

Frontiers in the American Mind

*How Ideas about the Past, the Present and
the Future in America are Dominated by
Hollywood Frontier Narratives*

By: Matti Johansen Richoux



A thesis presented to:
The Department of Literature, Area Studies, and European Languages

North American Area Studies

Faculty of Humanities

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the MA degree in North American
Area Studies

Supervisor: Mark Luccarelli

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO
Spring 2012

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2012

Frontiers in the American Mind: How Ideas about the Past, the Present and the Future in
America are Dominated by Hollywood Frontier Narratives

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Trykk: Reprosentralen, Universitetet i Oslo

II

Abstract:

The tendency to read political and social issues in the United States through the myth of the frontier has long been a controversial topic in American historiography. Although the national myth in America has been fiercely criticized by scholars such as the historians of the New Western History movement, this thesis argues that the American mind is still strongly attached to mythic conceptions about the American West. Today, both the Left and the Right side of the spectrum of American popular politics express a political rhetoric fundamentally concerned with the projection of frontier narratives. This is due to how narratives about the “imaginary” frontiers of America have been a key aspect of Hollywood films for nearly a century. After the fragmentation of the national myth in the 1960s and 1970s, Hollywood film-makers responded to the socio-political developments in America by creating Left and Right cycle films. These films catered to the nostalgia of its audience by celebrating a nostalgic return to traditional American frontier values on the one hand, while promoting the political positions of the Left and Right on the other. This thesis has demonstrated how the inherent contradictions found in Hollywood’s post-mythic narratives now appear in the political rhetoric of 21st century American popular politics. By analyzing the metapolitical rhetoric of contemporary political commentators, this thesis has identified how ideas about American life today are inseparable from the prism of the frontier. This author argues that the constant reassertion of Hollywood frontier narratives represents a strong sense of ideological inertia in the American mind.

Acknowledgements:

Thanks to my supervisor Mark Luccarelli for the many hours of inspiration, help and debate throughout the writing of this thesis. Thanks to my fellow students, friends and family for insight and feedback.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Frontiers in the American Mind

The frontier is a powerful concept in the American mind. Frontiers seem to be found everywhere. Today, we hear of territorial frontiers of war, scientific frontiers of the human mind, financial frontiers of economic growth and astrophysical frontiers of outer space. Some of these frontiers are rooted in a physical reality, while others are imaginary. Imaginary frontiers can be understood in social terms, and function as a prism through which cultural concepts can be approached. Fundamentally, frontiers describe the threshold for new discoveries and new opportunities. A frontier represents a border between what is known and what is unknown. Crossing over the frontier into unknown spaces can offer great risks, as well as considerable rewards. By entering a frontier space, one accepts the challenge of being confronted with the possibility of failure, hardship and disaster. A successful frontier experience will, however, enable the “frontiersman” to reap the benefits of exploring the outer edges of human knowledge and understanding. Through a “frontier process,” material and spiritual gain is exerted from the unknown, relocating the frontier to yet again represent the border between old and new experiences. Therefore, some frontiers can be exhausted, while others can be extended in a seemingly endless fashion. For instance, the most important frontier in the American mind, the agrarian frontier in the American West, has long been exhausted.

The many ways in which the concept of the frontier has come to permeate the American mind speaks to the versatility of the term. For Americans today, the frontier embodies a wide range of cultural and historical connotations, as well as a strong sense of nostalgia for traditional American life. Ever since Frederick Jackson Turner’s seminal essay *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* written in 1893, the American mind has long been accustomed to perceiving events in their past, present and future through the lens of “frontiers.” Today, the concept of the frontier is still visible in the American mind, as it has been reinterpreted time and again. The term has reappeared numerous times, and is visible in historiographical approaches to American history, in American mythology, in the world of entertainment, and today, in the rhetorical landscape of popular politics. In order to situate the current discourse of the frontier in American society, this chapter will first provide a brief

historical overview of the frontier as concept both in American history and in the mythological realm of the American imagination.

