

Panay, A (2002) The Outlaw Josey Wales and the Frontier Myth of Development.
Media Education Journal (Issue 32) p.31-38.

The Outlaw Josey Wales as Critique of the Frontier Myth of American Culture.

ABSTRACT: The cultural genre of the American western has developed through the myth/ideology of white European migration east to west across the American continent. This myth system is grounded in the archetypes of the Garden and Deliverance. Ideological revisions, most notably those associated with the emergence of the United States as a major industrial nation in the latter half of the 19th century, have been absorbed into western cultural products in the 20th century and the western film genre in particular. Western films that are considered both classic to the genre, and revisions to it, exist within the dominant myth/ideological system. These films represent at once a celebratory and alternatively a cautionary account of the emergence of the United States. Each however envisages a similar destiny, that of continental settlement and the sweeping away of the native inhabitants of the land. The intention of this paper is to locate the frontier myth of American expansion as the dominant narrative code in the western film and identify a single film which appears to be an exception to the unifying rule in that it exists outside of the dominant myth/ideological system of American development.

When George W. Bush refers to the post September 11th 2001 conflict as a war between the forces of civilisation and barbarity, he invokes a conceptual rhetoric familiar to all of us who teach the Western as part of media and film studies courses. This is the language of myth, invoking the Plains wars between the US military and 'savage' Indian nations in the 19th century. It exists within a myth/ideological system that equates the use of American military power with the values of progress and modernity and has developed historically through the cultural representation of American national expansion most notably in the westerns produced by Hollywood. Historically, the western genre, whilst responsive to social and cultural changes within the American national consciousness, has tended to remain true to its mythical interpretation of US history as one forged through succeeding stages of frontier settlement culminating in the inevitability of colonial conquest. I argue here, nevertheless, that it is mistaken to consider all products of the genre as necessarily reducible to this myth/ideological equation. The Clint Eastwood directed film, *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, seems exceptional in this respect, offering an historical representation that revises our understanding of western migration in the post civil

war period and effectively undermines the mythic foundations upon which the genre is built. This film offers, I think, both a true revision of the genre, and contemporarily an alternative framework from which to consider the kinds of meaning attached to the present rhetoric of war.

Midway through *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, Wales responds curiously to speech made by Lone Watie, an ageing Cherokee regarding his nation's defeat and subsequent betrayal by the Union government. Apparently without sarcastic intent Wales mutters, 'seems like we can't trust the white man.' What is interesting in this line is not that it conforms to a familiar trope in revisionist westerns, the doomed Indian as hero set against the land lust and violence of the whites, *Josey Wales* is subtler than this. What Wales seems to articulate here is a sense of his own inclusion within taxonomy of fate that is designed and administered by a rapacious government. *The Outlaw Josey Wales* describes the persecution and violent pursuit from Missouri to Texas of a gender and racially mixed band of the American oppressed. Wales's own status is described early in the piece by a soldier/senator who orders him hunted down as an 'insurrectionist rebel.'

The Outlaw Josey Wales is in many ways a highly unusual American film, let alone western. Released in the bicentennial year of 1976 in a period of so called economic 'stagflation', Presidential instability and the continuing reverberations from Watergate and Vietnam, the film appears not simply as a cultural response to these events but as a critique of the national myth of colonisation. In *The Outlaw Josey Wales* colonisation is not an exercise in natural human progress and neither does it occur east to west in a rolling wave of the imagination of historian Frederick Jackson Turner, but is messy. There are incursions and territorial wrangles north to south and south to north. Movement west after the Civil War has little to do with the renewed vigour of a freshly reconciled nation, as it is classically depicted in the genre, or with the desire to 'see the frontier before it disappears' (*Dances with Wolves* 1990) which is a narrative theme in more contemporary pro-Indian films or those that mourn the end of the west (*Lonesome Dove* 1988). In the *Outlaw Josey Wales* people are forcibly displaced, men and women, young and old, brown and white. As the nation is spreading across the western lands we accompany Josey Wales and his group through a country that is thick with carpetbaggers, buffalo hunters, unprincipled entrepreneurs, desperate bounty hunters, commancheros, the crippled and destitute of the civil war. This film constantly reminds of the forced flight of its central sympathetic characters. Wales himself fleeing pursuit by government forces, the Cherokee Lone Watie escaping from the immiseration of forced living on officially designated lands for defeated Indian peoples, a Navajo Indian woman running from indebted slavery to a brutal white trader and the mother and daughter of a family heading west because they have nothing in their native battle torn Kansas worth staying on for. In this western colonisation is not something practised or achieved by the spontaneous and heroic migration of individuals, but by the deliberate and vengeful policy of governments and as the consequences of war and its devastation of the lived environment and decimation of people's lives.

