of Western. Instead of turning his back on the female sphere and preserving a homosocial safe space, the Postmortem hero attempts to engage the sphere directly by embracing domesticity, laying down his arms, and attempting the path of the ordinary man, if only for a short while. Will he let himself be transformed? A man is but a half a man without a wife, these films seem to say. As the proverb goes, marriage is a quick solution to a whole new set of problems and, indeed, these new problems make good fodder for the Postmortem Western. The fire that forges the masculine subject’s regeneration is not as much the shoot-out anymore, but the hearth; the new frontier is withstanding the heat of domesticity and the myriad difficulties arising from sexual difference. Thus it appears that these films make some attempt to unravel the enigma of women and sexual difference as posited by

Žižek, and are partly successful in de-concealing Hollywood's habit of repression through 'constituent ideology'.

Moreover, their analysis sheds light on the intricate relationship between masculine ontology, competence, and the compulsive need to prove oneself through masculine-coded endeavour. These films presuppose that the female sphere and all that it represents would tenderize the male subject during his process of formation, easing the adrenalizing effects of hyper-masculine performance in the public realm. This is what Martha does, by giving the captain a haven to relax his migraine headaches, by facilitating softness through her presence: like the way he changes from aggressive to tender in the scene where she comes to see him in the jailhouse. But we notice that in all three films the main obstacle to harmonious negotiation of these two gender laden-spheres is some combination of addictive, aggressive, and compulsive behaviour. By their very nature, such cowboy-styled masculinities bar the male subject's capacity to 'lay his head down' within his own interiority, by insisting that he take arms and perform a romance of competence out on the frontier. And here, the 'frontier' is taken to mean the Frontier Myth scenario of separation, regression, and regeneration through violence, which, it should be clear by now, is the scenario responsible for shaping cowboy masculinities. Each of these heroes is increasingly torn between two poles within their masculine ontology – *regeneration through violence* and *recuperation through domesticity* – which, we will continue to see, is the principal binary underlying the Postmortem Western.

Chapter 4: ‘You Cannot Fuck the Future, Sir. The Future Fucks You.’

Epic Reformulation and Neoliberal Masculinities in *Deadwood*

Deadwood's special status as both an HBO series and an epic makes it a critical component of our study. Since HBO prime-time programming has earned such popular and critical notoriety and is considered to have some of the most original creative content in television and American genre cinema today, theoretically *Deadwood* should showcase the most innovative work presently being produced in the Western (Edgerton 1-22). As we shall see, the series delves into the same central themes of regeneration through violence and recuperation through domesticity explored in the last chapter while its format as an episodic series enables it to expand upon these much further as well as add new dimensions. Moreover, *Deadwood* may be considered the only Western of epic scale made in the past 20 years apart from *Dances With Wolves*, which goes a long way to re-inaugurate the Western's relevance and sustainability as a contemporary genre. As an epic, *Deadwood* charts an alternative way forward that is unconstrained by the progressive and populist ideologies of Slotkin's Historical and Cult of the Outlaw dichotomy. Still revisionist, it replays and revises the Western's conventions of masculinity and the Frontier Myth, but distinguishes itself by proffering a prescription of masculine-subject formation to cope with the multitude of pressures and social effects of our current neoliberal era. It appears that Milch intended the series as more than just a character study. As he says, it is "about something larger, about drivers below the surface, moving the characters and the action forward" ("Bonus Disc"). Taking the characters together as a body politic, I submit that the two main drivers beneath the surface are gender relations and the marketplace.

Before moving ahead, we should justify the significance of HBO as a venue for the Western form. HBO established its distinctive brand identity of being “different, challenging, and more original” in the mid-90s, when they began limiting their output to thirteen episodes per year and investing more money into program development (from \$2 to \$4 million per prime-time hour). The idea was to ensure their subscription-based channel was worth paying for and to capitalize on the fact that American audiences were watching more television than ever before. The burgeoning trend of ‘appointment TV’ and the digital conversion of audiences, meant viewers were increasingly building programming into their daily schedule and time and place shifting when and where they watch. Viewers were primarily lured by HBO’s breakout programming, but they were also baited by new venues such as HBO online, DVD box-sets, series syndication, and the ‘multiplexing’ of HBO’s satellite channel (into HBO Family and HBO Signature, etc.), all of which, capitalized on alternate streams of revenue. This combination of high-quality programming and savvy business model would garner the highest annual yields (over \$1.1 billion) earned by any television network in both 2004 and 2005, (years corresponding with *Deadwood*’s first and second season) (Edgerton 8-11). Needless to say, HBO’s success dramatically affected the way other networks did business and reset the bar for quality content in television.³³ As Gary Edgerton puts it in his introduction to *The Essential HBO Reader*, HBO has established itself as a “highly profitable boutique network” within the Time-Warner Corporation; its reputation for permitting creative freedom has made it a magnet for the most creative directors, writers and producers in American film and television (13-15).

Aside from its mandate for groundbreaking creative content, there are two other advantages that the HBO format affords: series-length that can be extended into multiple seasons

³³ For example, CBS was influenced to follow a similar model with its Showtime network. See Edgerton’s “Introduction” in the *HBO Reader* for his analysis of other networks similarly affected.

and the absence of the MPAA rating system. Taken together, both have a profound impact on generic and cultural verisimilitude – key factors that Steve Neale says influence a genre’s ability to sustain and adapt over time (160-163). Just so, the purpose of revisionist Westerns has been to answer this call for increased verisimilitude. By responding to a changing cultural horizon of expectations as well as retaining enough conventions that the story still looks and functions in accordance with the genre, the Postmortem Western has developed some distinct trademarks of theme and style. By and large, they complicate gender relations and performativities, incorporate politically correct protocols and, perhaps most importantly, dispel the ‘successful’ lone hero myth. *Deadwood*’s series-length is ideal in these respects because it provides enough time to flesh out character relationships, expand the representation of gender roles, sexualities, and ethnicities, and muddle conventional narrative dynamics.

Additionally, it is important that production and distribution matters do not censor the ‘truth effect’ of the Postmortem Western’s darker and grittier aesthetics. In an interview with *Salon.com*, David Milch says: “the idea of the western...as people conceive it, is really an artefact of the Hays Production Code of the ‘20s and ‘30s and it has really nothing to do with the West, and much to do with...a sanitized heroic idea of what America was.” By his own account, Milch faced similar censorship constraints working in network television and was relieved that the absence of HBO’s rating system allowed him to come to the Western “fresh.” As a result, *Deadwood* mars any semblance of the classical Western’s glossy patina with depictions of graphic violence, coarse language and agonizing frontier conditions, ratcheted to an extreme never before seen in the Western. Just as HBO had reset the bar for original programming, *Deadwood* resets the bar for generic verisimilitude in future Westerns. Such alteration has led to claims such as Horace Newcomb’s that *Deadwood* really is not a Western at all: it neither revises

nor replays elements of the genre, but exposes “the genre itself, as an attempt to provide ‘endings’ which can never be true” (99-100). To be sure, Newcomb is partly right, for *Deadwood* proposes no easy endings; on the other hand, its process of demythologization depends squarely on replaying and revising the Western’s conventions, as do the other films in this study, which together pave the way for the genre’s future in film and television.

4.1 Synopsis

The show’s three seasons take place in the historical town of Deadwood between 1876 and 1877, three years after the discovery of gold in the surrounding Black Hills and up to the town’s annexation by the territory of South Dakota. It dramatizes how market forces combine with greed, aggression, and civic virtue to form a civilization within a lawless context. The story begins when Seth Bullock (Timothy Olyphant) leaves his post as a Marshall in Montana to establish a hardware store in Deadwood with his friend Sol Star (John Hawkes). One of their first conflicts comes in bartering real estate from Al Swearengen (Ian McShane), an early settler whose Gem Saloon earns a hefty profit through prostitution, heroin trafficking, and employing road agents (“Deadwood”). Bullock soon realizes (much like *Clementine*’s Wyatt Earp) that the lawless town needs an upstanding and trustworthy Sheriff, so he takes up the tin star himself.

While he and Swearengen are rivals from the outset, both come to understand the need to cooperate because each has something the other lacks, either in aptitude or disposition. Despite his despotic tendencies, Swearengen is increasingly humanized and relatable, while Bullock’s moral rectitude often impedes progress toward the greater good, requiring that he continually compromise his code of conduct. Bullock’s uptight and straight-backed walk is a distinctive feature of the show, evincing a barely-controlled impulse to thrash those who would stray from just and common decency. But he himself is a contradiction, too. Early on, he falls in love with

Alma Garret (Molly Parker), a recently widowed claim seeker from New York. To complicate things, Bullock's wife Martha (Anna Gunn) and child eventually show up, forcing Bullock and Garret to break off their relationship. This, of course, only furthers his image of a bottled-up and torn masculinity, as he suppresses his passions to resume the role of dutiful husband.

He don't know if he's breathing or taking it in through fucking gills, he is that fucking cuntstruck.

They're afloat, in some fairy fucking bubble lighter than air – him, her snatch, and his stupid fucking badge.

– Al Swearengen

Swearengen is keening in on Bullock from his balcony overlooking the thoroughfare, concerned that the Sheriff's affair with Alma will compromise his firmness of purpose. And so he sounds off insults loud enough for Bullock to hear. When Bullock demands he account for his indignities, Swearengen, reasoning as best he knows how, exhorts "Jesus Christ, Bullock! The world abounds in cunt of every kind, including hers." With that remark the two proceed to beat each other almost to death. Swearengen manages to gain the upper hand through unfair means and draws a knife to Bullock's throat. But the fight is suddenly interrupted by a stagecoach delivering Bullock's wife and 12-year old son. Upon seeing them, Swearengen freezes, open-mouthed and dumbstruck. "Welcome to fucking Deadwood," he calls out finally, "It can be combative." Ending the fight, he makes his way limping and bleeding back to his headquarters in the Gem ("A Lie Agreed Upon, Part 1"). That Swearengen thinks Bullock's romance will make him soft, and that Bullock risks his life defending the honour of a woman (who incidentally, was not present to hear the insult) reiterates the binary of regeneration through violence and recuperation through domesticity underlying the films examined thus far.

Deadwood goes further though, by explicitly presenting this binary as a practical dilemma that

each man must resolve, as these two men do by negotiating against each other as well as with the cast of women characters.

Swearengen and Bullock are shadow sides of each other, each embracing what the other tries to repress. Bullock can barely contain the murderous rage that Swearengen coolly summons for his own purposes. And while expressions of virtue are front and centre in Bullock's code of conduct, Swearengen's many monologues betray an ill-fitted, twisted-up compassion. Within Swearengen's masculine ontology, compassion causes a man to lose his nerve and is what made him hesitate in slitting Bullock's throat, as he later discloses to his henchman Dan (W. Earl Brown): "Cow-eyed kid looking from that coach, that's what fucking unmanned me." Bullock, too, glimpses how romance and civic duty are poor bedfellows. At one point during their tryst, he admits to Alma, "I'll intend something, come to myself realizing I've only stood or sat thinking about you. Just now, that your toes are beautiful, when I'd intended to replenish the kindling" ("A Lie Agreed Upon, Part 1"). With both protagonists frequently at odds and exhibiting strengths and weaknesses in alternating measure, an ideal masculinity is conceived as a mean or balance between the two. It is neither Bullock nor Swearengen in and of themselves, but a productive tension between them that approximates *Deadwood's* fully integrated hero.

Of course, an equally important factor in this masculine subject formation is the domesticating influence of women characters like Alma, Martha, and Trixie (Paula Malcomson), Swearengen's favourite moll. Here, *Deadwood's* series-length rounds out deep and plausible female subjectivities well beyond anything seen before, or perhaps even possible, in feature Westerns. As we discussed in chapter two, there are three tendencies confining women in the Western: either they are relegated to one or the other pole of the schoolmarm/saloon-girl

(Madonna/Whore) binary, their empowerment is overdetermined to the point that they masquerade as men, or they supply an alternate tone and counterpoint to cathartic violence, which Blake Lucas has argued is their best hope (307). In all cases, their presence is rarely more than symbolic. By contrast, many of *Deadwood*'s empowered women control their own destinies within the plot; their autonomy paints a convincing portrait of feminine subject formation and, as such, poses a dialectical relationship to *Deadwood*'s men. As sociologist Arthur Brittan has said: "How men behave will depend upon the existing social relations of gender. By this I mean the way in which men and women confront each other ideologically and politically" (3). As is always the case with historical dramas and epics (which say more about the times in which they are made than the times in which they are set) *Deadwood*'s male-female confrontations echo contemporary gender relations. A feminist perspective might analyze these women's roles for how they reflect political constraints still lingering from the times of the old West, but that would be another project in and of itself. Instead, my profeminist perspective focuses on men's responses to this process of empowerment, seeing new masculinities forming from the unravelling of old gender scripts, as well as particularly stubborn points of inflexibility.

4.2 Women of Deadwood

Since the Western's gender performance scripts have become so rigidly ingrained, one of the series' main sources of pleasure is derived from continually cutting across this grain of expectations by bending, breaking, and inverting these scripts in innovative new ways. Alma comes from high-society New York and clearly embodies Eastern values of culture, institutions, and idealism, but her integrity, love of freedom, and tendency toward solipsism suggest her affinity with the West. Upon striking it rich from her gold claim, she could have retreated back to her familiar social circle in New York and reaped the proceeds. And even though her life in

Deadwood is threatened from many angles (as a recently widowed single woman, not yet disillusioned of her Eastern ideals, in a town with no laws or government) her pioneering spirit motivates her to stay on and establish Deadwood's first bank. Still, every strong feature of her personality is clouded by a complication: she takes on the role of guardian to the orphaned Sofia (Bree Seanna Wall) while she struggles to overcome an addiction to laudanum; she conducts herself as upright and dignified outwardly, while she engages in an adulterous affair with the wedded Bullock; she is righteous, empowered, and defies the limiting sexual politics of her milieu, and yet she is often vulnerable and suffering and relies on the support of others. In the course of the narrative, her circumstance changes from wife, to widow, to guardian, to unwed expectant mother, to banker, to wife, to widow again – her presence is anything but simplified or symbolic.