1.2 The Historical Context: Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis and the American National Myth

Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.¹

With these famous words, Frederick Jackson Turner introduced his Frontier Thesis, also known as the Turner Thesis, a text in American historiography that has been widely “recognized as the most influential single piece of historical writing ever done in the United States.”² With his vivid language and an almost prophetic vigor, Frederick Jackson Turner wrote his 1893 essay *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, crafting a new theory in explaining the development of American culture and history. Turner suggested that cultural developments in America could be traced back to the agrarian frontier process of farmers accessing the American West. Through the conceptual prism of the frontier, Turner explained the development of American culture and the historical roots of the “American character.” Turner’s text would be immortalized both through the praise of Turner’s disciples and the fierce attacks of his critics.

Ray Allen Billington, a recognized historian researching America’s frontier era, wrote in *America’s Frontier Heritage* that “a dictionary printed between 1889 and 1891 defined the frontier as ‘that part of a country which forms the border of its settled or uninhabited regions.’”³ According to historian Walter Prescott Webb, in political geography, a frontier represents the border on a map, separating countries from one another.⁴ Turner’s Frontier Thesis sought to embody the many definitions to the term by approaching the frontier as a socio-geographic concept. According to Turner, the frontier represented “the meeting point between savagery and civilization”⁵ throughout the colonization of American West. For Turner, the frontier was not only narrowly defined as a borderland between two geographical regions; it also represented a space for cultural creation. According to Turner, “the term is an elastic one, and for our purposes does not need sharp definition.”⁶

Turner writes that the frontier era in American history began right after the American

Revolution as American farmers gained access to the vast spaces of the North American continent. The American frontier could be found at the most western end of settled American territories, constantly forced further West as farmers, trappers and explorers expanded their reach toward the Pacific Coast.

Turner explained how the frontier was a place where American culture experienced a “perennial rebirth”⁷ and gained its insulation against what he described as the corrupting forces of civilized life. During the years of the American Revolution, urban areas in America were relatively small, with a census count of no more than 200.000 inhabitants. However, by the end of the Civil War, the population in American cities had boomed, as the urban population in America reached over 6.000.000.⁸ The crowded American cities along the Atlantic seaboard became known for their large factories, poor working conditions and political corruption. Turner argued that, throughout the frontier era, the “empty” landscape in the American West had guaranteed a steady flow of “primitive conditions”⁹ upon the American people, which counterbalanced the kinds of social and political ills represented by city life. Donald Pickens’ essay *Westward Expansion and the End of American Exceptionalism* (1981) argues that Turner, among other historians:

depicted the “precocious advantage” of an empire of liberty, [and] the exceptionalism of a republic of small free-hold farmers. In so doing, [he] drew on a complex tradition of “conservatives and liberals” who saw the West as a safety-valve for American expectations.¹⁰

Turner argued that the frontiers in the American West represented an opportunity for Americans to “restart” the process of civilization. New forms of society and new political structures could be crafted on the frontier, fundamentally based upon agrarian values of self-determination, democracy, individualism and honest work. The sense of political, economic and social inequality in the American cities was erased on the frontier. According to Turner, the frontier represented a permanent source of equality, democracy and moral purity, which later came to influence the cities on the Atlantic seaboard, slowly affecting the national “American culture” as a whole.

