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American Myth-Busting

A new breed of westerns tells it like it is

BY JOE WILKINS

GROWING UP ON THE PLAINS of eastern Montana, I saw my fair share of westerns. We didn't have a VCR when I was a boy, and my mother didn't allow us to watch much TV, but westerns were part of the general atmosphere. The bachelor farmer who lived across the river played them for my brother and me when he baby-sat us. We watched them at school on holidays or when we had substitutes. I have to say, though, I never much liked westerns. They didn't fit what I saw in the western world around me. Though my mother was a widow raising three children, she didn't need rescue; she did fine on her own. My grandfather, who quit school after the eighth grade to cowboy for a living, wasn't a man of brooding violence and righteousness; he was gentle and fun and inquisitive.

And I'm not the first to level this argument against the mass-market western. In 1902 (the year the original Reclamation Act was passed, providing federal moneys for various irrigation projects across the arid West and eventually leading to the damming of most major western rivers) the novelist and critic Frank Norris announced:

The frontier has disappeared. . . . But when at last one comes to look for the literature that sprang from and has grown up around the last great epic event in the

history of civilization, the event which in spite of stupendous difficulties was consummated more swiftly, more completely, more satisfactorily than any like event since the westward migration began—I mean the conquering of the West, the subduing of the wilderness beyond the Mississippi—What has this produced in the way of literature? The dime novel! The dime novel and nothing else.

Though the celebratory tone galls, though I take strong issue with (among other things) the phrase “more satisfactorily,” and though I'm reading these words 110 years later—years that have seen the likes of Willa Cather, Wallace Stegner, James Welch, and many others author epic, necessary, and honest works of literature about the American West—when it comes to film (save *The Wild Bunch* and the more recent “neo-westerns” I'll get to shortly), I find myself mostly agreeing with Norris. And this is a problem.

Movies matter, deeply, in America, and the simple dishonesties of those dime books, writ large on silver screens across the nation, built into the guiding visions and imaginations of boys and girls from Tennessee to Montana, have shaped a number of our most insidious American mythologies. Though it could be argued that neither *Stagecoach* nor *Shane* holds

much sway in our contemporary cultural psyche, consider instead *Rambo*, or the latest iteration of *Die Hard*, or even *The Hurt Locker*—really any big-screen affair featuring an honorable, lonely, decidedly masculine hero staring down the bad guys. Truly, many of the shoot'em-up blockbusters we see each summer are direct mythological descendants of those dime-novel westerns, which posited that, with right intention, violence will lead to stability and community; that the present situation is somehow degraded or dishonest and only our hero—violent and brooding but honest to a fault—will serve as tonic and example; and that we might deeply love the natural world while still destroying or vastly altering large tracts of it. And from President Bush's cowboy foreign policy to local arguments for fracking and mountaintop removal, you see the problem. Stories have power. Despite all evidence to the contrary, we'll cling to whatever myth made us. Even as the water slips over our noses, we'll keep filling our pockets with those same stones.

We need new stories, truer stories. We especially need stories that intentionally take a wrecking ball to those used-up, dead-wrong myths, which is why I find the last two decades' run of neo-westerns—*Unforgiven*, *Smoke Signals*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Down in the Valley*, *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, *There Will Be Blood*, and *No Country for Old Men*, among others—so heartening.

Yes, I know. It's hard to think of the Coen brothers' bloody, disturbing adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's novel (which is