Likewise, Joanie (Kim Dickens) and Trixie, the 'mother hens' of their respective brothels, transcend their social positions as prostitutes. Joanie had been abused from a very young age by her father, who later sold her to Cy Tolliver (Powers Boothe), owner of the Bella Union Saloon and Brothel. Later, with Cy's reluctant support, she is 'released' to start up her own high-end brothel in Deadwood. After that business venture failed for matters more catastrophic than poor management, she opens Deadwood's first school. Her timidity and chronic self-doubt is always mitigated by her steady, quiet determination. Trixie, on the other hand, has a fiery and outspoken temperament, and is ever torn between her devotion to Swearingen and her newfound affection for Sol. Her rough and thorny relationship with Swearingen is glimpsed in one of their first scenes together. Swearingen throws her against the wall, presses his boot against her windpipe and threatens her with a gun – her punishment for killing a john who had beaten her up ("Deadwood"). Although this initial perception of

Swearengen as an abusive misogynist is never completely undone, his relationship with Trixie serves as a window into his hidden compassion. Swearengen was an abandoned child himself, and though he purchased his prostitutes for profit, it was also his way of protecting and providing for them. We learn through Trixie that this is why he took Jewel (Geri Jewell) ‘the gimp’ under his wing – a physically disabled woman for whom no john would ever pay (“New Money”). He also nudges Trixie toward starting a new life with Sol, even though this makes him visibly jealous.

Both Al and Cy’s tucked away affections desire that these women outgrow their status as prostitutes and become financially independent. As a result, Joanie becomes an entrepreneur and benefactor, and Trixie learns accounting from Sol. Even so, neither woman is able to fully transcend their gendered scripts as prostitutes: Joanie comments that she’s “just a whore” even though she co-owns a brothel; Trixie spontaneously offers Sol’s friend Charlie (Dayton Callie) a “quick open-air blow job” while the two are waiting outside Sol’s house (which the disconcerted Charlie politely refuses) (“No Other Sons or Daughters”; “A Lie Agreed Upon, Part 2”). Lest audiences begin to romanticize Trixie’s beginnings as a ‘new’ woman, the notion quickly dissolves with this brazen reminder of her carnality, reminding audiences of the deeply ingrained materialities of her class and upbringing. Nonetheless, as each woman moves out from under the thumb of a patriarchal oppressor they are able to grow, garner new knowledge and fall in love, as Trixie does with Sol and Joanie does with Jane Cannary.

Jane, or Calamity Jane, is a particularly notable example of a character that blurs the traditional Western binary of male and female gender-coded scripts. It is surely a testament to the resilience of this binary that there have been so few overtly queer representations in the

Western's history.³⁴ But since *Deadwood* thrives by complicating heterosexual relations and gender roles, it is fitting that it takes the time to disclose Jane's contradictory desires and motivations, and bring to light aspects of lesbian subject formation. Her one true love appears to be Wild Bill Hickock (Keith Carradine). Although it seems Platonic from the outset, her excessive doting suggests an underlying ambivalence within her own sexuality: being married, Bill is off limits, but his chivalrous manner epitomizes the perfect man who, if Jane cannot marry, she would emulate. Perhaps this partly explains her tomboy dress and surliness around other men and why it is she jockeys for dominance as though she had a masculine inferiority complex of her own.

After Bill dies, Jane falls heavily to drink and her alcoholism lasts through all three seasons. Maybe she needs this inebriation in order to avail herself as she does, with eyes half-closed, to an intimate relationship with Joanie ("Unauthorized Cinnamon"). The fact that the series portrays this dynamic unflinchingly, representing their sexual intimacy with all the awkwardness and shame that accompanies each encounter, attests to an open and non-normative queer perspective that falls in suit with contemporary politically correct expectations. However, the fact that their relationship remains closeted, and the two never encounter the full onslaught of ideological and political pressures from the social, falls short of representing a more complete picture of queer subject formation. Admittedly, this would not be in keeping with the show's main purpose but, just the same, Jane demonstrates more clearly than any other character that gendered subject formation is a process constantly in flux. Maybe her daily struggle with alcoholism is why she recognizes this but, in any case, her statement "Every day takes figuring all over again how to fucking live" reveals one of *Deadwood*'s profound insights: we are at each

³⁴ Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* [2005], Maggie Greenwald's *The Ballad of Little Jo*, and Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles* [1974] are the only three that spring to mind.

moment negotiating our political presence as males or females within a gendered discourse, adopting various scripts to cope with each new circumstance, be they masculine or feminine-coded or something in-between (“Tell Your God to Ready for Blood”).

4.3 The Necessity of Gender and Homosocial Dialectics

Don't believe there's no good women till you've seen one with maggots in her eyes.

– Cy Tolliver

This bitter vituperation is the last thing Cy says to Joanie before she leaves to start up her new brothel. Powers Boothe plays the character superbly; fearful that a crack in his icy countenance will betray his longing for her, and knowing this oppressive masculinity is what repels her in the first place, he cannot help but reassert his hollow authority by insulting her and maligning her sex (“A Lie Agreed Upon, Part 1”). With his incessant sneering and gnashing, Tolliver stands as the pitiful specimen of an outworn masculinity, a frightening example of men’s dysfunction in the face of changing gender relations. Such is the reason that Tolliver would admire a man like George Hearst (Gerald McRaney), and why he quickly assumes a dog-like subordination in his presence:

HEARST. In my dealings with people, I ought solely have to do with niggers and whites who obey me like dogs.

CY. If he hadn't meant me to wag it, Sir, why would the Lord give me a tail? (“True Colours”)

Tolliver envies in Hearst a masculinity shorn of any remorse or compassion, one who can operate purely as a moneymaking plutocrat, an inhuman force of nature that will compel all in his path to yield or else be consumed. The audience sees what Hearst must do to become this: he

muscles his way in gender relations, exploits his physical, financial, and political power, and insists upon the sexes' essential differences and the need for separately gendered enclaves.

In juxtaposing these male characters against Deadwood's cast of empowered women, much is revealed about the masculinist scripts that men adopt to retain an illusion of wholeness. Such scenes also unveil the dark sexual politics that structure gender relations in Deadwood and serve as stark reminders of the ideological and political shackles on the female subject that persist in part to this day. In effect, David Milch re-inscribes contemporary gender issues within the strictures of a late 19th century frontier town that is hardly touched by first wave feminism. If there were any one exponent of historical feminism that would plausibly exist in the town, it would surely be Alma. In season three, Alma decides, against the advice of her new husband Richard Ellsworth (Jim Beaver), that the best way to placate Hearst is to sell him a 49% stake in her gold claim. She meets him alone in his hotel room where she nervously reads out her proposal like a script, admitting that she is "out of her depth." Hearst hears the whole proposal, staring at her "like a jackal" as she later describes, after which he seizes his moment to dominate her:

HEARST. A vulgar man would ask before preceding any further if you would require him to produce his jack-knife and make himself a capon before you.

ALMA. (pausing) What in my ideas do you find emasculating?

HEARST. I can offer no inside explanations, Mrs. Ellsworth, as I am not a capon, which details offend me and why your proposal offends completely. It mistakes my nature absolutely.

Hearst's insatiable thirst for gold has brought him to Deadwood to buy up every last bit of it, but he is doubly offended that a woman would dare barter with a behemoth like himself, who

swallows the biggest of capitalist sharks for breakfast. And so he aggressively demands to buy her out and later blocks her way when she leaves toward the door. She threatens to scream as he towers over her menacingly. He says, “The hour makes the thoroughfare uncertain. Will you have an escort until your dear home’s lights appear before you?” Alma shakes her head, “No.” He steps in closer and whispers into her ear, “You are reckless, madam. (He inhales.) You indulge yourself” (“True Colours”).

That Hearst sees Alma as reckless and indulgent presupposes that women have no place in what he sees as ‘man’s domain’, a point he underscores with his tacit threat of rape. When Alma later relays the events to her husband Ellsworth, he erupts: “You’re a Goddamn fool who almost got what she deserved,” to which Alma snaps back: “And what would that have been? And *why* would I have deserved it?” “I only wanted to protect you,” Ellsworth protests. “You can’t!” she cries. Here, we come upon the same bone of contention previously raised in *The Proposition*: the crass assumption that violence toward women, sexual or otherwise, is their just punishment for not listening to their husbands. Yet, if this twisted and oppressive logic was only gestured toward in that film, it is more fully exposed here as the power that reins the female subject within patriarchy succeeds partly through intimidation and partly through the politics of vague language. Alma is quick to call Ellsworth on this, revealing how the threat of rape becomes more powerful in the imagination when it is left unspoken. And, indeed, why would Alma have deserved it? The very word ‘deserve’ is wielded as part of a masculinist discourse to confine women to their ‘proper station.’

To be fair, Ellsworth’s intent is based upon a cautious pragmatism; *Deadwood* is still located in the Wild West where idealism is only suffered by fools or heroes. Alma’s idealism is not in defence of her right to confront hostile masculinities unguarded, however; it takes aim at

the politics of language that sanction oppression, demanding that the oppressive discourse itself be brought to light. When Ellsworth protests that he ‘just wants to protect her’, he reiterates an old masculinist script bestowing males with essential capacities (stronger, wiser, more pragmatic) somehow lacking in women, thus necessitating males’ protective role. Accepting this premise itself binds women to a claustrophobic or confined station, a condition Alma is unwilling to endure, and why it is finally that he cannot ever really protect her. We know poor Ellsworth only means well, but this is precisely the point: for all his good intentions, Ellsworth is reacting at the limits of a script, a script which domestic confrontation helps to rewrite. It is only through such gender dialectics that he would realize the damaging effects of his masculinism and transform beyond his gendered script.

By contrast, there is no domestic presence around Hearst to confront his behaviour and complicate his choices – Mrs. Hearst is nowhere to be seen. Audiences hear that she remains at his home in San Francisco where they may well imagine how stationed she would be in her gender role. Mr. Hearst explains the situation to his ‘nigger cook’ Aunt Lou (Cleo King): “Aw she knows, she knows. She knows why I always leave so quickly. Truth is I’d rather be off by myself, Aunt Lou. Free to do my work” (“True Colours”). Mrs. Hearst’s absence is important in presenting Mr. Hearst as the lone cowboy pursuing what Whitehead would call ‘his own heroic project’ in this frontier town. Neither is there anyone within the homosocial community to whom he can relate, due to his masculine ontology’s irrepressible drive to dominate. And in the town of Deadwood this poses a problem because its prospering community is founded upon bonds forged through compromise between the genders or through homosocial relationships like Swearingen and Bullock’s.

Hearst is therefore the real enemy to Deadwood, opposed to its citizenry and their competing vision of human progress so ensconced in gender dialectics – hence, the pivotal contrast between the scene with Ellsworth and Alma and the previous Hearst/Alma altercation. It is important to note that of all the people in Deadwood, Ellsworth is arguably the most noble: he marries Alma (expectant with Bullock’s child) to spare her from public disgrace, and he separates from her when she relapses to laudanum out of concern for her unhappiness in their marriage. So, too, of all the relationships in Deadwood, theirs is arguably the most dynamic and productive for each other’s growth. This is why it is so tragically appropriate that Ellsworth is the only one of *Deadwood*’s principle characters who is shot and killed by Hearst’s order – it pitches selflessness against avaricious misanthropy, or those who would embrace gender struggle against those who would stamp it out completely.

Returning to our earlier analysis of the homosocial dialectic between Bullock and Swearengen, there is a scene following their fight that nicely sums up one of *Deadwood*’s fundamental ideologies. Bullock, backed by Jane and Charlie, call upon Swearengen to return the badge and gun that he left in the Gem before their brawl. The townsfolk wait in trepidation to see how this battle of wills will culminate. Swearengen comes out alone and unarmed:

I offer these, (lifts up the gun and badge) and I hope you’ll wear them a good long fucking time in this fucking camp, whosever fucking thumb we’re under... and improve our general fucking atmosphere for a good long fucking time, even with all the personal complications and fucking disasters that we all fucking have, and where, running away solves absolutely fucking nothing.

Seth looks mystified, partly because of the conciliatory gesture, and partly because his secret agenda to run away with Alma was so transparent to Swearengen’s perception (“A Lie Agreed

Upon, Part 2”). The scene is not only important in developing their bond, but also in expressing a counterposing worldview to the lone hero myth that Whitehead’s describes. We may recall, along with the long line of classical Westerns whose hero rides away at the end, the song opening Ford’s *The Searchers*: “What makes a man to wander?/ What makes a man to roam?” and the answer, “...Ride away.” This lone hero myth is not the ideology that *Deadwood* prescribes, however; staying on and enduring societal strife and domestic confrontation is what forms honourable masculinities in this particular frontier town. Because he knows this, a certain moral authority is vested in Swearingen that espouses societal networks and the strategic art of compromise. By contrast, Bullock’s more legal moral authority approximates the liberal democratic values of the Constitution. Though they were ready to kill each other earlier that day, they both recognize that their alliance produces the right measure of morality, virtue, and courage needed for staving off an atomizing force like George Hearst.

4.4 The Neoliberal Frontier

As our scholars of masculinity have noted above, socio-economic forces are equally important in shaping the masculine subject. *Deadwood* demonstrates this by updating the genre’s horizon of expectations with a cultural verisimilitude reflective of our modern neoliberal era. We can begin to define neoliberalism as a set of economic practices espousing a radically free market, which has risen to hegemony in the Western world over the past three decades as the historical ancestor of classical market liberalism. It is also a political rationality and/or philosophy, as Wendy Brown and Paul Treanor argue, that simultaneously interpellates its discourse into the subjectivities of citizens. As a political rationality, it is astonishing how many aspects of our social and political institutions have been recast with a neoliberal ethic. Previously non-market institutions such as universities, utility providers, and even municipalities

are increasingly branding themselves as entrepreneurial entities and consumer sites for potential students, employees, investors, residents and so on. This rationality simultaneously demands that subjects themselves become exceedingly employable by branding themselves with the requisite skills and adaptability desired in an economy increasingly contingent upon part-time and short-term contract labour.