Through the historiographical lens of the frontier, Turner sought to explain the process of “Americanization” and the creation of a uniquely “American” culture:

The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin.¹¹

For Turner, the American experience in the West represented a process of cultural creation that transcended ethnic, political and cultural boundaries. On the frontier, people with different nationalities entered a transnational crucible of cultural creation, becoming American by accessing and subduing the wild forests of the West. According to Turner, the pioneers and frontiersmen who colonized the Great West attained a sense of self-reliance and individualism that would come to define the settlements on the frontier.¹² According to Turner, “out of his wilderness experience, out of the freedom of his opportunities, he fashioned a formula for social regeneration – the freedom of the individual to seek his own.”¹³ Turner claimed that the sense of individualism that rose among those who participated in the frontier experience also coincided with the development of democratic tendencies in America, as the abundance of free lands “promoted equality among the Western settlers and reacted as a check on the aristocratic influences of the East.”¹⁴ The hereditary traditions in Europe concerning land were nullified by the seemingly endless spaces of the American West. Through hard work, a bit of luck and bold entrepreneurship, anyone could succeed on the frontier and become an American. On the frontier, “the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics.”¹⁵

Turner’s Frontier Thesis formulated a historiographical approach that opposed well-established academic theories about the cultural and political development in the United States. Instead of perceiving the development of American culture and politics through the traditional tropes of transatlantic relations, class struggle and immigration, Turner approached some of the most basic elements of American life through the concept of the frontier. Through the Turner Thesis, “the westward-moving frontier could be seen as a kind of mirror of America’s history that permitted one to gaze backward from the present to the origins of the frontier experience.”¹⁶

The frontier process, enabled by the vast amounts of free land in America, also created the basis for Turner’s view of America as an exceptional country in the world. The unique socio-geographic environment in America gave the individual “an open field, unchecked by restraints of an old social order.”¹⁷ Daniel Bell’s essay *The End of American Exceptionalism* argues that Turner saw the democratic tendencies in America as “natural,” fueled by the vast natural resources of the continent. According to Bell, the “natural” democracy in America was built on social values that were not only seen as exceptional, but diametrically different from those in Europe, where democracy had to be enforced as nations faced their ecological limits and their lack of a frontier.¹⁸

Turner's way of describing the frontier as a "safety valve" for the creation of cultural traits in America implied that without the frontier, American life would stagnate. By losing the frontier, American society as a whole would be without the critical essence that would guarantee social regeneration, individualism and the virtues of a primitive state of being. The weight of the Turner Thesis and its praise of the frontier directly lends to the gravity of the opposition between "frontier America" and "closed-frontier America." It is therefore interesting to note that Turner introduced his thesis by announcing that the frontier era in America is over, claiming that "the closing of a great historic movement"¹⁹ is now upon the United States. The first page of the Turner Thesis features a quote from the superintendent of the census in 1890, stating that "up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there hardly can be said to be a frontier line."²⁰ Ironically, in his Frontier Thesis, Turner not only introduces the newly forged historiographical concept of the frontier, he simultaneously declares how the frontier era in American history has ended.

In order to understand how the concept of the frontier has been able to survive in the American mind well past the closing of the physical frontier in 1890, we must illuminate the creation of the frontier myth. Indeed, Turner's way of explaining American development through the frontier quickly became more than a historical concept explaining the agrarian expanse beyond the Appalachian Mountains. For many, the frontier came to represent a mythic explanation for American life. Beginning in the early 20th century, the notion that America was a "frontier nation" no longer coincided with the openness of the geographic frontier in the West. Throughout the frontier era, the American mind had been accustomed to the limitless nature of the American continent, and the "safety-valve" of the frontier. Therefore, imaginary frontiers in the American mind quickly substituted the geographical frontiers of the American West. Through nostalgia and myth, the frontier survived in America.

Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx were two central figures in the field of American studies, and wrote extensively on how America and the American West has been perceived through mythic images and narratives since early colonial times. Smith's seminal text *Virgin Land* (1950) laid the foundation for the Myth and Symbol School consisting of a group of scholars reading American history through representations of how the American West had been perceived as an Eden-like space ever since the mid-18th century. According to Smith, America had long been seen as a "Garden of the World" which "embraced a cluster of

metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth.”²¹ Smith argues that these early narratives of America became the foundation for the American origins narrative. Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) approaches the discourse of the American West in similar ways, reading American literature through the opposition between the American quest for machinery and mechanization, and the “pastoral ideal” of a bucolic escape into the “garden” of America.