The western genre has always been preoccupied with the mythic settlement and spread of former European peoples across the American continent. It is accepted that in large part it is exactly this narrative code, the Frontier Myth, which gives to the

genre it's vitality and power, ensuring its continuing appeal even as cultural products bearing its mark dwindle in volume. Social historian Richard Slotkin identifies the frontier as 'The central myth/ideological trope of American culture' (Slotkin, 1985). Representations of the frontier wilderness in American literary culture have tended to represent it as a mythic space. A conjunction offering an abundance of free open space and the promise of restorative even transformatory powers. From Natty Bumppo in Fenimore-Cooper's chronicles, to Lieutenant John J. Dunbar in *Dances with Wolves*, the frontier wilderness has symbolised to Americans the promise of spiritual and cultural rejuvenation. Henry Nash Smith (1978, p3-12) further recognised the functional importance of frontier mythology to the impetus for national expansion and economic development in the 19th century. Arguing that the cultural perception of the western wilderness was one of infinite space and consequently limitless economic opportunity, he theorises that that west provided a 'safety valve' through which the tensions associated with urbanism in Europe, and steadily in the East of the U.S, could be circumvented in America by the releasing of people onto the frontier.

In 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', delivered as a paper to the American Historical Association in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner accounts for American expansion in the abundance of material wealth able to be realised through settlement on the western frontier. The availability of free land leads to the establishment of settlements providing commercial centres and communication gateways. As one frontier settles so significant populations overleap it to begin the process again on as yet unsettled lands. For Turner and those historians later identified as 'Turnerians', frontier movement westward in this fashion provides the roots of an exceptional American development. It is the frontier experience of American history which marks it out as unique in the histories of those nations whose modernising impulses originate in Europe.

American exceptionalism, characterised by a mythical frontier experience is a central theme in the western. Both the romantic and national/political components of the frontier myth provide for numerous plot lines and symbolic representations of people, land and nation. Most often these mythic components are intertwined to represent the epic scale of American achievement in first subduing and then settling the continent. At the height of its popularity to the 1960's the western provided for a celebratory representation of this historic struggle. The genre's principal movie icons such as John Wayne came to represent to Americans not simply the embodiment of a nation's idealised view of itself, the mythic representation of an American national character, but the fact of American history personified. In John Ford's great film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) a newspaper man proclaims that (when) 'the legend becomes fact print the legend!' This line from a film maker who above all others represented the colonisation process in heroic terms, aptly describes the predominant narrative project of the bulk of western films prior to the turbulent decade of the 1960's.

In the western the legend *is* printed as fact. Fact becomes the myth of frontier expansion as imagined in the Frontier Myth. Central and recurring narrative codes are the struggle to establish white civilisation, the imposition of law and order and the wars with Indians over claims to the land. American social concerns in the late 1960's and early 1970's with civil rights and military adventurism in South East Asia, were

reflected in revisions to the classic western format. What may now be termed classic revisionist westerns, such as *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Soldier Blue* (1970), articulate these concerns through revised narrative structures which now concentrate on the decimation of native American peoples by a technologically mighty military power. The stoic and humane frontier soldiers, lovingly crafted by John Ford as defenders of white civilisation in a 'fatal environment', to borrow Richard Slotkins' term, are replaced in revisionist films by military gangsters. The representation in both *Little Big Man* and *Soldier Blue* of a massacre of Cheyenne villagers in 1868 is a prescient reminder to contemporary audiences of the origins of the My Lai massacre some one hundred years later in 1969.