Deadwood allegorizes life within neoliberalism by dramatizing its effects in ways similar to what we perceive today, namely through the profound changes in our conception of time and space. It figures the marketplace, more than the harsh natural elements or any particular evil character, as the hostile force of the frontier. One effect of neoliberalism, for example, is enhanced factor mobility, which frees up capital to flow farther and wider, at all hours of the day. The new telegraph poles in *Deadwood* are symptomatic of such changes: “Invisible messages from invisible sources,” grumbles Swearingen, “or what some people think of as progress.” Certainly things are much simpler when we can see, hear, and touch the material conditions that affect our lives. Swearingen prefers such empiricism; keeping watch from his balcony, he can spot any disruptive presence in all the town’s comers and goers. The telegraph lines worry him not only because they allow instant communication from Hearst and Yankton politicians plotting to exploit the town’s riches, but also because he cannot see and pre-empt those who would conspire against him. With such immaterial hazards circulating in the ether, threatening to manifest unforeseen, it only means he has to work that much faster and harder in devising strategies and counter-measures. “Ain’t the state of things cloudy enough?” he mutters to Dan scornfully, “Don’t we face enough fucking imponderables?” (“A Lie Agreed Upon, Part 1). Indeed, *Deadwood* is here depicting a pivotal historic moment when the concrete value of a gold claim can suddenly be overturned by ‘invisible sources’ sending ‘invisible messages’. The

contemporary correlate might be the recent housing plummet in the U.S., or the sudden loss Canadians and American saw in their pensions in the early 2000s; in both cases, the illusion of real value was all at once dispelled due to forces unseen – powerful corporate interests driving and manipulating the market.

The exponential compression of space and time that neoliberal markets demand can have tyrannical effects, which *Deadwood* reflects through George Hearst's mining corporation. Dispatched to Deadwood to purchase all the miner's gold claims, Hearst's chief surveyor Francis Wolcott (Garret Dillahunt) sends a letter to Hearst that begins as follows:

The operations of the old Aurora and Keet's mines and a number of smaller adjoining claims are now entirely consolidated, accessed through the former Hidden Treasure property. Anxious as I know you to be, Mr. Hearst, to move to 24-hour operation, until workers at wage outnumber individual prospectors in the camp, the matter of Chinese labour remains delicate of introduction. And we must therefore rest content with Germans and Cornish unwilling to work at night ... The Cornish are quicker than the Germans, but ever ready to combine and complain, and deserve their reputation as high-graders, which, if anything, is understated.

The excerpt captures several distinctively neoliberal features: the 24 hour work day reflective of contemporary global trading hours, the micro-monitoring of labour pools,³⁵ the positioning of labour groups in contention with each other for employment, and the continual assessment of

³⁵ John O'Connor's article "Neo-Liberalism, Coercive Competition and Recasting the Balance of Class Forces" stresses the importance of unemployment to re-establishing a reserve army of labour (RAL), which has helped reset the asymmetry between labour and capital in the era. He notes: "Over the neo-liberal period more people were unemployed than at any other time since the end of the war, increasing from 30 million in 1983 to 35 million in 1993 (OECD 1994)," thus making the lives of wage earners more difficult and more insecure than ever before.

work performance and employability.³⁶ The oligopolistic Hearst machine is an example of coercive competition: in forcing consolidation of all the camp's gold claims and replacing prospectors with cheaper, foreign wage-earners, capital's position is increasingly leveraged over labour, effectively pressuring workers to a 'race to the bottom' in sacrificing their labour rights. Hearst aims to bring about this eventuality with the introduction of Chinese labour, because they are the most willing and therefore, tragically, most exploitable of labour groups.

The Hearst machine thus represents the dark side of neoliberalism. With the removal of economic constraints and state regulation, institutional monies are more able to manipulate market forces and further unbalance class relations, eviscerating liberal democratic values of equal opportunity and freedom from oppression. However, as Worden astutely notes, *Deadwood*'s antidote in this regard is not "a return to liberalism in the form of appeals to state intervention" (237). He argues that *Deadwood* inverts the national allegory usually associated with the Western: rather than standing in for the nation, the people of Deadwood function as a multitude, "a group of people within global capitalism united by strategic interests yet not yoked together under any formal identity category" (235). The Classical Western is in the habit of dramatizing such appeals to state intervention through the 'civilizing agency' of cowboys like Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda), Shane (Alan Ladd), and Ransom Stoddard (Jimmy Stewart), who 'stand in' for liberal democratic America by settling scores in a final shoot-out. On the other hand, *Deadwood* fights neoliberalism's ill effects on its own terms. That is, by making each individual entirely responsible for her/himself, surviving neoliberalism requires establishing strategic networks and shrewdly adapting to new socio-economic circumstances. The Classical Western's ideology of open societies, access and equality is subsumed by the neoliberal value of

³⁶ See Paul Treanor's "Neoliberalism: Origins, Theory, Definition" for a lengthy elaboration of these key concepts including the creation of sub-markets, supplier maximalization, and employability.

network societies that can bypass non-market morality and identity categories, connecting subjects through shared self-interest.

Such cost-benefit utilitarianism underlies many of *Deadwood*'s characters' motivations and plays a formative part in their alliances with each other. Worden analyzes how the central characters are constantly strategizing every action and policy to considerations of profitability, which reveals the extent to which subjects are rewarded for conducting rational entrepreneurial action "against a micro-economic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral value-neutrality" (231). We have already seen how characters such as Trixie, Joanie, and Alma achieve autonomy largely through their acquisition of new financial knowledge and business ventures. What is even more pronounced is how the Bullock-Swearengen dynamic dramatizes the gradual displacement of Bullock's non-market morality in favour of Al's morally neutral and long-term cost-benefit analysis.

For instance, *Deadwood*'s treatment of Hearst's union busting of the Cornish workers is very different than *Heaven's Gate*, an epic Western in which some may see a surface resemblance with the HBO series. Quite unlike Cimino's pro-union narrative whose heroes fight on the side of (mostly foreign) labour against oligopolistic capital interests, *Deadwood*'s heroes do not fight on the side of the union but use Hearst's ruthless slaying of a Cornish organizer to their tactical advantage. Bullock and Swearengen team with the newspaperman Merrick (Jeffrey Jones) to publish a letter written to the dead man's wife, expressing respect for the way the worker lived and sympathy for his family without ever charging or condemning Hearst – an ingenuous strategy to raise suspicion in and outside the camp of Hearst's tyranny ("Unauthorized Cinnamon"). Whereas heroes stand in for the nation in traditional Westerns, in *Deadwood* the nation equals rampant large-scale market coercion, against which people's only chance for

survival lies in staying ahead of the curve by keeping informed, sheltering their enterprises, and forming smart alliances.

And yet, this insight was a long time coming for Bullock, whose stubborn code of conduct frequently dictates that he ‘act heroically’ in the conventional sense, arresting, pummelling, or killing those who would break the law, without considering the long-term repercussions. Hearst’s earlier killing of two Cornishmen, for instance, was as much an affront to Bullock’s masculinity as his legal authority: “Dogs. For him to laugh at while we chase our tails,” he complains to Sol, and then goes and puts Hearst ‘on notice’ without any hard evidence to substantiate a case. When Swearengen objects to tackling the situation head on in this way, Bullock protests that the killing must be stopped:

SWEARENGEN. What makes you think any good will come of confronting Hearst now?

BULLOCK: Now is when he’s killing people.

SWEARENGEN: What, you think he’ll leave off soon?

BULLOCK: Tactics and timing ain’t the issue.

BULLOCK: The hell you say. (“True Colours”)

After the third Cornish organizer is murdered, Bullock is bent on arresting Hearst. When Swearengen asks for more time to deploy another strategy, Bullock furiously protests: “No. No. Or we’re both just fuckin’ cowards.” Arresting Hearst for ‘public drunkenness’ and ‘threatening a peace officer’, he takes him by the ear down the thoroughfare to spend the night in jail (“A Two-headed Beast”). Since he neglected to clear this with the rest of the camp first, he beckons Al’s reproach: “our hour is wrong...Hearst will be on the muscle and we who will be his wrath’s object ought to stay close and confide. Our alternative is flight. Does that appeal?” “No,” says Bullock. “We ain’t the sort, which is maybe more the pity,” says Swearengen (“A Rich Find”).

Again, we see how these men find meaning in staying and withstanding Hearst, the market, and ‘all the personal complications and fucking disasters’, which ordinary life throws at them. Having his finger chopped off by Hearst shortly before when he refused to capitulate to him, Swearingen could well have struck back with his own hired guns but decided instead to have his revenge “served cold” (“I Am Not the Fine Man You Take Me for”). The solution is thus found in tactical teams that can coordinate and adapt efficiently, and not stand-alone courage and fast-draw heroics. Swearingen stands as *Deadwood*’s exemplar of Machiavellian pragmatism, which is why when Bullock finally demonstrates clever thinking over impetuous action by the writing that letter, Swearingen gives him a surprised look of approbation, much as a father would his oft-errant son. Indeed, Al, however ruthless and self-serving at times, remains the father figure of *Deadwood*’s community. His resilience, ability to control his emotions, and devise the cleverest of plans endows him with the authority to coach others on how to best conduct themselves.

4.5 ‘Art of War’ Marketplace Masculinity

David Milch had initially conceived the central premise of how a society sustains itself without law to take place within a Roman setting, which supports Horace Newcomb’s notion that the Western form is not vital to *Deadwood* (Newcomb 94, 99-100). Daniel Worden might also argue that, as an allegory for life within neoliberalism, the show could feasibly work within other genres. What both of them seem to overlook, however, is how the Western genre’s inherent preoccupation with masculinity inevitably affects the show’s themes. Consequently, even as it dramatizes our current struggle with neoliberalism, *Deadwood* conceives this struggle in terms of masculinity and portrays how masculine subjects are tried, tested, and refined in the crucible of the marketplace. In this regard, we may readily note how Al’s tutelage so often doubles as

Deadwood's prescription for modern marketplace masculinities, where 'being a man' implies withstanding the 'feminizing' effects of oppressive market forces. To illustrate, Swearingen tries to persuade Bullock to side against the Yankton-Hearst duo by framing his discourse in terms of emasculation and being chewed up like beasts:

Our cause is surviving, not bein' allied with Yankton or cogs in the Hearst machine, to show it don't fate us as runts, or two-headed calves or pigs with excess legs, to a good fuckin' grindin' up. ... Our moment permits interest in one question only: will we, of Deadwood, be more than targets for ass fucking? To not grab ankle is to declare yourself interested. What's your posture, Bullock? ("Childish Things")

When Merrick sulks in despair after being beaten and his office ransacked on Tolliver's order, Swearingen slaps him in the face and reprimands him: "Pain or damage don't end the world, or despair or fuckin' beatin's. The world ends when you're dead. Until then, you got more punishment in store. Stand it like a man – and give some back" ("E.B. Was Left Out").

Such object lessons in how to be a man are commonly given by Al, and yet, it is equally apparent how this prescription for masculinity is framed in terms of battle or war. When he finds out that a new telegraph operator is stationed in the newspaper headquarters, for example, Swearingen admonishes Merrick for neglecting to inform him right away: "you and me are allies, marching into battle together" ("Childish Things"). Even if he's not staging an advance against one posse or another, the process of surviving day-to-day – enduring the constant stress of micro-managing everything from Yankton's ploys to Bullock's irascibility to whether or not serving cinnamon at a town meeting will offend the guests – makes Swearingen tantamount to *Deadwood*'s General. Such discourse reminds us of those business people who read Sun Tzu's *Art of War* hoping to gain a tactical advantage over their competitors (a practice not only taken

up by CEOs, mind you, but a widening margin of middle-class men and women who supplement their incomes with venture enterprises). Viewers learn through Al, who exists as the central agent of *Deadwood*'s narrational authority, the art of self-production in the neoliberal era: rational calculation trumps everything, which requires constantly figuring out the proper measure of courage, caution, aggression, and compassion to maximize the best result in pursuing one's own self-interest.

The question remains, however, what is the difference ultimately between Swearingen and Hearst? Where does Swearingen draw the line short of Hearst in exploiting *Deadwood*'s lack of laws and economic regulations for his own end? This question is answered rather ironically when he confides to Seth:

Pain-in-the-balls Hearst. Running his holdings like a despot, I grant, has a fucking logic. It's the way I fucking run mine. It's the way I'd run my home if I fucking had one. But there's no practical need for him to run the fucking camp. That's out of scale. It's out of proportion, and it's a warped, unnatural impulse, this fucking cocksucker! ("Tell Your God to Ready for Blood")

Daniel Worden highlights this as the key passage differentiating the two: where Swearingen's interests are hemmed in by 'practical need' and some measure of compassion for the collective, Hearst's impulses are both impractical and unnatural (236). Worden astutely reads the townsfolk of *Deadwood* as a collective formation that does not seek refuge in laws or government regulation but are bound by a set of shared values. As such, they can navigate and flourish from within the same neoliberal, market-based individualism that encompasses Hearst. But I would add that there is a crucial difference between their philosophies. Swearingen conceives an

“equal inequality for all”³⁷ of *Deadwood*’s citizens, that everyone is equally responsible for branding and promoting themselves as entrepreneurial entities in competition. By contrast, Hearst would exclude certain groups, namely women, based on the belief that there is a separate category of people who are not fully market-compatible. Scholar Paul Treanor observes this mindset as characteristic of “Workfare Neoliberals...[who in practice] condemn this underclass to a service function.” Treanor notes the hypocrisy in the workfare ideology, “that by recognizing a non-market underclass, neoliberals undermine their own claims about the universal applicability of market principles.” In a nutshell, the difference is not only a matter of scale. Swearingen’s ‘just’ neoliberalism is based on the premise that all agents are capable of rational entrepreneurial action and their interconnectivity is necessary for long-term success. This requires establishing a shared set of values, which, even if they are predicated on the marketplace, essentially strengthen human bonds and interpersonal relations.