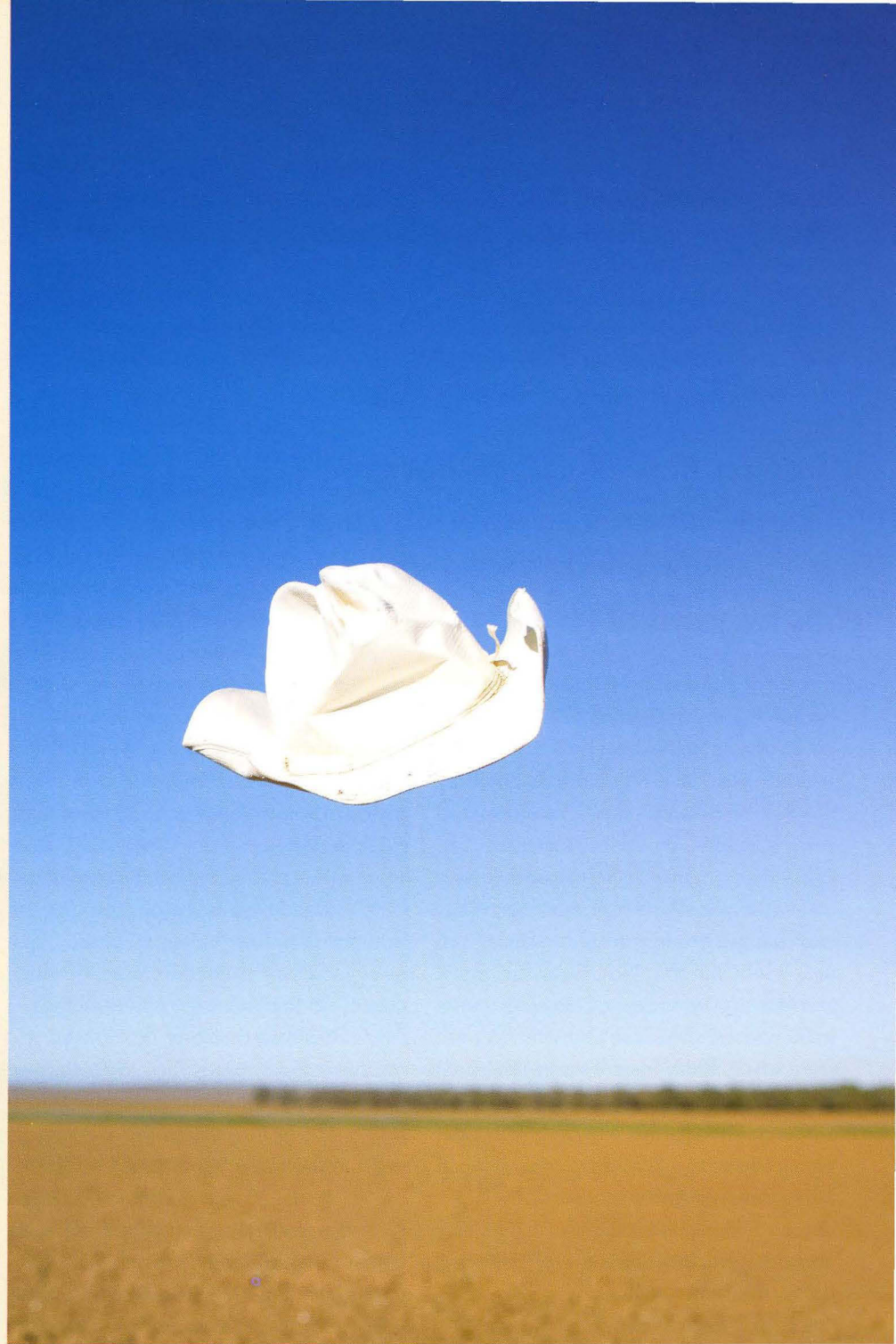
even more bloody and disturbing) and think *heartening*. Yet I would argue there is a difference between the violence of characters like Llewelyn Moss and Anton Chigurh (*No Country for Old Men*) and the violence transacted in most Hollywood blockbusters. The blockbuster, and the dime novel before it, would have us believe violence can be directed and controlled, used. When employed by the good guy, violence becomes a tool for community, justice, and righteousness. When employed by the bad guy, violence leads to division, terror, and profit. This, I think, is stunningly naïve. Violence can perhaps be used as a tool, yet it is always more than a tool as well. It is a force beyond its wielder, a force that leads mostly unto itself. So Llewelyn Moss steps, even briefly, and despite his self-serving but understandable intentions, into the brutal world of the cross-border drug war and is irrevocably sucked (along with his blameless wife and a handful of observers) into a sudden, short life of violence. Even Anton Chigurh, who seems for the bulk of the film demoniacally in control, is literally blindsided by violence at the end of the movie, when a speeding car slams into him at an intersection. As Chigurh stumbles from his own vehicle, dazed and bleeding, a torn end of bone spurred through the meat of his forearm, a young boy, witness to the crash, keeps repeating, “Would you look at that fucking bone!” That is true violence. Startling, amoral, beyond us all. Even the devil himself is wrought up in it, is ruined by it.

Violence works against the very land we make so much of as well. The many landscapes of the American West may be fussed and fawned over in the western, but those landscapes are also settled, plowed, grazed, fenced, mined, dug for roads and ditches, and, in a word, destructed. Without a doubt, the true loser of most every traditional western is the land. And here, again, these new westerns are far more honest in their portrayal of this sad, violent history: the landscapes of the American

Southwest are oil stained and smoking in Paul Thomas Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood*, and in David Jacobson’s *Down in the Valley* we get any number of long, heat-warped shots not of high plains and blue mountains—but of six-lane superhighways, dry aqueducts, and metastasizing housing developments.