Through the Myth and Symbol school, Smith and Marx made myth an aspect of cultural studies. Their research reveals how Turner’s frontier-perspective on American history merged with already existing myths about the New World and the American West. This resulted in the formation of the frontier myth. The mythic version of Turner’s historical concept quickly saturated itself in the American mind, and came to encompass the mythic tales of how the movement west had formed American society that had been articulated in American literature since colonial times.²² In *Regeneration Through Violence*, historian Richard Slotkin writes that “the evolution of the American myth was a synthetic process of reconciling the romantic-conventional myths of Europe to American experience.”²³ The frontier myth became emblematic of an interconnected network of nostalgic images, narratives and values connected to America’s frontier era, shared by the American people through a sense of national identity and historical experience. At its most fundamental level, the frontier myth spoke to a sense of “limitlessness.” As the cultural acceptability of the frontier myth came to dominate American society, it eventually embodied the nation as a whole, becoming American national myth.

The American West was indeed a highly mythical place in the 18th and 19th century. Smith writes that many of the leading intellectual figures at that time “took it for granted that American society would expand indefinitely westward.”²⁴ This belief was also inherent in the exploration of the American West. Only a few years after the formation of the United States, Thomas Jefferson organized the Lewis and Clark expedition, arguing that “the exploration the West might be part of the salvation of the republic.”²⁵ In the early years of the new country, the wilderness of the West came to represent a sense of social purity and intellectual strength, a symbol of the new American nation often employed in comparing America to Europe.²⁶

In its essence, the frontier myth was an apolitical theory of American development. The national myth promoted the American West as a social and political space without limits or need for compromise. The West was seen as a force in America that would help the young nation overcome strife and internal conflict. This is how the frontier myth reflected Turner’s

Frontier Thesis, as Turner too created his historiographical approach in attempting to sidestep two major political oppositions in his time. Through his thesis, Turner tried to dissolve the political strife between the Americanisms, capitalism and laissez-faire politics on the “Right,” and European socialism on the “Left.” Essentially, the frontier myth obscured social conflict by turning them into symbols that could be negated by the narrative of the “limitless” American West. The frontier myth was based on a particular space that became symbolically interpreted to represent sense of “limitlessness.” The national myth and its mythic approach to the American West created a politics of evasion, forging a reconciliatory space that overcame divisions. This consensus space became the socio-political symbol of American identity and history as a nation. In America, the limitlessness of the frontier myth functioned as “the intelligible mask of that enigma called ‘the national character.’”²⁷ According to Smith, through the national myth, the character of the American empire was defined “between American man and the American West.”²⁸ Therefore, every American was imbued with the attributes of the West – namely an ideology that stressed the coexistence rather than opposition between cultural traits, ideas, and political positions. This represented the “consensus space” of the American mind.

Although the national myth permeated the American mind for generations, scholars agree that the cultural acceptability of the frontier myth abruptly ended in the latter half of the 20th century. The political climate in America the 1960s and 1970s featured growing concerns over the applicability of the frontier myth to pressing socioeconomic developments. Politically, the counterculture and civil right movements represented a fierce opposition to traditional American culture. As the New Left announced the death of traditional America, the frontier myth lost its central place in the American imagination, as the apolitical nature of the myth diametrically violated the Left’s idea of political opposition and reform. As the consensus of the national myth was breached, the frontier myth lost its explanatory power over American life. This fragmented the national myth.

Paradoxically, in the 1960s and 1970s, remaining fragments of the frontier myth became politicized, and came to symbolically distinguish the political opposition between the Left and the Right. In these years, the frontier myth became a political tool, wielded by both political sides in America. Today, as this thesis will reveal, the Left and the Right are still choosing to define themselves by the different remaining fragments of the dead national myth. On the surface, conservatives on the Right seemed to hold on to the frontier myth, fighting to protect the traditional values of Frontier America against the reformist and revolutionary Left.