4.6 The Importance of In/Action

In *Deadwood*, men and women alike are required to practice this form of masculine-coded performance – shrewdly enterprising, standing up against plutocracy and resisting paternalism – even if being ‘masculine’ in this way is yet another form of femininity for women. Ultimately, the aim is for each person to develop his or her own autonomy and self-reliance, while existing as a crucial link in a wider social network. Additionally, dialectic relationships are essential between genders and homosocial groupings in order that each may work together and do their part in sustaining this web, as we have seen. However, the show’s underlying neoliberal ethic entails that the survival of this network equally depends upon its ability to

³⁷ The phrase, coined by Foucault and cited in Thomas Lemke’s article “‘The Birth of Bio-Politics’: Michel Foucault’s lecture at the College de France on Neo-Liberal Governmentality,” basically entails the universalization of the entrepreneurial form through all work and social relations, so that eventually the moral and cultural order of society would be recast in terms of competition and supply and demand.

sustain itself economically, that is, retain its wealth from being swept away from the tides of larger corporate interest. For example, it is not only courageous and steadfast of Alma Garret that she stays on in Deadwood despite its many dangers, it is also important that her wealth remain in Deadwood to strengthen its local economy. According to Al, it is her “civic duty” not only so that the capital remains in play to flow through the Gem Saloon, but also because the financial institution she inaugurates is another pillar that can help the camp bear up against Yankton’s threat of forced consolidation and amalgamation. From this perspective, it is somewhat of a tragic end to its last season when Hearst rides out of town, having bought up all the town’s claims including Alma’s. For we know that every chunk of ore will be mined by exploited foreign labour and then shipped far away from Deadwood for other uses, such as to line the bottom of the pool at the Hearst castle.³⁸

In the series’ final scene, the audience, along with Bullock have to swallow this fact, knowing that Hearst was able to come to Deadwood, strip its wealth, murder and intimidate anyone who stood in his path, and ride away scot-free. As Hearst rides away, Charlie Utter congratulates Bullock for helping to eject the force of evil from the community:

UTTER: You done fucking good.

BULLOCK: I did fucking nothing.

UTTER: That’s often a tough one, in aid of the larger purpose.

BULLOCK: Which is laying head to pillow, not confusing yourself with a sucker?

UTTER: Far as I ever get.

BULLOCK: ‘Cause that’s gonna be a project tonight. (“Tell Him Something Pretty”)

³⁸ However, it was his eccentric son William Randolph Hearst who later conceived the gold-tiled pool as part of the famous castle built between 1919-47 by architect Julia Morgan.

Indeed, in order to move forward, these men must augment their masculine ontology, rethink that ‘being a man’ is not just the opposite of being a ‘sucker’, ‘coward’, ‘runt’, who is ‘ass-fucked’ by the powers that be. For a man like Bullock, who is the epitome of a cowboy masculinity that would fight injustice with his own two hands alone if necessary, ‘doing nothing’ is likened to powerlessness and is utterly emasculating. But, as we know, brazen and heroic action are equated with a short-sighted foolishness in *Deadwood*; what’s needed is the ability to adapt, as Swearingen does, to see beyond the empirical and reflect in the abstract towards a larger purpose. In the end, it is because of *Deadwood*’s tight-knit and resilient network that the community is spared from the brink of annihilation; the network itself being comprised of members willing to learn and adapt, which ultimately requires embodying new masculinities and femininities.

There is a humorous moment when an angry mob of ‘hoopleheads’ (as Swearingen calls them) imperils Hugo Jarry (Stephen Tobolowsky), the newly appointed commissioner sent from Yankton. The Commissioner posted a public notice that from now on the legitimacy of all existing gold claims will be “subject to mitigating factors qualified by officials of the Dakota Territory.” (Say what?!) The supercilious and vague diction is enough to provoke a panic throughout the camp, and Jarry is chased into a cage in Tolliver’s casino. The commissioner declares: “Had you vision as well as sight, you would recognize within me not only a man, but an institution and the future as well.” This, of course, only further incites the mob: “Fuck you, fuck the institution, and fuck the future!” says one, to whom Jarry swiftly rebukes, “You cannot fuck the future, sir. The future fucks you” (“Complications”). The scene is important in distinguishing *Deadwood* from previous epics. As we have discussed by way of Slotkin, epics have generally been made in the progressive/historical and the populist/cult of the outlaw mould,

either celebrating the forward drift of progress, institutions, and centralization, or shunning it in favour of small agrarian and mercantile economies. The scene above would seem to embrace a cult of the outlaw rejection of progress, but the commissioner delivers a dose of reality, which, if lost on the hoopleheads, is surely not on the audience – there is no respite from the forward drift of modernity, as the imbecilic looks on the faces of the mob reveal. But, the fact that the commissioner voices it this way – the future fucks you – also reveals how even the agents of progress have grown cynical. *Deadwood* neither celebrates the future nor turns its back on it to pine nostalgically for another time; rather, its heroes brace for its onslaught with a neoliberal ethic, forming networks and adapting to shifting gender roles, accordingly. As such, the series proves the Western's currency in updating a mythic-historical script relevant to our present-day ideological horizon.

Chapter 5: ‘The Past Is Never Dead. It’s Not Even Past’:

The Western Disinterred

Whereas the Westerns explored in the last two chapters accord with the Postmortem cycle’s unique brand of revisionism, there is yet an alternate cluster of films that belong to this cycle, which explore the same themes by way of a different formal and aesthetic strategy. These are films like *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, *Down in the Valley*, and *No Country for Old Men*, which use patent Western icons and tropes but frame their stories in a modern day setting.³⁹ The simple change in setting alters the film form dramatically; rather than re-visioning the Western anew, these films resurrect the spectre of the Classical Western text only to quash it through its immersion in postmodernity. This dual visibility bestows these films with a unique critical perspective, one that simultaneously reinforces the genre’s outmodedness while reflecting culture’s nostalgia for simpler, more honourable times. The traces of the Classical Western text appear like an historical palimpsest that underscores yesteryear’s ideologies and the formative heritage with which contemporary subjects continue to struggle. Faulkner’s well known quote rings with a sense of eternal recurrence: it aptly epitomizes the way these films resuscitate dead forms and obsolete values into their plots, however implausibly, which is why I dub them ‘Disinterred Westerns’.

While I have yet to find any criticism on these post-nineties films as a cohesive set, there are at least two other critics that have written about pre-nineties films of the same ilk as *Westerns*. Firstly, Edward Gallafent’s essay “Not with a Bang” discusses *The Misfits* (John Huston, 1960), *Lonely Are the Brave* (David Miller, 1962), and *Hud* (Martin Ritt, 1963) as ‘End-

³⁹ *Thunderheart* (Michael Apted, 1992), *Lone Star* (John Sayles, 1996), *The Hi-Lo Country* (Stephen Frears, 1998), and *All the Pretty Horses* (Billy Bob Thornton, 2000) can also be regarded as part of this cluster. Obviously boundaries are tenuously porous at this point, but various other films may apply to the extent that they partake of similar generic-processes.

of-the-West Westerns' fitting in with the genre's first wave of revisionism (241-254). Secondly, Phillip French touches upon the same films, while adding John Sturges' *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1954) and Don Siegel's *Coogan's Bluff* (1968), among others, to a group of films he calls 'Post-Westerns' (135-167). French sums up how these films draw upon the Western and "the cowboy cult":

Seen out of his time and place, the Western hero seems an incongruous figure.

Depending on the dramatic use to which he may be put, he can be variously seen as vulnerable and pathetic or dangerous and anarchic, an upholder of cherished traditional values or the embodiment of outmoded ways which linger menacingly on, a challenge to modern conformity or the incarnation of a past that must be rejected. (138-9)

Not only does the above passage concisely define the nature of the films we are about to explore, it reiterates the same general theme from the past two chapters: that is, the cowboy's growing incongruity with contemporary sensibilities as he constantly teeters between vulnerable and dangerous forms of masculinity. While continuing to explore this theme, Jacques Rancière's theory from his book *Film Fables* can help elucidate how this particular style of Western creates its split-subjectivity.

But we had best begin by identifying these films' Western elements. Can we really call them Westerns because there are horses, the protagonists wear cowboy hats, and the locations provide so many long shots of the open country? Well, *yes*, partly. The connotative power of such iconography should not be underestimated, especially where the American landscape is concerned. John Ford once remarked that the real star of his Westerns has always been the land (Libby 56). Both his cinematic legacy and his gift for the pictorial representation of stories went such a long way towards cementing the cinematic image of the American landscape with notions

of the Western as a regenerative fount. In addition, the Disinterred Western keeps to the task of deconstructing the Frontier Myth, drawing upon and overturning its tropes, as is wont to happen in the Postmortem cycle. For the purpose of this analysis, we will need to make a clear distinction between what we mean by myth and fable. The *fable* of Rancière's theory is appropriate because it connotes a story secured in a simplified moral universe, an otherwise tall-tale requiring the extension of belief. In going forward, we will broaden this term to include the Classical Western text, a bygone model that once asserted our trust in the stability of ethical values and America's foundational spirit. Meanwhile, we will use the term *myth* in keeping with Richard Slotkin's Frontier Myth formulation, as the root symbolic narrative ubiquitous in American film and literature (Western genre and otherwise). The fable, then, is the outworn fiction, cut off from its source in consensual belief, whereas the myth is the condensation of those surviving ideologies embedded within the substructure of so many genre films today.

As we have previously remarked, the revisionist Western has a tendency to emphasize the low-mimetic manner and eschew the romantic mode, tipping the scales that were held in balance within the Classical Western of Pye's description. Yet, we may find that in such a strongly coded genre as the Western, the romantic connotation may linger in the ether of the film's diegesis, continually tugging at audiences as a noticeable absence. A trademark of the Disinterred Western is the way in which it channels this lost romanticism through aspects of narration, cinematography, and *mise-en-scène*, effectively re-spawning a fable within its formal design. The experience of seeing and hearing two sensibilities at once, one suggestive of the Classical Western and the other of postmodernity, ostensibly provides the viewer a 'thwarted fable' in kind with Rancière's theory. For Rancière, cinema is aesthetically predisposed to two contradicting tendencies, telling stories and recording reality. The former creates the illusion of

a beginning, middle, and end to life's circumstance conveyed through Aristotelian *mimesis*, while the latter conveys the inscrutable presence of pure forms, light, and shadow. He conceives the opposition between meaning and matter, subjective intention and the *thingliness* within the image to be in perpetual tension with each other. This dualism is never transcended, however, but remains in a state of 'aesthetic play'. His reading of various films spanning from experimental, documentary, and narrative genres demonstrates how the thwarted fable aesthetically enriches the artistic production through its disjunctive synthesis of immanent materiality and fictional pretence, of truth and lies. While the Classical Western would be one such thwarted fable in its own right (in much the same way that its style melds the romantic mode with the low-mimetic manner), the Disinterred Western is an altogether different type of thwarted fable.

In these films, the sense of aesthetic play is not just limited to the disjunction of *mythos* and *opsis* within the image, but extended to a meta-historical engagement with the genre itself. In other words, the fable side of the equation exceeds its story-telling function and positions the Classical Western text *itself* as a fable. The fable it tells is one that celebrates America's foundational beginnings, its faith in progress, and its exceptional American character. We may readily object to the conception of a homogenous Classical Western, and there are no shortage of critics (Janet Staiger and Tag Gallagher included) who continue to complicate this generalization with evidence of the Western's history of variation, hybridity, and revisionism.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, as the decades increasingly distance filmmakers and viewers from the period of Classical cinema, our culture's habit of making sweeping claims about historical periods has a way of

⁴⁰Staiger's "The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History" argues there never really was such a time when genres were purely classical; there has always been a tendency to hybridize across genres. Likewise, Gallagher points out the fallacy of positioning the Classical Western at the beginning of some 'linear evolution'. He contends there has always been revisionism that continually updated the program to meet the demands of contemporary audiences. Thus, genres develop in cycles, not linearly.

turning this misconception into a reality. Slowly but surely, many have come to think of the 40s and 50s era Western as a regressive security blanket, symptomatic of a rosy-coloured time of ideological consensus. Just as that era retains the illusion of a simpler, more honourable time, so, too, are we liable to conflate all early Westerns into sharing the same utopian vision of films like *How the West Was Won*. The Disinterred Western resuscitates this fable in some measure every time it shows a man with a cowboy hat riding on horseback in the open country; the fable's promise is immediately frustrated, however, the moment freeways, helicopters, and antennae come into view and litter the *mise-en-scène*.

Rancière's concept of aesthetic play also extends to the "games of exchange and inversion" it plays with the other arts, such as the "literary fable, the plastic form, and the theatrical voice," as well as the system of genres internal to cinema itself (*Film Fables* 15). In a sense, cinema can best get to know itself by going beyond itself, deploying its own technical means in relation to the other arts, and through a non-genre specific gaming that appropriates anything and everything in the service of artistic production. Furthermore, in Sudeep Dasgupta's essay on Rancière's aesthetic and political theory, cinema's capacity for aesthetic play is integrally linked with a vision of politics that embraces disagreement and counters the "police regime" that is Rancière's view of contemporary consensus politics. She argues that Rancière's:

politico-philosophical argument around the 'police regime' can be said to be homologous to his articulation of the representative regime of art, which establishes the conventions that govern the subjects and their 'proper' mode of representation. The dis-articulation of this regime by the 'aesthetic revolution' (Rancière 2002), which disobeys generic classifications and thwarts artistic purity through 'mixed identities', can also be seen as

homologous with Rancière's understanding of 'politics', which disobeys the rules and conventions that demarcate social space. (347)

In the same manner, the Disinterred Western achieves its political dimension through a unique form of genre play that insinuates its way into the Classical Western form while defying that categorization. They deploy the *Western genre* as a fable, a grand narrative of masterfully controlled violence and utopian progress. The process of thwarting the fable, however, reveals the point of historical rupture between two ideologies – the foundational and forward-looking liberal progressivism versus the anti-foundational and postmodern neoliberalism of today. These films, just as the other Westerns that we have discussed, propose to mine the old Western's ethos and model of masculinity for anything of use in these present times.

I have selected these three films because they each thwart their fable in a slightly different way, resulting in three unique ideological perspectives. In *Three Burials*, Melquiades' corpse is metonymic of the fable, that which is long dead and what its hero endeavours tirelessly to resurrect (quite literally, by digging it up and transporting it to a more respectable place of burial). Though the film remains ambivalent about compulsive cowboy masculinities, it sincerely embraces the old fable's model of ethical subject formation in the older hero's moral tutelage of an errant offender. By contrast, *Down in the Valley* treats the fable as a regressive security blanket; its model of masculinity proves to be a problematic shelter for damaged and troubled subjects. But this film, too, retains a sense of ambivalence to the extent that audiences imagine the protagonist suffering worse conditions in the absence of his Western fantasy. And lastly, *No Country*'s disposition is the most disconnected from the fable of yore. It neither redeems the fable in part, nor shows how its fantasy can be a comfort. In consigning the fable to an irrecoverable past, both its vision of heroism and the potential for justice are seen as

hopelessly impossible in today's world. In the absence of such possibility, the film shows us the cold, stony life we must bear when all such illusions are stripped from our subjectivities.