Although the revisions to the western narrative format of this time are stark, representing an almost complete break with their generic forebears, it can be shown that what I've called 'classic' revisionist westerns are still grounded within the myth/ideology of the frontier, and especially in the cultural representation of mythic space first established in the metropolitan centres of the eastern seaboard either as an abundance of free land for economic renewal and opportunism, or as a place with the potential for spiritual uplift and rejuvenation. American literary variants had imagined the western lands as a space possessing of the ability to rejuvenate and transform the spirit. In this Eden the Indian was a noble savage, spiritually attuned to the rhythms of the Earth. Crucially for the largely bourgeois audiences who read, and for whom cultural products of this type were intended, they existed free from the turbulent memories of social and industrial upheaval in their former European homelands. As industrialism develops in an American context in the 19th century, this myth variant appeals to a sense of growing fear over the spread of urbanism, social concerns surrounding overcrowding in eastern cities, growing antagonism between classes and frequent outbreaks of labour unrest.

The representation of the west as mythic space, a place free of the stresses and ravages of a modernising industrial society clearly has some resonance to the structures of feeling embodied in the counter-cultural concerns of the 1960's. In the *Little Big Man* released in 1970 the continual narrative and visual shift between the settled lands of spreading white society and frontier lands inhabited by the Cheyenne is as much social and cultural as geographic and spatial. The Cheyenne reflect the noble savages of cultural myth and are barely concealed representations of hippies. White civilisation on the other hand is depicted as anything but. The townscapes are ugly and the people who inhabit them are crude sometimes violent hypocrites, narcissistic and vain glorious, as in the depiction's in this film of western legends George Armstrong Custer and Wild Bill Hickock.

The narrative origins of the 'classic' revisionist type film are found in Delmer Davies's *Broken Arrow* (1950) and in Sam Fuller's *Run of the Arrow* (1957). These films are critical of violent white responses to the Indian's and generally convey a sympathetic representation of native American concerns for the future of their way of life as white society is seen to encroach on it. In later films such as *Little Big Man*, *Soldier Blue* and the excellent *Ulzana's Raid* (1972), no such brokerage is possible. These and Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves* (1990) are all clear regarding the fate of the Indian. These films which exhibit a revision of the 'classic' western do so within conventional cultural codes of the frontier myth. Whilst borrowing heavily

from that cultural variant which stresses the 'mythic space' of the frontier, these films also convey the logic of Turner's thesis, that of an inexorable and fateful march westward of the United States. A civilising process in Turner's version and a destroyer of it in the 'classic' revisionist western. Nevertheless each speaks to the inevitability of white American colonisation of the continent.

The western then, both 'classic' and 'classic' revisionist, work within familiar tropes of the American myth of the frontier. Each variant develops from the myth/literary representation of wilderness abundance and largesse. Both variations also articulate a Turnerian sense of fate. Those films written and released prior to the 1960's are largely triumphal and celebratory regarding the spread of American civilisation, seeing the defeat of the 'savage' Indian as being a necessary factor in the process. Towards the end of the 1960's the appeal of this triumphalism is diminished by concerns over civil rights and military campaigns overseas. In reflecting these social concerns through revisions to the narrative structure of westerns, revisionist films depict westward expansion through a sense of loss. This is not only or substantially as it affects Indians, through the loss of their land and way of life, but the loss of a mythic space in the American imagination. The mythic space of the west had promised an alternative to the ravages of national expansionism, urbanism and industrial modernisation. Its destruction by the representatives of these colonising destinies, the government, military and capitalists is expressed in these films through the subjugation and occupation of a space both actual and mythic, and through the destruction of its human embodiment the native American.

Because the 'classic' revisionist western is bound by a frontier ideology of inexorable expansionism embodying the imaginative conceptualisation of mythic space, it is unable to envision any other outcome than that of fateful colonisation. The destiny of the west then is already foretold in myth, with little else to do but mourn the loss and end of possibilities. This is particularly true of those films whose central narrative construct involves the assimilation into Indian society of a white American. These films are of course always revisionist. Plotting usually follows the journey of spiritual discovery of a troubled and alienated white character. Always a male, he discovers in the mythic space inhabited by Indians a resolution to personal psychic traumas and a life-affirming way of being which is antithetical to his previous existence. In the cultural imaginings of the frontier myth, the mythic space inhabited by Indians embodies an opposite trajectory for the possibilities of American civilisation. What is offered here is seemingly radical, the representation through popular culture of an alternative American society. It is certainly popular, as the box office appeal and critical acclaim of films like *Little Big Man*, *A Man Called Horse* (both 1971) and *Dances with Wolves* proves. Yet, what is on offer here is not an appeal through a mass art form for social change, beyond the contextually incidental one for greater tolerance and understanding of native American history. These films, made as they are in the tradition of the frontier myth of American culture represent the idealist imaginings of the mythic space variant, that place of the bourgeois American imagination which is resistant and fearful of modernity, its attendant industrialism, urbanism and class and racial antagonisms. Of course, as I have tried to show, this idealism is inherent within the very myth of American colonisation and is bound up in its ideological project to explain the emergence of the American nation, its creed, its history and its people. Ultimately these films represent merely a variation of the