The Left, on the other hand, promotes a political platform that, on the surface, announces the end of Frontier America. Beneath the surface, however, both political sides cling to a sense of nostalgia for the consensus space of the frontier myth, visible through contradiction and paradox in their political rhetoric.

1.3 Thesis Statement

The purpose of this thesis is to identify and analyze how both the Left and the Right side of the political spectrum in America today either consciously or inadvertently employ the concept of the frontier to the promotion of their political views. This thesis will argue that ever since the end of the national myth, there has been an ongoing tendency in America to connect frontier narratives concerning the fragmentation of the frontier myth in the 1960s and 1970s to political positions. Today, the cultural consensus of the national myth in American society has been inverted by a politicization of its remaining fragments. Since the 1960s, the post-mythic remnants of frontier myth have been used for obverse political purposes by the Left and the Right. Today, in the 21st century, these politicized frontier narratives are still visible. In fact, the realm of popular politics is today, perhaps more than ever, saturated with narratives that are fundamentally concerned with the open/closed dichotomy of the frontier myth.

Through an analysis of examples of left and right-wing rhetoric today, this thesis will reveal how the political positions of both sides of the political spectrum in America are fundamentally based upon a strong sense of nostalgia toward traditional American values and the lost frontier myth. This thesis will critique the ways in which the frontier myth is today being used for political purposes, and reveal how the frontier narratives promoting a politicized nostalgia toward traditional American culture not only collides with the overall political message of both the Left and the Right, but also transcends the Left-Right opposition entirely. The contradictions that emanate in the combination of a nostalgic frontier narrative and a political position have today come to define the rhetoric of 21st century popular politics. This thesis argues that the contradictions that emanate from the frontier narratives in the American mind are symbolic of a strong sense of ideological inertia in America.

In illuminating the close relationship between American politics, the American mind and the concept of the frontier, this thesis will rely heavily on an analysis of Hollywood entertainment. This is due to how Hollywood films have, for almost a century, been the

primary source of frontier narratives in American society. This thesis will argue that ever since the era of the “talkies,” Hollywood has been adamant in providing the American audience with frontier mythology, fundamentally structuring its industrial business model on thematic elements found in the frontier myth. The ways in which Hollywood film-makers have employed the national myth as a metapolitical discourse in their films have greatly influenced the American people, accounting for the survival of the “imaginary frontiers” in American society. In recent years, the myths portrayed and created in Hollywood have come to permeate the realm of American popular politics. This is how Hollywood today functions as a link between the mythic realm of the American imagination and political rhetoric in American society. Specifically, this thesis will argue that the post-mythic and politicized films created in Hollywood between the 1960s and 1970s today function as the formal and thematic baseline for contemporary political rhetoric in America. This suggests that American popular politics today can be understood through the imagery and narratives of Hollywood films.

1.4 Terms, Concepts and Theoretical Approach

Because this thesis approaches a broad topic, it has been limited to a fairly specific theoretical approach. In analyzing the frontier narratives of contemporary American society, this thesis will rely on a selection of key literature featuring a historicist approach to myth. This will create the foundation for my critique of mythic and post-mythic narratives in 21st century political rhetoric. This thesis will approach and conceptualize myth in terms of cultural creation, arguing that myth is something created through historical experience and given particular readings based on institutional and social conditions. Due to limitations in time, this thesis has not critiqued culture through a structuralist / post-structuralist approach. Instead, examples of political propaganda employing the frontier myth today will be read in cultural terms, relying on a historicist / phenomenological approach.