5.1 A Fable Fermented for the Vintage in *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*

The plot of *Three Burials* begins in an unspecified West Texas town, after a Border Patrolman named Mike Norton (Barry Pepper) accidentally shoots an illegal immigrant, Melquiades Estrada (Julio Cedillo). To avoid a legal quagmire, the lazy and racist Sheriff Belmont (Dwight Yoakam) forgoes an investigation and buries the body unceremoniously, leaving Melquiades' friend Pete Perkins (Tommy Lee Jones) incensed. Ascertaining the killer's identity by his own means, Pete proceeds to take Mike hostage, dig up Melquiades' corpse, and tote them together on horseback into Mexico. He plans to return the body to Melquiades' wife and bury it in their hometown of Jiminez; while he's at it, he hopes to teach Mike a lesson, too. The film is thematically concerned with the state of America's ethos, depicting cultural malaise through a community of faithless, cynical, and apathetic masculinities.

Mostly all of the men in the town have some stain of incompetence that reveals a lack within their masculine subject formation. The prospect of red tape and legal trivialities seem to have sapped Belmont of the virility to properly do his job, which includes investigating the murder of Melquiades. In a scene with his mistress, Rachel (Melissa Leo), he sits deflated with his pants off and a pillow over his crotch. She suggests Viagra and he fires back, "I'll turn truck stop queer and blow-job-giver 'fore I use that shit!" Mike Norton's sexual problems are of a different sort. A not-so-long take watches him casually mount his wife Lou Ann (January Jones) from behind while she's cutting a cucumber; she cheerlessly endures the routine, which lasts less than a minute. So, too, are the rest of the townsfolk rather odious: the Border Patrol are alpha-macho, the real estate agent is obese and sleazy, the kids scream profanities and can't catch a

football. Even the pets are over-coddled it seems, when a neighbour needs to carry their fattened dog to its leash upon the fence. The pathetic and unglamorous town is metaphoric for the state of America generally, as glimpsed in the opening scene. The camera pans down from the nation's flag and tracks into the modular home the Nortons plan to purchase. Across the street a billboard reads: "Liberty Means Freedom from Higher Interest Rates." 'Liberty' and 'freedom' – light bulb words that used to meaningfully signify in the Classical Western – are textualized here in the shallow and distorted connotations with which neoliberalism has made us accustomed.

It is in defiance of this cultural portrait that Pete, whose subjectivity strongly commands the film's narrative structure, envisages a romanticized Western fable. Both formally and aesthetically, the film reinforces a nature/culture dichotomy: counterposing a promising, idyllic respite against a listless, degenerating morass. Scenes alternate between the community's state of decline and Pete's male bonding with Mel as they corral steer together in the fresh country air. The cold blue tones of the town's police station, morgue, and truck stop restaurant are in stark contrast to the golden hues of natural light, the non-diegetic guitar strings, and the soft-focus photography that envelop the cowboys with a peaceful, majestic aura. The latter are Pete's flashbacks, framed like nostalgic snapshots interspersed throughout a non-linear structure. Through Pete, the film is in the habit of *looking back* to a time when all was wholesome and bound with an integral way of being. In one such flashback, Pete vowed that if Melquiades should die, he would bury him in Mexico and not in Texas "beneath all the fucking billboards." The sharply defined polarity aligns the viewer with Pete's frame of mind, which is sick with the state of things and longs for Classical Western justice to set things aright. Hence, Pete enacts a cowboy's frontier journey to succeed the romantic tenor of his flashbacks. Once he saddles the

horses and starts toward Mexico, the film textualizes the fable in a long shot image – the mythical landscape is an escape valve for society’s malaise.

To fulfil his pledge, Pete becomes the righteous outlaw: enacting vigilante justice, kidnapping, grave robbing, and sneaking into Mexico with the police and Border Patrol in close pursuit. The Western fable dictates such courage, to risk one’s life and social acceptance in order to do what one *has to do*; to honour the social bond here consummates the masculine ideal. There is a catch, however, when audiences learn that Melquiades never actually had a wife, nor is there any village called ‘Jiminez’ – either Melquiades lied or Pete remembered wrongly. But Pete refuses to believe this. He obstinately roams the outback in search of the nonexistent Jiminez until he comes across some old ruins that he convinces himself is the place, so he can bury the body and keep the fabular logic intact. Thus the audience’s emotional identification with Pete becomes increasingly thwarted by the plot’s complications, casting a doubtful light on Pete as well as the fable he forces into existence. Several characters call him ‘crazy’ throughout the story and, surely, the glazed expression on his face now and again is enough to make viewers wonder, too, whether he’s getting too much sun. These effects not only alienate viewers from the protagonist and his fable, but also help to underscore the compulsive masculinity required for such an onerous undertaking.

Thus *Three Burials* develops a dual visibility, which stems from these narrative complications and spreads into the cinematography and *mise-en-scène*. Key moments of rupture expand a gap between what the fable echoes in the story’s moral universe and the perceptual oddities – foremost being Melquiades’ rotting corpse – that continually divert our attention. Such gaps are what Rancière argues in the Western “causes problems for these quarrels with desire and the law by substituting them with the confrontation of two perceptive spaces ...

[thwarting] narrative continuity and the rationality of the goals by not aligning two visibilities” (*Film Fables* 16). Cinema’s impassive recording of materiality lets the *thingliness* of objects ‘speak for themselves’ a reality beyond the fable’s scope, thwarting the fable by its own technological process.

This fractured visibility crops up enough to become an observable motif, heaving beneath the surface of Pete’s ‘just act’. The scene that best illustrates this motif takes place in a tiny Mexican village. As Mike recovers from snakebite, Pete unwinds in the *Cantina Liebre* awaiting a long-distance connection to his sometime girlfriend Rachel. He has a bit of a shine-on, partly because he’s been sipping tequila and partly because, at this stage in his journey – exhausted, engrossed in kidnapping, and closely acquainted with advanced human decomposition – he’s beginning to lose his mind. Surprisingly though, his composure has never looked more serene. The advanced setting sun issues streaks of purple and orange; a Mexican girl keys Chopin on a creaky, out-of-tune piano; a dubbed fifties-era sci-fi film plays on a cheap black and white TV; and strung through the cantina, pulling all the discordance together, is a darling string of Christmas lights. Further echoing Pete’s wavelength is the bizarre sound of a radio dial, with channels fading in and out as though his mind were an antenna tuning in to remote frequencies in tandem. At this point, previous claims about Pete being mentally disturbed should be ringing more and more true in audience minds.

Next comes the phone call and Pete asks Rachel to come to Mexico and marry him. She had once said she loved only him, rather disingenuously, although he seems to have taken her at her word. She reminds him she’s married and says “you don’t understand, I have to go.” Then Pete lurches out of the cantina, around the corner and into a little shed. He slowly unwraps the coverings from his only friend, the long rotten Melquiades. However, the stomach-churning

fetor, to which others frequently bear witness, in no way registers on Pete's face. He can only mutter, "You look like hell, son," as he proceeds to comb him with a horse brush. The brush pulls the hair clean off his head with a dull scraping sound. Defeated, he slumps back against the shed wall, resigned to utter alienation.

This scene is what I take to be the film's centrepiece, expressing the culmination of two contradictory impulses: the romantic promise of the Western fable and the material denial of its possibility. The two come together here in an off-kilter composition. The audience's confidence in the protagonist's authority should be sufficiently unhinged as the soundscape oscillates between the objective sounds in the cantina and the warped noises passing through his mind. This not only sets Pete apart, but also forces the viewer to harmonize the setting's discordant elements through his peculiar point of view. Sitting on his stool, over his left shoulder are the rudimentary accoutrements of the cantina, and over his right, a wide-open Mexican vista – as he smiles bemusedly to himself it's as though the clocks were turned back fifty years and he were home at last in his own Western movie. But the scene's sundry protuberances, onto which we may further add Pete's bowlegged walk and the limping bartender with the large hoop earring, draw attention to themselves. As opposed to the cohesion maintained in Pye's model of the Classical Western, there is a split-subjectivity of two competing iconographies. The low-mimetic manner suppresses any propensity toward abstraction for the viewer, but Pete restores this tendency by romanticizing the *mise-en-scène*'s jumble of imperfections into the 'perfect scene'.

Of course, the sorest protuberance of all and the biggest obstacle to romanticization is Melquiades' remains. (Lest we forget precisely what we mean by the Disinterred Western, Melquiades' carcass is the perfect metonym.) Thrice buried, and twice resurrected in various

stages of decomposition – the increasingly unsightly corpse aptly conveys the genre’s stigma in the eyes of many contemporary viewers. The scene in the shed further signifies the pitiable disconnection compulsive cowboys have from the world of women – Pete’s incomprehension of Rachel and his unending devotion to the homosocial bond forgoes heterosexual partnership in favour of nestling a male corpse bride. For all the romantic splendour conferred upon the figure of Melquiades, the mortal *thingliness* of his corpse never ceases to remind the viewer of the brutal truth: Pete enjoins us to court the fable despite its peeling flesh. The utopian connotations of the fable are stripped and lodged as an insular principle in Pete’s mind. This emphasizes not only how conspicuously out of joint the fable is with public perception, but also how stubbornly entrenched it is within American identity. While audiences can remain cynical about such romantic fables, they can still identify with Pete, at least from a certain remove, as being one of more than a few Americans past middle age whose masculinity has been largely shaped through icons of Western performance. Above all, his quixotic journey expresses the deep-seated cultural desire to make sense of the world’s complications by contriving a beginning, middle, and end, in spite of the immense suspension of disbelief required.

Thus, how the film chooses to end its story is of special significance. After finally burying Melquiades, the broken and weary Mike Norton expects to die. But Pete had never intended to execute Mike; he holds up a picture of Melquiades and, pointing his gun, orders him to apologize before God. “I don’t believe in God,” Mike replies. Pete fires several deafening shots around Mike’s head until the latter breaks down and sobs a heartfelt apology. Pete seems satisfied with this, and after a while tells him “you’re free to go, son,” and gives him the better horse. Then, as Pete rides away, Mike calls out after him, “You gonna be alright?” Pete keeps riding and doesn’t answer back. This closing image, picturing the mentor vanishing into the

distance while the pupil calls out after him, is drawn straight from *Shane* and referenced in a long line of Westerns including *Pale Rider* (Clint Eastwood, 1985) and *Dances with Wolves*.

Shane may well be the apotheosis of the Western fable, distilling the bare essentials of the Classical Western form, as Will Wright (34), Robert Warshow (44-46), and André Bazin (51-52) have each demonstrated in turn. By quoting *Shane*, *Three Burials* asserts its loyalty to its *de facto* fabular structure, which in this sense, strongly suggests the pupil will carry the torch back to the community and remain a beacon of reformed and humbled masculinity – thus making Pete’s project a success. Some part of the film still believes that subjecting Mike to a Frontier Myth cycle – separating him from society, regressing him to a primitive state (and he is never more primitive than when he’s in a frenzied delirium from snakebite), and prolonging the life-threatening ordeal – is the prescription he needs for masculine regeneration. The film recuperates America’s knight-errant while simultaneously alluding to the masculinist, compulsive trappings afoot in the genre’s formative heritage. And perhaps better than any other Western we discuss, it reflects the love-hate relationship American culture has with the cowboy.

5.2 Everybody’s Talkin’ but Harlan Don’t Hear a Word in *Down in the Valley*

A similar quotation from *Shane* opens *Down in the Valley* (as *Valley* hereafter). The ‘cowboy hero’ Harlan (Edward Norton) descends into the San Fernando Valley wearing a cowboy hat and boots, with a lasso hitched to his packsack. Like *Shane*, Harlan emerges from an unknown elsewhere, without history, called like some angelic force to restore balance within the community. Read this way, *Shane/Shane* is the model upon which Harlan has re-invented himself; yet, the film frames him oppositional to the social sphere right from this opening sequence. As Harlan pauses to gaze upon the Valley, his point of view sees crowded freeways and bridges, planes and broadcasting antennae rising into a smog-filled sky. The audience later

learns of his contempt for cars because they “make people lazy,” a perspective that seems as retrograde to his new teenage friends as his straight-laced disapproval of “wacky tobaccy,” as he calls it. The girls giggle at him and he causes everyone to do a double take, which should recall the conspicuous outmodedness of Joe Buck (Jon Voight) in *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969), with whom Harlan also shares the same ‘awe shucks’ naïve persona. The film depicts the strange interface of this persona in present-day urbanity, while its more serious project deconstructs the reasons for its performance in the first place.

When 30-something Harlan first meets the 18-year old Tobe, the two quickly fall in love. He seems like the ideal boyfriend – his cowboy persona presents an earnest, sturdy, and adventurous character. He devotes his full attention to her and also makes a point to spend time with her younger brother Lonnie (Rory Culkin), who doesn’t seem to have any friends of his own. Neither Tobe nor Lonnie get much attention from home, being raised solely by their father Wade (David Morse), a self-absorbed correctional officer, and so Harlan seems a blessing in both their lives. But the viewer is privy to certain moments which make them pause and reconsider. The first of these is a scene with Harlan alone in his apartment, playing ‘shoot-out’ with imaginary villains. He is seen holstering two unloaded Colt .45s (the same kind, we later learn, “that Billy the Kid and all the ‘ol cowboys used”). Ducking for cover behind the couch, he calls out: “You’re a lying sack o’ shit and – You’re a dirty, greedy pig and I’m gonna make ya’ squeal!” – thus revealing that his cowboy lingo doesn’t come naturally – he has to practice it. Eventually, the viewer learns that Harlan comes from the Valley and not South Dakota as he wished to pretend: his opening descent into the Valley was the conscious activation of fantasy. In fact, he comes from a broken home and has a history of delinquency and detention in a string of correctional facilities.