Beyond adherence to violence as a cor-

rective and solution, nothing characterizes the traditional western more than the elemental honesty of the hero. The western hero is a truth-teller—honest as the day is long, honest as the horse between his knees—and even if our hero’s truth forces him to stand outside law or society, we know, always, that wherever he stands, he’s right (I think here, especially, of the



run-up to the Iraq War, and how listening to Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld on the news, I sometimes found myself almost convinced that a preemptive war made sense, was somehow the right thing to do). So, it seems to me right and fitting that if there is one thing that defines these newer, truer westerns, it is their fidelity to dishonesty. Time and again in these films, we

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witness characters, even those who would be our heroes, reckoning with the falsehoods and subtleties that turn in the wind around them, all while being battered by the half-seen hopes and misunderstood desires hidden in their own hearts. In Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals* Arnold Joseph hides, for years, a monstrous secret that eventually drives him from his family and nearly kills his son; Jack Twist and Ennis Del Mar of Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* must conceal their love and who they are from wives, children, and the entire brutal human world they've been born into.

Yet nowhere is this wrestling with what is true and what is false more apparent than in Tommy Lee Jones's masterly *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, a decidedly western film, featuring every traditional trope from sunset shots of Texas scrublands to a cast of characters that includes a no-nonsense sheriff, a neglected wife, and a kind cowboy. Yet *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* is also very aware of the territory it's covering and along the way intentionally challenges and explodes many of the genre's conventions. The characters might aspire to the myths they've been reared on, but they discover that those simple stories just plain don't work: Our hero, Pete, convinces himself that since the

law won't go after the Border Patrol agent who accidentally killed his friend and fellow cowhand, Melquiades Estrada, it is his western duty to do just that. So, he kidnaps the agent and on a long trip down into Mexico brutally tortures him. But that's not even the half of it. The force of Pete's grief is so strong that the viewer is caught up in this violence as well. It seems for a while that Pete's vigilantism might be right, might be exactly what's needed to deal with this dishonest world. Not so.

Near the end of the film, confronted with irrefutable evidence of Melquiades's dishonesty—evidence that calls into question every brutal, illegal, loyal thing Pete has done since Melquiades's death—Pete simply won't accept it. His grief and his delusional adherence to the myth are too strong. Instead, he tries to remake the world, forcing Melquiades's killer to rebuild a ruined village, bury Melquiades's rotting body for a final time, and beg forgiveness of Melquiades's ghost. And, in a wonderful twist, this elaborate ritual does seem to absolve the killer—which of course destroys the story Pete's been telling himself all the further. With the bad guy redeemed, who's the good guy? Which side is which? You see, in this western it's not that the world has changed or that we have forgotten what things mean—it's that we never really knew this world at all. Our stories obscured the truth; our stories have ridden us to our ruin. The film forces us to see ourselves not as we want to be but as we are, to stare into that awful mirror.

Yet—and this is important—from start to finish, *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* is a downright beautiful movie. The landscapes of south Texas and Mexico are wide and wild and lovely, and even after his lies are made plain, we see that Melquiades has spoken the truth about one thing, the country of his youth: "If you go to Jimenez," he tells Pete, "I swear to you

your heart will break with so much beauty." Like the traditional westerns they're working against, these new westerns honor the rough beauty and renewing power of the land—despite the violence that's been done to it—and so manage a kind of hopeful condemnation. Consider the last scene of *Smoke Signals*, where we enter Thomas Builds-the-Fire's mind's eye, and see there the Spokane River (dammed seven times during the height of the Reclamation Act era and recently included on American Rivers' Most Endangered Rivers list) as it snakes through mountain meadows and thunders toward a rock-strewn falls. "How do we forgive our fathers?" Thomas asks. "Do we forgive our fathers in our age, or in theirs? If we forgive our fathers, what is left?" We, the viewers, are left with the river. Whether we forgive our fathers or not, a river is something beyond us. There is a cautious hope in this: For all our blunders in the West, this river still runs. There is much we haven't yet wrecked.

We have this thinnest sliver of hope—and that's about it. There are no easy, dime-novel answers in any of these new westerns. And so we finally have the beginnings of a silver-screen legacy worthy of the epic-but-troubling history Norris cites: We are left with questions. And this is a good thing. As we wind down our war of aggression in Iraq, as we listen to the claims and promises of another presidential campaign, as we watch our extractive technologies continue to outpace our knowledge of their ramifications, we should be asking lots of questions. Questions that continue to bust up those most pernicious national myths, questions that might lead to conversations that might allow us to take a good, hard look at ourselves and the reality of the American West.

Joe Wilkins is the author of a memoir, The Mountain and the Fathers, and two collections of poems, Notes from the Journey Westward and Killing the Murnion Dogs.