A central concept in this thesis that will be referred to frequently is the “imaginary frontier.” As already established, the national myth disconnected the concept of the frontier from Turner’s historical and geographical setting. Through mythic narratives, the American “frontier” was no longer merely a sociogeographic concept, but a timeless notion applicable to a wide variety of aspects in American society. Although the political divide in American society after the fragmentation of the national myth was concerned with whether or not

America was still a “frontier nation,” both sides acknowledged the physical closing of the frontier announced by Turner in 1893. Therefore, “imaginary frontiers” would substitute the closing of the agrarian frontier, and serve as the new foundation for the political strife in America. This thesis will use the terms “national myth” and “frontier myth” interchangeably due to their interconnected nature, and use the “imaginary frontier” as a feature of the resulting frontier narratives in the American mind.

This thesis will also use the term “popular politics.” The political opposition analyzed in the following chapters has been located in the discourse currently being played out in the landscape of American media. “Popular politics” represents the political demagoguery and commentary that is visible on both sides of the spectrum of American politics today. This is the primary location of myths and frontier narratives, and features the most vocal assertions of nostalgia for traditional American culture. This thesis will also use the term “counter-frontier.” This thesis will reveal how counter-frontiers are especially visible on the Left, as the nostalgic longing for traditional frontier life seems to overcome the Left’s political inclination to recognize the invalidation of traditional American culture. As a response, the Left creates “counter-frontiers” distinguished by their reactionary nature toward the frontier mentality of the Right promoting “normal” frontiers.

Myths are limited in their very nature by how they can only survive on a widespread cultural acceptance and a foundation of consensus. Narratives of the “imaginary frontier” found in Hollywood after the fragmentation of the national myth, which today are visible in 21st century politics, are therefore “post-mythic.” These frontier narratives are defined by how they have been created after the fragmentation of the national myth, in a post-consensus (post-mythic) society, employed for political purposes. Mythology and history are, by their very nature, diametrically opposed to each other. A myth’s ability to subordinate opposing values into a non-politicized space and resolve their incompatibilities is a fundamentally apolitical function. This differs from how politics and history is a “real” approach to “real” sociopolitical conditions. Therefore, the idea of imaginary frontiers in America is fiercely debated, much like the notion of a national myth. Are there still “real” frontiers for American society able to provide Americans with new “frontier processes,” or is the notion of imaginary frontiers merely employed by the Right in order to justify a conservative political platform? Has the possibility for finding new frontiers for the American people vanished altogether? Rhetorical questions such as these have defined the ways in which post-mythic frontier narratives have been politicized in post-consensus America.

At its core, the imaginary frontier came to symbolize of the political division between the Left and the Right in America since the 1960s and 1970s. Even today, the belief in imaginary frontiers in America suggests a belief that America still is a frontier nation. The belief that America still has frontiers for social regeneration and material wealth suggests that traditional American culture can be upheld as the powers of the frontier once again are able to obscure and resolve social conflict. Imaginary frontiers suggest a sense of “limitlessness,” once again evoking the frontier’s ability to negate political reform, safeguard a sense of individualism, and justifying and a “hands-off” type of government. However, by attacking the notion of frontier America, one argues that political and cultural reform is needed in responding to new challenges in the American society. This thesis will describe the open/closed dichotomy of the imaginary frontier as the “metapolitical discourse” visible in contemporary American politics, which has been adopted from the thematic baseline of Hollywood films.

1.5 Chapter Outline

This thesis will consist of four main chapters. The first main chapter, chapter 2, will give a reading of Robert Ray’s *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*. Ray’s text is a seminal work in American Studies and film studies. Despite its 1985 publication, Ray’s text still relates to critical aspects of how American myths are employed by Hollywood films. Ray identifies how the thematic paradigm in Hollywood since the early 20th century has been concerned with mythic and post-mythic frontier narratives. Ray’s text enables this thesis to make the argument that contemporary politics in the United States have adopted the formal and thematic foundations of Hollywood films of the 1960s and 1970s. This chapter will, through a reading of Ray’s text, display the ways in which the concept of the imaginary frontier created frontier-perspectives, and how these perspectives have been used to support or reject certain social values in America, represented in the form of Left and Right cycle films.