The subtle slippage in Harlan's vocal performance, which alternates between a relaxed and more pronounced drawl, is a crafty nuance by the actor. In fact, the number of sham or duplicitous characters within Norton's body of work contributes to the intertextual knowledge that makes him so fitting for this part.⁴¹ Like so many contemporary actors besides Tommy Lee Jones and Clint Eastwood, Ed Norton's physiognomy is not very credible as a leather-faced cowboy, which is ideal in this case because neither is Harlan. Norton inflects the character with a barely visible mercurial quality, to give the impression of something enigmatic lurking beneath Harlan's upright façade. The self-consciousness of casting and performance is what already thwarts Harlan's every action and gesture that would aspire to the level of fable. To finish his imaginary shoot-out 'scene' Harlan takes one in the gut and, keeling over, mumbles, "All over a lump of ore...I guess that's just the human folly," and then falls to the floor. In gesturing to the cowboy's heroic last stand, bound to his ethics even in death, Harlan's 'performance' recalls Steve Judd's (Joel McCrea) elegiac death in *Ride the High Country* (Sam Peckinpah, 1962), posited by Kitses as a bookend to the Classical Western (19). The scene evokes an epochal turning point when an incipient post-modernism would eclipse culture's ability to believe in such uniformly good icons as Steve Judd. Harlan's daily practice to both embody and believe in this ideal lends the story a sense of tragic irony.

To reiterate Martin Pumphrey's argument outlined in chapter two, stringent codes of masculine behaviour were formative and instructional to men of his generation, who grew up watching Classical Westerns. He says his generation became increasingly uncomfortable with the style revolution in men's fashion over the past few decades, in which males have come to conceive their identity as being contingent, historical, relational, and constantly under

⁴¹ Norton's debut performance in *Primal Fear* (Gregory Hoblit, 1996) was one such role, made all the more notable for the Academy Award nomination it earned him. Other roles include *The Score* (Frank Oz, 2001) and the *The Italian Job* (F. Gary Gray, 2003).

negotiation. Fully accepting this premise can be intimidating for many men, since it presupposes the lack that constitutes subjects, which leads them to establish ontological security through gender-coded behaviour in the first place. If in *Three Burials*, Pete must enact the frontier drama to concoct a fable from life's messy and uncertain events, in *Valley Harlan* must 'perform' the cowboy to save him from his own unstable personality. Being immersed in a later generation's postmodern, post-structuralist gender sensibility, he looks to escape its existential anxiety through the Western fable's authoritative text. For Harlan, the normative masculinity of the cowboy provides a cohesive, singular identity. It is ironic that he chooses to *re-invent* himself along the lines of a masculine style that was seen as fixed and determined by stringent codes; this contributes to the film's split-subjectivity, expressing its desire for a single authorial voice within a postmodernity that has fractured this voice into the performance of multiple personae.

This split-subjectivity is vividly rendered in a scene before the mirror, a prismatic device of *mise-en-scène* that is arguably the best way to translate a character's fractured identity. At this point in the plot, viewers have been given a few clues that there is more to Harlan than meets his good 'ol boy image, though nothing definitive. Wade recognizes something dubious about Harlan right away, and eventually calls him on it: "What you are is a piece of trailer trash. You're a nobody, who wishes he was a somebody. But what makes you different is you're willing to do something stupid to meet your goal. And that makes you a menace." He warns Harlan with a gun to leave his kids alone, and Tobe soon concedes that it is probably best they separate for the time being. (In the latter scene, Harlan waits for her in a coffee shop looking mournfully over his plate. He fidgets idly with a donut hole, attempting to press it back into the centre of a donut – a not-so-subtle metaphor posing Tobe as the 'missing piece' to his identity.) Nevertheless, if Wade's words don't seem to fit audiences' picture of Harlan thus far, his

monologue before the mirror alters the picture drastically. Breaking his own code of conduct, Harlan heedlessly chugs from a bottle of whiskey and sucks the remnants of a joint. Shirtless and holstered, he aims his gun and questions into the mirror: “What’s my line? What’s my line? What’s your line, Wade! Corrections? Oh, so you’re a ‘screwhead’. Yah, that’s what we called you.” In the style of Pasolini, editing and sound design create a free indirect discourse with Harlan’s subjectivity.⁴² The voices in his mind interlace with those he speaks aloud, alternating between Harlan (the cowboy), Harlan (the rebellious delinquent), and Wade, who is split between the disapproving father and some correctional officer from Harlan’s past.

Suddenly, his gun accidentally blasts a hole through the mirror. His landlord, Rita (Jennifer Echols) storms in and reprimands him. Her words acoustically morph with double resonance; selective phrases amplify within his mind like “you don’t give me any respect” and “I need you to pack your things and leave right now.” “Yah okay, Rita,” he says in his ‘aw shucks’ tone. It takes a few moments for the reality to sink in, but when she repeats the order Harlan snaps back in a virulent tone: “I’m getting my fucking shit together, alright, Rita!” The scene is a startling revelation of Harlan’s propensity for violence, which suggests yet another reason why he would choose the cowboy figure – whose violence is masterfully controlled – upon which to model himself. However, his process of masculine subject formation suffers a meltdown at the threat of losing Tobe, and in a last-ditch effort to save their relationship he tries to convince her to run away with him. When she refuses, seeing at last how volatile he is, the scene quickly

⁴² The savvy audience member would likely read the scene as a quotation of the ‘You talking to me?’ scene in *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976). In fact, a line can be traced through *Taxi Driver* back to *The Searchers*, since Scorsese’s film has several direct references to the seminal revisionist Western. Indeed, ridiculed as ‘the Cowboy’ by Sport (Harvey Keitel), Travis Bickle (Robert DeNiro) is the quintessential square whose anti-social symptoms are shared to varying degrees by Harlan and Pete Perkins. By this logic, even though it lacks the distinctive conventions of a ‘frontier’ and a nature/culture semantic, *Taxi Driver* shares a few things in common with French’s Post-Western.

becomes confrontational. Harlan instinctively draws his gun and shoots her and then goes into a state of shock, hardly able to believe what he has done.

In a desperate attempt to re-integrate his symbolic identity, he enacts his own frontier drama, stealing a horse and hiding out in the surrounding backcountry of the Valley. He convinces Lonnie to come with him, telling him that it was Wade who accidentally shot her, aiming for Harlan as the two were running away. Lonnie is the only person left who has never seen Harlan's composure slip and still believes he is who he pretends to be; his presence therefore gives Harlan's fantasy a source of external reinforcement. Added to this, the tangible experience of being a 'righteous outlaw' on horseback in the woods seems to serve as a defence mechanism to repress the trauma of accidentally shooting Tobe. The Freudian logic takes on *Don Quixote* proportions: If you want to be a knight/cowboy, act like a knight/cowboy. The apotheosis of Harlan's wish-fulfilment happens when the two stumble upon a movie-set filming a remake of *My Darling Clementine*. He stands in amongst the extras, unaware the cameras are rolling; his attire just happens to blend in with those of the extras. Turning around to see Lonnie, he raises his arms as if to say 'Can you believe it? We've arrived at last.'

The illusion is soon shattered when Wade and the police arrive, chasing them into an adjacent suburban zone. The iconography is most poignant: Harlan on horseback, blood seeping from his wounds, trotting along the winding crescents of the noiseless suburbs. The contextual disjunction is even more striking when Harlan gets held up in a newly constructed home. Devoid of furniture, with white painted walls, the *mise-en-scène* in the suburban home could not be further from Harlan's ideal pastoral. He says, "Oh God, this is not where I want to die." Wade has his gun trained on Harlan and orders him to drop his weapon. Harlan has his back

turned, then spins around and goes for his gun with the ‘hero’s disadvantage.’ Even with his practiced quick-draw, Harlan is shot dead.

Valley satirizes the cowboy hero’s persona in both its aberrant outmodedness and its potential grip on the cultural imaginary. Harlan is dangerously unstable, a product of an array of institutional failures: familial, psychological, correctional, and educational. Paradoxically, the most positive influence on his subject formation had been media, specifically the Classical Western genre. Adopting that fantasy is what made him functional; all of his good effects were conveyed to others when this persona was intact. Of course, if he had not been inspired to play with guns, he would not have accidentally shot his girlfriend; but the deeper question is what would Harlan have been like if he had he not assumed this Western persona? Those moments of slippage revealing the savagery accompanying his lack are meant to remind viewers of this question, leaving them saddled with a perplexity. In *Valley*’s final scene, Lonnie and Tobe (recovered from her gun shot) take a moment to cast Harlan’s ashes down into the Valley. It seems they have forgiven him; despite his troubled interior, Harlan’s good intentions were sincere. Lonnie asks Tobe what they should say. “Don’t say anything,” she responds. Just as in the end of *Three Burials*, the film tries to bestow its hero with some dignity, but viewers are still left uncertain what to think or feel.

Or to put it another way, *Three Burials* knows what it feels about the Western fable, but is less sure what it thinks; *Valley* knows what it thinks, but is less sure how it feels. *Three Burials* is impelled by a powerful emotional logic, and while viewers know well enough why characters call Pete crazy, they probably don’t believe it on a gut level. Pete’s firmness of purpose and singular virtue is enough to win the audience’s trust, even if they are unsure whether cowboy masculinities make any sense nowadays. On the other hand, *Valley* is quite sure of

Harlan's personality disorder and gradually dissociates identification from the hero, textualizing the fable and the cowboy persona in a series of social discordances. But ultimately its feelings are contradictory: it both loves and ridicules what the cowboy's fable represents.

5.3 Chasing Ghosts across the Hard Caliche in *No Country for Old Men*

Contrary to the previous two films, *No Country* knows exactly what it thinks and feels about such fables; paradoxically, this gives the film the most uncertain disposition of them all. At the film's outset, the fable is buried somewhere underground, but its ghosts still haunt the characters, beckoning them to embody their lifeless forms in spite of the hazard they portend. Though their voices never silence, the film makes it clear at the end that this is no country for old Western fables. Drawing the curtain on the past and its moral ideologies, the film clears the stage for a *Realpolitik* of sorts, in which we may conceive the relationship among masculinity, violence, and justice as a practical problem without simple solutions. Compared to the previous films, Rancière's notion of aesthetic play is even more pronounced here, particularly in the film's dynamic engagement and inversion of generic conventions. *No Country* deploys genres and sub-genres ranging from Western to crime, neo-noir, police procedural, horror, serial killer and even comedy, all in cross-contention with each other like an assortment of mixed identities that each voice their part in a political debate.⁴³ To continental philosophers like Rancière, Slavoj Žižek, and Alain Badiou, politics and *real* thought are born of differences, disagreement, and the persistence of debate. The generic discordance in *No Country* is its way of exposing the false consciousness of the Frontier Myth and the facile answers the fable spins from Classical genres.

⁴³ In the "Bonus Features" of the DVD the short documentary "The Making of *No Country For Old Men*" opens with a montage of cast and crew attempting to type the film in a genre. It runs the gamut mentioned above, while adding in the road movie, and hybrids like horror-comedy-chase. The sequence concludes with actress Kelly MacDonal saying "It's a Coen brothers film: they're their own genre."

Hence the film attains the status of a quandary, the complexities of which are read in the despondent countenance of its main character Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones).

This quandary's connection with the fable is succinctly expressed in the opening scene. Sheriff Bell narrates how he comes from a long line of lawmen, him being third after his daddy and granddaddy before him: "Some of the old-time sheriffs never even wore a gun. A lot of folks find that hard to believe. ...I always like to hear about the old-timers. Never missed a chance to do so. You can't help but compare yourself against the old-timers. Can't help but wonder how they would've operated these times." The words are juxtaposed against still, long shots of the Texas Trans-Pecos,⁴⁴ empty of people or human habitation. The effect would likely induce audiences to fill in the picture by imagining cowboys and Indians riding the open plains, images that would be sourced from their memories of Classical Westerns, no doubt. The dialogue simultaneously communicates nostalgia for older times and discouragement with the present, the latter of which is reinforced in the Sheriff's tenor. Any imaginings of the great plainsmen of old, therefore, are bestowed with a ghostly effect – heroes of the past without successors. The opening scene inaugurates the spirit of demythologization, but it also roots itself in the Western. This is fitting since the Western is the locus of origin for the Frontier Myth in cinema; the film simultaneously deconstructs the Myth, reveals its origin, as well as its rampancy in other genres.

When, a few scenes later, Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin) tracks an antelope through the same landscape, the adjustments in cinematography and sound further the demythologizing effect. The film stock appears to be bleach bypassed, muting the colours and emphasizing the parched look of the landscape. The camera tracks at a low height, level with Moss's boots as

⁴⁴ The Trans-Pecos is the most mountainous and arid region of the state, known for its harsh climate and scenic vistas. It is comprised of nine Texas counties that lie within the Chihuahuan Desert.

they crunch along the sun-baked, powdery terrain; the voluminous sound of the wind adds to the setting's tactility. This is in direct contrast to the saturated hues in Technicolor Westerns like *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* and *Shane*, or even black and white Westerns, which all retained a sense of the picturesque. Perhaps this is because these older films tended to frame their action at a certain remove, orchestrate grandiose music, and paste over conventional sound bytes culled from audio libraries. As a result, the sand and grit of the frontier seemed to be sanitized from the cog-work of the action, allowing for that idyllic look. *No Country*'s emphasis on the material elements, its complete absence of musical score or soundtrack, and the close, Steadicam shots immerse audiences in the harsh environs. The auditory and visual focus on the boots here in particular intimates the stratum buried beneath – the layer of the old fable whose colour and grandeur has since been crusted over by harsh terrain.

The Coens agreed they needed someone who looks like a “cowboy” to play Llewelyn Moss. Josh Brolin was ideal because he worked on a ranch in his younger years and knew well the rugged and taciturn West Texas brand of masculinity the part required (“The Making of *No Country*”). While hunting antelope in the backcountry, Llewelyn happens upon the aftermath of a drug deal gone bad and the remains of four men, a truckload of heroin, and a satchel with two million dollars. He takes the satchel, unaware that it is rigged with a transponder, and is soon tracked by the man hired to retrieve the money, Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem). Still, Llewelyn believes he can handle the situation, get away with the money, and provide a better life for him and his wife Carla Jean (Kelly MacDonald). He returns home and tells her she has to hurry and pack up and move to Odessa while he settles some things – anything she leaves in their trailer she “ain’t gonna see again.” When she asks what happened, he retorts, “You don’t need to know everything, Carla Jean.” When she makes a fuss that her life is upturned, he grumbles back,

“Baby, things happen. I can’t take ‘em back.” Carla Jean, obliging him against her intuition, and Llewelyn, doing what ‘he’s gotta do’ in spite of his wife’s protests, together rehearse the traditional gender roles of old Westerns.