triumphalism which attends this, cautionary tales depicting the dirty work of colonial conquest and representing the tragedy of American idealism.

In a genre as rich and significant as the western there are to be found products which appear as truly revisionist. Such films not only debunk the structural and iconic conventions of the genre itself such as the spoof western *Blazing saddles* (1974), or Robert Altman's *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (1972), but say something profound about the central organising principle of the genre, the myth of the frontier, and therefore about the emergence and meaning of America. To return to the *Outlaw Josey Wales*, this film tells the story of the forced flight/migration of oppressed people from an expanding American nation in the 19th century. It ends in their eventual reconciliation and establishment as a community which through violent struggle has transcended the claims of national government to represent them and through this inclusion, to control them. Unlike the classic revisionist films of the period *The Outlaw Josey Wales* is not mournful, but as Michael Coyne acknowledges, 'truly life affirming'(Coyne, 1997). It is life affirming too not in simplified individualistic terms, which is the staple stuff of industrial Hollywood, but in codes that are social and communal, which is not. The destiny of eventual conquest which is inherent to the structure and meaning of classic revisionist westerns, is absent here. Even the Commanche with whom this new group resolves to co-exist, are not represented as doomed *a priori*, but are intent on violent resistance if American expansion threatens them. As Worland and Countryman (1998, p182-197) comment, 'one of the central themes in the past two decades historical work is the destruction of the hoary notion that Indians were simply and inexorably pushed back.' They explain that recent academic work has established a far greater complexity of relations in the West of whites and white colonialists, Hispanics, native Americans and Black Americans, who co-existed, intermingled and whose communities intersected. In *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, it appears that it is *these* historical insights, far more than those that inform the Turnerian thesis of progress, or the myth/ideology of the frontier, which are narratively dominant.

The Outlaw Josey Wales is able to avoid the doom laden prognosis for American society which characterises the classic revisions to the western genre because it demythologises the mythic space of the frontier. That element of the American cultural imagination which gives to the western landscape and its human inhabitants the possibilities for spiritual and cultural transformation, but knows in advance that it's destiny too is colonisation is not embodied in the narrative structure of *Josey Wales*. Instead this film grounds its narrative focus and its 'story' of American colonialism in the actions, motivations and structures of human social/ historical interrelationships and not in the force of myth/imagination. In this way, in avoiding the destination trap of revisionist westerns *The Outlaw Josey Wales* is able to offer a true revision of the genre and a small revision of the account of American history.

Sources.

- Buscombe, E & Pearson, R E, eds. (1998) Back in the Saddle Again, London: British Film Institute.
- Cameron, I & Pye, D. eds (1996) The Movie Book of the Western, London: Studio Vista.
- Coyne, M (1997) The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western, London: I.B Tauris.
- Emmert, S D (1996) Loaded Fictions: Social Critique and the 20th Century Western, New York: University of Idaho Press.
- Nobles, G H (1998) American Frontiers: Cultural Encounters And Continental Conquest. London: Penguin Edition.
- Slotkin, R (1994) The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialisation, 1800-1890. New York: Oklahoma University Press.
- Turner, F J (1938) The Early Writings of Frederick Jackson Turner, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.¹

Filmography

- Broken Arrow*, Delmer Davis, 1950.
- Dances with Wolves*, Kevin Costner, 1990.
- Little Big Man*, Arthur Penn, 1970.
- A Man Called Horse*, Elliot Silverstein, 1970.
- The Man who shot Liberty Valence*, John Ford, 1962.
- The Outlaw Josey Wales*, Clint Eastwood, 1976.
- Run of the Arrow*, Sam Fuller, 1957.
- Soldier Blue*, Ralph Nelson, 1970.
- Ulzana's Raid*, Robert Aldrich, 1972.