Chapter 3 will analyze the ways in which a recent article by conservative commentator Jeffrey Kuhner employs a frontier narrative in promoting a right-wing political platform. This chapter will argue that Kuhner’s article *The Last Conservative, Pat Buchanan* is representative of a tendency among the Right to clothe conservative political figures in the “post-mythic garments” of the Right cycle heroes of Hollywood. Kuhner is adamant in

promoting Pat Buchanan as a hero of “conservative America” today, a portrayal that strongly resembles the vigilant hero of Right cycle Hollywood films. In addition to this, Kuhner’s article creates a narrative that perceives an open imaginary frontier in America as way of justifying traditional American culture. This chapter will critically analyze Kuhner’s rhetoric and reveal the many contradictions that emanate in the combination of a political rhetoric and a Hollywood-type frontier narrative.

Chapter 4 will analyze James Cameron’s newest film, *Avatar*. This chapter will argue that *Avatar* is a frontier narrative that combines a left-wing political agenda with a story of American origins. Essentially, *Avatar* can be seen as a retrofitted Left cycle film of the 1960s and 1970s, critiquing the conservative Right in contemporary American politics while promoting many of the key political issues of the Left. Similarly to Kuhner’s right-wing message, Cameron’s film features a number of contradictions between its political message and its overall narrative structure.

The final chapter, chapter 5, will provide a brief overview of literature that may help us further understand how frontier narratives have come to define how Americans perceive the past, present and future in American society. This chapter will give a reading of David E. Nye’s *America as Second Creation*. Nye’s text uses “second creation stories” and “counter-narratives” in approaching the open-closed dichotomy of the frontier myth. This chapter will argue that Nye’s text is applicable to Ray’s analysis of “open” and “closed” representations of the imaginary frontier in Hollywood films. The chapter will employ Nye’s discourse in identifying and critiquing the concept of the frontier in the American mind, as exemplified by the previous three chapters. The conclusion of this thesis will highlight the overall findings of this text and suggest other methods of research that may that illuminate other approaches to the relationship between the American mind and the concept of the frontier.

Notes, Chapter 1

- ¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 1.
- ² Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Frontier* (New York: University of Texas Press, 1979), 6.
- ³ Ray Allen Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 24.
- ⁴ Webb, 2.
- ⁵ Turner, 3.
- ⁶ Turner, 3.
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- ⁸ Ted Steinberg, *Down To Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 55.
- ⁹ Turner, 2.
- ¹⁰ Donald K. Pickens, "Westward Expansion and the End of American Exceptionalism," *The Western Historical Quarterly* Vol. 12 No. 4 (1981): 409-418, online via JSTOR, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/968852>> (12 June 2011), 413-414.
- ¹¹ Turner, 4.
- ¹² Turner, 44.
- ¹³ Turner, 48.
- ¹⁴ Turner, 47.
- ¹⁵ Turner, 22.
- ¹⁶ Wilbur Jacobs, *On Turner's Trail : 100 Years of Writing Western History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 7.
- ¹⁷ Turner, 48.
- ¹⁸ Daniel Bell, "The End Of American Exceptionalism," *National Affairs* Vol. 41, (1975): 193-224, online via Nationalaffairs.com, <http://www.nationalaffairs.com/doclib/20080527_197504111theendofamericanexceptionalismdanielbell.pdf> (28 March 2012), 208.
- ¹⁹ Turner, 1.
- ²⁰ Turner, 1.
- ²¹ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 123.
- ²² Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* (Connecticut : Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 16.
- ²³ Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 17.
- ²⁴ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 126.
- ²⁵ James P. Ronda, *Finding The West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 27.
- ²⁶ Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness & The American Mind* (London, Yale University Press, 2001), 69.
- ²⁷ Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 3.
- ²⁸ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 187.