However, Llewelyn woefully underestimates Anton Chigurh, who is as proficient and resilient as he is depraved. Getting around while avoiding detection from the law, Chigurh would just as soon kill a person for their car, for information, or for the slightest inconvenience they might cause him. Wanting to remain inconspicuous, it is ironic how sorely he stands out; his unfamiliar dialect, his 70s hockey hairdo, his captive bolt pistol and air tank, and his utter lack of a sense of humour put him at odds with everyone he encounters. In one scene, he prepares to kill a gas station proprietor for his attempt at casual conversation. He flips a coin, noting that it travelled 22 years from its 1958 date to arrive at this moment, and he tells the man to call it. The man is completely unaware of what’s at stake (and also unaware that the fan belts hanging in a row behind his head appear like nooses), but he calls it right and unwittingly saves his own life. By some mad logic, Chigurh sees himself as the black hand of fate, a force beyond cause and effect and human will. This licenses him to menace his fellow man, as though their lives were a meaningless charade against a background of chance and contingency.

The plot proceeds as a taut game of cat and mouse between Chigurh and Llewelyn, with the Sheriff picking up their trail, usually two or three steps behind. The chase scenes take place mostly at night, in low-key lit hotel rooms and quiet streets lit by sodium lamps that cast pools of gloomy reddish-orange light. The meticulous focus on each man’s clever planning and procedure, the lighting, and the tightly edited back and forth of their chase resembles something of a neo-noir, hardboiled thriller. The Sheriff tries to intervene and deliver Llewelyn a message from the hard light of day – turn yourself in so we can protect you. But since he can’t catch up

with him, he tries to go through Carla Jean; she assures the Sheriff that her man “can take all comers.” Indeed, Llewelyn believes he can, as he tells the contract killer hired to find Chigurh, “Maybe *he* (meaning Chigurh) should be worried. About me.” And so the audience is primed for an outcome to this thriller in the form of some standoff (or showdown) between these two men – the compulsive cowboy who’s got something to prove and the black hand of fate who dooms all human hopes, dreams, and schemes. But the film takes a different turn. The audience does not get to see Moss fight his last stand, nor is Chigurh the one who kills him; Llewelyn is shot dead by a competing faction of Mexicans hired to find the money. By editing out Moss’s bloody send off, however, the film abruptly does away with the hardboiled thriller arc of the story and the burden of the plot now hangs upon Ed Tom Bell.

What type of character is Bell and what is the nature of the problem he has inherited, that the film would shift focus to him in this way? He is, first of all, a character whose masculinity is very different from Llewelyn Moss’. He’s not compulsive like Llewelyn; he doesn’t have to ‘win’ or prove himself, ultimately. Although there is a shred of Bell that still believes he can do some good, he’s coming to accept the fact that probably he can’t. He has come to see the world plainly and without embellishment, conceding to his deputy “Age will flatten a man, Wendell” when his detective skills are charged with being “linear.” His relationship with his wife also contrasts Llewelyn’s. Judging by the ‘heck’ that he is always looking to avoid, Ed Tom and Loretta Bell (Tess Harper) share more equitable gender roles. When he needs a second horse to investigate the backcountry, he borrows hers but insists that Wendell (Garret Dillahunt) ride it, avowing: “Anything happens to Loretta’s horse I can tell you right now I don’t want to be the party that was aboard.” The manner in which the film cuts Moss’ death scene is important, not only because it derails audience expectations, but also because it stamps out generic forms of

personal heroism as though they were a foregone conclusion – the fable’s failure is not spared the dignity of even being *seen*. If audiences are frustrated with the filmmakers’ choice, it indicates the degree to which they are still enthralled with outworn fables and compulsive masculinities; Bell’s weathered visage registers the experience of one who would recognize that, probably after having witnessed their failure on more than one occasion. Thus the film switches to Bell for a more sober reflection of the real world, one stripped of Hollywood ideology.

As for the conditions of *No Country*’s diegetic world, they reflect a state of disorder that extends well beyond the problem of Anton Chigurh. Perhaps this is best expressed in the dialogue, which is on the whole lifted verbatim from Cormac McCarthy’s titular novel. Everything the characters say to one another is laced with a sense of the apocalyptic, an implacable darkness encroaching on the horizon. Surveying the crime scene in the backcountry – the “colossal goat fuck” as one man calls it – Wendell laments, “It’s a mess, ain’t it Sheriff?” to which Bell responds, “If it ain’t, it’ll do ‘til a mess gets here.” Wendell cannot see the look of worry on Bell’s face that the viewer can, however; his back is turned to spare Wendell the sight of an older man’s discouragement, because this older man is supposed to be the bastion of law in the region. The Sheriff glimpses that his chances are flimsy at best, just as fables have no place in the real world; the remnants of his hanging on signal the spectre of the fable that has persisted to linger in some faint way from the opening scene. Taken together, the collapse of generic tropes, the doubt-laden conversations, and the emphasis on graphic materiality all heavily tilt the scales of Rancière’s ‘two perceptive spaces in confrontation’: in *No Country*, narrative continuity and the rationality of the goals are not merely thwarted, but upturned to the point that the fable can hardly survive at all.

But if the fable still whispers some faint assurance that law will prevail, then its voice is further blotted out by the sheer enormity of bloodletting in the film. A deputy's windpipe is cracked and his carotid artery spurts all over in the opening scene; a drug-kingpin is shot in the neck and slowly dies, gushing blood onto the floor of his high-rise office; both gangsters and innocents alike are gorily slaughtered; and Chigurh and Llewelyn are each badly maimed by the other – the former lets blood from the leg, and the latter gushes profusely from his side. The dismal state of things is surely because of “all the money and the drugs,” complains a DEA officer to Bell. For his part, Bell thinks “once you stop hearin’ sir and madam, the rest is soon to foller.” If good manners are a sign of the capacity of the nation’s institutions to instil a sound ethos, then the institutions themselves have been compromised with a different ethos in which money and the marketplace are the foremost value.

It is important in this respect that the film shows bloody money being exchanged to a bystander on three separate occasions. Moss gives \$500 to a teenager for his coat, and later \$100 to a band of mariachis to point the way to a hospital. Each time there is a focus on the money, always crinkled and blood-soaked. The motif continues after Chigurh is unexpectedly hit by a car and suffers a compound fracture in his arm. Two kids pull up on their bicycles and Chigurh offers one a bloody bill for his shirt to use as a sling: “Take it,” Chigurh says, “Take it and you didn’t see me. I was already gone.” “Yessir,” says the boy. The shot dissolves as the kids squabble: “You know part of that’s mine.” “You still got your damn shirt,” snaps the other. The next shot is the final scene with Ed Tom and Loretta at the breakfast table. The kid’s “Yessir” lingering on from the last scene has a haunting irony, insinuating the return of good manners but in support of precisely the wrong institution: a neoliberal ethic devoid of any morality. Indeed, a

society where even children swap money to cover up the scrutiny of blood, points to a systemic disorder that reaches far beyond the figure of Chigurh.

That Bell has come to believe he is chasing “a ghost,” someone whom he never once sees, who slips away so easily, who leaves such eccentric clues – like hollowed-out lock cylinders, flaming cars, and victims shot in the head with neither exit wounds nor bullets – is enough to convince him that he’s overmatched. In the opening narration, he confesses, “The crime you see now, it’s hard to even take its measure. ... I don’t want to push my chips forward and go out and meet something I don’t understand. A man would have to put his soul at hazard.” This is an important point: it is not that the Sheriff is unwilling to die to do his job, rather it is the worry that operating so far beyond the level of his competence will foul his inner self like a contagion, swallowing up what virtue he has left. Hence, his decision to retire and spend time with his wife: Chigurh, meanwhile, roams free. The news disappoints his uncle Ellis (Barry Corbin), a retired lawman, now wheelchair-bound on account of being shot in the line of duty. Ellis tells Bell a story about his great uncle, Mac, also a lawman up in Hudspeth county: in 1909, Mac was shot on his porch by a group of Indians and left to bleed to death in front of his wife Ella. “She buried him the next day. Digging in that hard caliche.” He continues: “What you got ain’t nothin’ new. This country’s hard on people. You can’t stop what’s comin’. Ain’t all waitin’ on you.” The stark anecdote flies in the face of what the Western has taught us about the past as simpler times. The film asserts there never was a time of Technicolor simplicity where good and evil were seen as clear as the colour of one’s hat; in fact, the caliche was just as hard and sun-baked then as it is today.

Nevertheless, the mythology persists, to the point of tormenting Ed Tom’s dreams, which he goes on to share with his wife in the final scene. The dream takes place in older times, with

him and his father riding horseback through a mountain pass at night. It's hard riding – dark, cold and snowing. His father rides past “carryin’ fire in a horn the way people used to do. ... And in the dream I knew that he was goin’ on ahead [...] fixin’ to make a fire [...] out there in all that dark and all that cold, and I knew whenever I got there he would be there. Out there up ahead. And then I woke up.” The camera remains in medium close-up on the dispirited Bell for a few beats as the soundtrack amplifies the ticking of the clock and then the film cuts to credits. *No Country* portrays a masculinity disillusioned of grand narratives, without God, or the Frontier Myth, or the Western fable to point the way. It pits one man’s confrontation with a systemic malaise as an impractical and impossible battle to win. Though Bell can’t abide the injunction of uncle Ellis and the spectres of the past, he can’t help but hear their chorus of voices. Even if these voices speak a mythology incongruent with reality, the question remains, did believing in them provide the illusion of safety? Did it help people endure? Did this regressive security blanket once engender an ideological consensus, or even a national cohesion? The masculinity Bell espouses is a conservative and non-heroic one. He is smart enough to not be fooled into chasing ghosts and wise enough to shelter what goodness life has left in store for him; brave enough to be a ‘coward’ and strong enough to bear these burning question marks whose flames will not expire.

5.4 Crowning the Action with ‘The END’

Whenever Americans may scorn their present moment for its apparent lack of ethics, when their masculinities seem to be in crisis, and the national consensus seems ever to spiral downward, they may flash a jaded glance to the Classical Western when everything was pieced so well together. This belief, whether illusory or not, nevertheless reaffirms the Western’s importance as a special cluster of meanings about ethics, masculine subject formation, and

national identity. The *Disinterred Western*, just like Gallafent's *End-of-the-West Western* and French's *Post-Western*, expresses culture's bipolar relationship to this cluster. They reflect culture's simultaneous disillusionment and desire for coherence, its scorn of naivety and its wish for something radical and profound to root within the national ethos and overturn its systemic malaise.

Tommy Lee Jones' persona, a mix of iron and rust, stone and feeling, does well to stand for this ambivalence – the strong emotions and less certain thoughts that we have nowadays about cowboy masculinities. His casting in the *Disinterred Western* is effective because he is old enough to span both sides of the historical point of rupture, having grown up during a time when the apogee of Western production met with the high point of American nationalism and expansionism. Born and bred in Texas, his laconic persona and weathered face bespeaks a generation of men whose masculinities have bridged a certain transition in which a myriad of factors from globalization, to consumer marketing, to second and third wave feminism have radically changed the conventions of normative masculinity. Whereas the characters of Pete Perkins and Ed Tom Bell are extremely dissimilar, the actor's persona is consistent in expressing this uniquely historical sense of loss.

While the *Postmortem Western* as a whole is about embracing ambiguity and thwarting the heroic endeavour, the subset of *Disinterred Westerns* has a distinctive way of wrapping up their stories, precisely because of their special connection to the fable. To help us clarify the importance these films' endings, we may refer to Rancière's distinction between the poet and the sage's perspectives. The poet, he says, being less tolerant than the sage, must hew action and tragedy out of life, with a measure of time that lends them grandeur and a set number of episodes. "Victory," Rancière says, "belongs to the one who can crown the action with the

words THE END. ... It is only right for the bad guys to be shot down, or else the Western, missing an end, would never have come into being in the first place" (*Film Fables* 77). This is how Pete Perkins concludes the fable of his mind; his project being fulfilled, he can now consummate the grandeur of his finale with the iconic image of the lone cowboy riding into the sunset. Harlan, on the other hand, victoriously concludes his fable as a tragic Western. At the moment he knows his game is up and he's certain to go to prison, he averts that outcome by turning and drawing instead, so he can go down in a blaze of glory.

However, *No Country* cannot end its story in the conventional sense, as Aristotle would have it, bringing closure to the grandeur, the measure, and the tempo of the story, so as to inscribe something definitive from the arbitrary succession of life. Unlike the other two films, *No Country* offers no succour in fables, neither does it co-opt any part of the Frontier Myth, whose philosophy of regeneration through violence has been so frequently swept up and glamorized into a fable by the Western form. The film abandons the poet's perspective for that of the sage who can turn a blind eye to Chigurh and suffer the existential ordeal of life's open-endedness. This makes *No Country* a critical bookend to our discussion: more than any other of the films discussed, it leaves the Western dead and buried. And though we, like Bell, continue to hear its plaintive moans from the grave, the film's ultimate perspective allows us to reflect more soberly what they mean.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

The Postmortem Western evokes a unique sense of loss, despair, and disavowal to match the disillusionment that comes from a perceived masculinity in crisis. These films are often harsh and bloody, but there is also a wintry, elegiac quality that expresses empathy for the masculine subject's damaged condition. As such, male audiences may find these films a comfort in their own lugubriousness, recognizing a similar tragic dysfunction in the way their own good intentions, much like the heroes', may go unrecognized and lead nowhere. But, as is always true of the Western, the landscape, the conditions, and the hero's plight require the subject to endure; the challenge demands an inner strength of resolve, and this equally captures the imagination of viewers. Sometimes this strength exhibits a bitter edge, as when Al Swearengen declaims "in life, you have to do a lot of things that you don't fuckin' want to do. That's what the fuck life is, one vile fucking task after another." Other times it shows a softer side as when Sheriff Bullock reopens his front door after storming out on his wife Martha, and pauses, sighing deeply, "Do please forgive me." The softness gives these audiences some hope, while the bitterness gives their residual anger a bone to chew on.

In striving to get to the heart of these films, I have chosen a methodology that has been mostly successful but has disadvantages, all the same. My close textual analysis of these films was primarily character and theme-based, which was appropriate given that these films centre on the masculine subject suffering a particular cultural condition. And yet, there was not room enough to elaborate the significance that graphic violence and cinematography had in expressing these films' mood and disposition. Certainly, *Unforgiven* set the trend by distinguishing its violence as less balletic and more measured when compared with previous portrayals of graphic

violence like *The Wild Bunch*. As in the other films of this study, *Unforgiven*'s violence is depicted in real time, quick and bloody, followed by a drawn-out aftermath for the viewer to ponder. This immersion in the bloody consequences of one's actions is a vital component of these films, not only with respect to the notion of controlling primitive impulses but in re-imagining a more strenuous time and place. David Milch has justified the excessive swearing in *Deadwood* by likening the town of Deadwood to a jungle, with swearing being the equivalent of gorillas beating their chest. The violence, too, can be read as an extension of this metaphor, symbolizing an antagonism and unwillingness to accept the changes thrust upon the masculine subject. I have tended to read the violence as an expression of the protagonist's world coming asunder, and sometimes as an emanation of the radical gap between the sexes. Some men may feel they have been cut off from the social web, both publicly and privately, which is perhaps why these films bleed the way they do.

That being said, Whitehead's theory of the masculine subject and masculine ontology proved indispensable to this study. It helped us develop a picture of the cowboy protagonist as not just a man, but a subject whose political power is being reconfigured by shifting discursive practices, such as female empowerment, neoliberal effects, inhospitable workplace conditions, unfamiliar or constricting homosocial relations, and institutional bureaucracy and indifference. So, too, does the audience's engagement with the characters onscreen double as a discursive practice, one that evokes the dwindling of old materialities and the presence of new performative codes with a fair degree of verisimilitude. Above all, Whitehead and Kimmel's work emphasizes the sense of existential anxiety men have about *being men*, which is the main source of fuel for the instability and malaise underlying these films. This often manifests within our characters as a chasm between *doing* and *being*. Realizing their goals seems to be inextricably

linked with realizing their selves as gendered subjects; the pressure is constantly to act, to do something, to shape their outward circumstance in a way that will give reason and purpose to their inner anxiety, or perhaps distract them from it. Still, we are not just watching cowboys who are failing to get the job done, but masculine subjects who are negotiating an historical moment when doing seems senseless before knowing how to be. If they are only enacting old patterns that no longer work, it makes more sense to do nothing and suffer the circumstances, which are ultimately beyond their grasp. The intense consternation we witness in characters like Captain Stanley, Sheriff Bullock, and Ed Tom Bell when they choose *not to act*, dramatizes their masculine ontology collapsing like a house of cards, readying them for something they are not at all used to – being ordinary.

Perhaps the greatest disadvantage of my methodology is that it grafted the origins of a widespread cultural condition onto a single nation's Frontier Myth. Slotkin is clear in *Gunfighter Nation* that the Frontier Myth is a uniquely American Myth, engendering a singular conception of violence, which manifests at inordinate levels compared to other nations. My contention is that the Frontier Myth has been instrumental in shaping a particular model of masculinity, but if we see the same, or strikingly similar, masculinities surface in a film like *The Proposition*, then what does this say about America's claim on frontier masculinity? If frontier masculinity is a universal condition or, at least, not exclusive to America, why do I bother to bring in Slotkin's Frontier Myth at all? The most obvious reason is that all the other films are set in America, and are very much related to the Myth's changing impact on its national identity. The second reason is because of the Myth's overlap and congruency with Whitehead's lone hero myth, as well as the fact that both scholars, along with Kimmel, have stressed the universal connotations of the wilderness as a site for masculine regeneration. So even if Slotkin does not

spend any time analyzing the Myth's impact on masculine subject formation, Whitehead and Kimmel have perceived a common set of characteristics affecting masculinities across the Western world. My thesis, therefore, pertains to a more global phenomenon of a perceived crisis in masculinity within a postmodern, neoliberal world, albeit analyzed through a predominantly American mythic-historical context. The third reason is that the Western was born and mostly shaped in America, but is no longer exclusive to it. The Frontier Myth has been crucial to the Western's development and, to be sure, there is a different frontier that holds a set of meanings equally unique and specific to Australia; but how can we determine exactly what parts of *The Proposition*'s performances, characters, cinematography, setting, and story belong to a purely Australian identity and are not already a product of the Western? At the end of the day, an American, Australian, British, and Canadian viewer should be able to glean a shared set of meanings from a film like *The Proposition*, as goes for the other Westerns of this study. At any rate, further study on Australian and British national myths could potentially stabilize this methodology somewhat.

This raises one final question, which is, why the Western? How do we define this shared set of meanings and what does the genre provide in representing these themes that other genres cannot? Surely there are other genres that have a revisionist engagement with the Frontier Myth, such as the war film. Yet, when we look at revisionist films like *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987) and *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1998), the range of themes are determined by certain generic factors. Critique is invariably levelled at the military institution, and the inherent violence of interpellating patriotism and obedience into subjects. The vital quality lacking, of course, is the frontier – more specifically, the symbolic image of *the west*. The iconic image of a lone cowboy riding into the sunset, however clichéd, evokes an existential

impression: One man, alone with his maker, forced to look inward and reflect upon his purpose in the world. Iconographically, there is a clear correspondence between Romantic era portraits of spiritual angst such as Caspar David Friedrich's "Monk by the Sea" (1809) and John Ford's penchant for low set horizons and wide-open skies. It is through such framed perspectives that we perhaps best glimpse the transcendental moment of man contemplating himself.

Of course, in the Postmortem Western, the frontier is radically foreshortened and, in the Disinterred Western, it is foreclosed completely. The demands of domesticity, civic disorder, and the myriad effects of globalization encroach upon the protagonists' lone hero myth. Even so, the nucleus of the Western's purpose of presenting a man's inner journey remains. The difference is in the sense of freedom that is lost: in the Classical Western, this journey is actualized in the open frontier; in the Postmortem Western, action is fraught and the journey is projected inwards, focusing on the micro-moments of contemplation that precede action. When asked in an interview about *Unforgiven*, what it is about the Western that makes it so resilient, Clint Eastwood responded:

I guess it's the simplicity of the times. Now everything's so complicated, so mired down in bureaucracy that people can't fathom a way of sorting it out. In the West, even though you could get killed, it seems more manageable, like a lone individual might be able to work things out in some way. In our society, the idea of one person making a difference one way or the other is remote. (249)

In opening with *Unforgiven*'s question mark and closing with *No Country*'s definitive answer, this study has tried to expand upon Eastwood's claim. As simple as it seems, it tangles matters of philosophy, masculinity, history, and the culture's mythological sense of itself. The Postmortem Western poeticizes this complex phenomenon with heroes that seem all too much

like Leonard Cohen's 'beautiful losers', flecks of gold dust glittering elegiacally in a murky river.

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Appendix A:

Proposed List of Postmortem Westerns

Walker (Alex Cox, 1987)

Unforgiven (Clint Eastwood, 1992)

Thunderheart (Michael Apted, 1992)

Dead Man (Jim Jarmusch, 1995)

Lone Star (John Sayles, 1996)

The Hi-Lo Country (Stephen Frears, 1998)

The Claim (Michael Winterbottom, 2000)

All the Pretty Horses (Billy Bob Thornton, 2000)

Deadwood (David Milch, 2004-7)

Down in the Valley (David Jacobson, 2005)

The Proposition (John Hillcoat, 2006)

The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada (Tommy Lee Jones, 2006)

No Country for Old Men (Coen bros. 2007)

Assassination of Jesse James (Andrew Dominik, 2007)

Appaloosa (Ed Harris, 2008)

Appendix B: Proposed Canon of Post-90s Westerns with Critic Scores and U.S. Box Office

The following list is intended to provide the reader a general sense of the genre's present popularity and critical success. The list is by no means exhaustive and in some cases includes films that stray a questionable distance from the standard of a post-bellum, traditional Western. By that token, several others could be added, but this would soon require that we define our criterion with a type of 'critics game', as suggested by Rick Altman in *Film/Genre*.

Notwithstanding, this is meant to be a general and non-comprehensive list and the criterion for selection is not stringent or academically defined. Films are selected in some cases because other critics have mentioned them as Westerns (as Roger Ebert does with *Ravenous* and Jim Kitses with *The Hi-Lo Country*), or because they play upon certain themes that this thesis touches upon, such as how *City Slickers* and *The Cowboy Way* take a comic spin on the 'outmoded' theme. *Metacritic.com* and *Rottentomatoes.com* have been selected because they average their scores across a selected range of critics who have been approved by certain criteria explained on their websites. Metacritic sources their reviews from a range of venues including *The New York Times*, *Variety*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *Salon.com*. With Rotten Tomatoes, critics must publish a minimum requirement in print, broadcast, or online form in an approved venue, and/or belong to one of their lists of critic associations, such as *National Society of Film Critics*, *New York Film Critics Circle*, and *Toronto Film Critics Association*. As for the colour scheme, Metacritic's score ranges are identified by three colours: green is favourable, yellow is mixed, and red is unfavourable. *Rottentomatoes.com* separates theirs into two categories, fresh and rotten, denoting fresh as red and rotten as green; however, I have inverted the colours to match with *Metacritic*'s, keeping green favourable and red less favourable. The Box Office Scores are culled from *Boxofficemojo.com* and are U.S. domestic totals only.

| | FILM | DIRECTOR, YEAR | METACRITIC % | ROTTEN TOMATO % | BOX OFFICE (K) |
|----|--|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| 1 | <i>Dances With Wolves</i> | Kevin Costner, 1990 | 72 | 78 | \$184,208 |
| 2 | <i>City Slickers</i> | Ron Underwood, 1991 | n/a | 88 | \$124,033 |
| 3 | <i>Unforgiven</i> | Clint Eastwood, 1992 | 82 | 96 | \$101,157 |
| 4 | <i>Thunderheart</i> | Michael Apted, 1992 | n/a | 92 | \$22,660 |
| 5 | <i>Last of the Mohicans</i> | Michael Mann, 1992 | n/a | 97 | \$75,505 |
| 6 | <i>Tombstone</i> | George Cosmatos, 1993 | n/a | 79 | \$56,505 |
| 7 | <i>The Ballad of Little Jo</i> | Maggie Greenwald, 1993 | n/a | 75 | \$543 |
| 8 | <i>Bad Girls</i> | Jonathan Kaplan, 1993 | n/a | 10 | \$15,240 |
| 9 | <i>Posse</i> | Mario Van Peebles, 1993 | n/a | 36 | \$18,289 |
| 10 | <i>Geronimo: An American Legend</i> | Walter Hill, 1993 | n/a | n/a | \$18,635 |
| 11 | <i>Maverick</i> | Richard Donner, 1994 | n/a | 69 | \$101,631 |
| 12 | <i>Wyatt Earp</i> | Lawrence Kasdan, 1994 | 47 | 44 | \$25,052 |
| 13 | <i>Frank and Jesse</i> | Robert Boris, 1994 | n/a | n/a | \$50 |
| 14 | <i>The Cowboy Way</i> | Gregg Champion, 1994 | n/a | 18 | \$20,280 |
| 15 | <i>Wild Bill</i> | Walter Hill, 1995 | n/a | 35 | \$2,193 |
| 16 | <i>Dead Man</i> | Jim Jarmusch, 1995 | 58 | 71 | \$1,037 |
| 17 | <i>The Quick and the Dead</i> | Sam Rami, 1996 | 49 | 57 | \$18,636 |
| 18 | <i>Lone Star</i> | John Sayles, 1996 | 78 | 92 | \$12,408 |
| 19 | <i>The Hi-Lo Country</i> | Stephen Frears, 1998 | n/a | 56 | \$166 |
| 20 | <i>Ride with the Devil</i> | Ang Lee 1999 | 69 | 62 | \$635 |
| 21 | <i>Wild Wild West</i> | Barry Sonnenfeld, 1999 | 38 | 21 | \$113,804 |
| 22 | <i>Ravenous</i> | Antonia Bird, 1999 | 45 | 42 | \$2,062 |
| 23 | <i>Shanghai Noon</i> | Tom Dey, 2000 | 77 | 78 | \$56,937 |
| 24 | <i>South of Heaven, West of Hell</i> | Dwight Yoakam, 2000 | 22 | 14 | \$28 |
| 25 | <i>The Claim</i> | M. Winterbottom, 2000 | 62 | 63 | \$669 |
| 26 | <i>All the Pretty Horses</i> | Billy Bob Thornton, 2000 | 55 | 32 | \$14,713 |
| 27 | <i>American Outlaws</i> | Les Mayfield, 2001 | 25 | 13 | \$11,888 |
| 28 | <i>The Missing</i> | Ron Howard, 2003 | 55 | 59 | \$26,811 |
| 29 | <i>Once Upon a Time in Mexico</i> | Robert Rodriguez, 2003 | 56 | 69 | \$55,845 |
| 30 | <i>And Starring Pancho Villa...</i> | Bruce Beresford, 2003 | n/a | n/a | n/a |
| 31 | <i>Open Range</i> | Kevin Costner, 2003 | 67 | 79 | \$58,260 |
| 32 | <i>Alamo</i> | John Lee Hancock, 2004 | n/a | 30 | \$22,367 |
| 33 | <i>Don't Come Knocking</i> | Wim Wenders, 2005 | 55 | 42 | \$345 |
| 34 | <i>Down in the Valley</i> | David Jacobson, 2005 | 65 | 52 | \$444 |
| 35 | <i>Brokeback Mountain</i> | Ang Lee, 2005 | 87 | 86 | \$82,970 |
| 36 | <i>The Proposition</i> | John Hillcoat, 2006 | 73 | 87 | \$1,705 |
| 37 | <i>Bandidas</i> | J. Rønning, E. Sandberg, 2006 | n/a | 62 | n/a |
| 38 | <i>The Three Burials of Melquiades...</i> | Tommy Lee Jones, 2006 | 77 | 85 | \$4,913 |
| 39 | <i>3:10 to Yuma</i> | James Mangold, 2007 | 76 | 88 | \$53,574 |
| 40 | <i>No Country for Old Men</i> | Coen bros., 2007 | 91 | 95 | \$75,223 |
| 41 | <i>The Assassination of Jesse James...</i> | Andrew Dominik, 2007 | 68 | 74 | \$3,794 |
| 42 | <i>Appaloosa</i> | Ed Harris, 2008 | 64 | 76 | \$20,157 |