2 Hollywood and the National Myth

2.1 Introduction

The entertainment industry in Hollywood began its development in the early 20th century. Since its early beginnings, Hollywood films sought to reflect developments in American society, such as cultural changes, technological progress, and political strife in order to appeal to its audience. Ever since the creation of moving pictures and the development of silent film, the movie-industry of America rose to ever higher levels of commercial success. Hollywood quickly became known for its big-production films, both in America and around the world. Before Hollywood films, theatre and literature had been major formats for entertainment for the American people. Before the technology of film emerged, these forms of entertainment had alone carried the cultural discourse in America. However, as the popularity of Hollywood cinema rose in the early 1900s, theatres were retrofitted to project moving pictures. “The Motion Picture Patents Company ... reported in 1911 that 11,500 theatres were devoted exclusively to movies. ... By 1914 there were 18,000.”¹ Throughout the early 20th century, this tendency skyrocketed, and slowly but steadily transformed the American audience into movie-goers. By 1945, Hollywood had undergone a 15 year period known as the “Studio Era” marking the two first decades of the “talkies.”² In terms of finance, 1939 was an early highpoint in Hollywood’s history as an industry, with over 33.000 employees.³ Classic Hollywood (1930-1945) became known for big production films and – above all – its enormous commercial success. The films of the Studio Era “attracted 83 cents of every U.S. dollar spent on recreation.”⁴ By 1945, Hollywood had established itself as an industry that dominated the market for entertainment, both domestically and internationally.⁵

Both the formal and thematic aspects of film-making had developed substantially throughout the Studio Era. This chapter will analyze the ways in which Classic Hollywood films, along with the introduction of sound, adopted the national myth in America as a thematic foundation for its films. Through mythic frontier narratives, film-makers of Classic Hollywood were able to respond to the most fundamental aspects of the American imagination. Relying on a reading of Robert Ray’s *A Certain Tendency Of The Hollywood Cinema*, this chapter will analyze the relationship between Hollywood and the national myth in America which started in Classic Hollywood, and is still visible today. This analysis will

constitute the foundation for the next chapters in this thesis, arguing that Hollywood frontier narratives still dominate the American mind in the 21st century.

Robert Ray suggests that Hollywood's adoption of the national myth reflected the ways in which myths in America were given particular readings based on social and institutional conditions. According to Ray, myths responded to – and were created by social conditions. He therefore presents a phenomenological and historicist analysis of myth. In his introduction, he writes that “[myths] are always socially produced and consumed, and thus always implicated in ideology.”⁶ He adds that “those perceptual structures, the means by which a culture organizes its experience the world, appear most compellingly in popular myths.”⁷ According to Ray, the frontier myth in Classic Hollywood would be employed by referring to the mythic and limitless nature of “frontier America” in negating choice between two opposing values in American society. A film would dramatize two seemingly incompatible values, and then employ the consensus-based structure of the national myth (the consensus of the imaginary frontier) in avoiding preference to either one. Ray argues that this “reconciliatory pattern” represented a modern reinvigoration of the mythic structure inherent to the Western myths that were created around Turner's Frontier Thesis. The consensus around the national myth in America enabled Hollywood to present its films in a consensus space that negated the necessity of choice. This became the recipe for Hollywood's immense success as an entertainment industry, becoming the thematic baseline that would mark the transition between the silent era and the era of the “talkies.”⁸

However, as this chapter will argue, the consensus around the national myth fragmented under the pressure of the violent 1960s and 1970s, leaving America polarized in the question of the frontier and its influence on American society. The myth of limitless expanse and social regeneration through imaginary frontiers was now to be given a different reading brought on by changes in the social and institutional fabric of American society. Politically, the 1960s and 1970s were defined by the opposition between the Left and the Right. Because Hollywood was adamant in responding to current issues and developments in American society, Left and Right cycle films were created, reflecting the politically charged “non-consensus space” of American society. However, in a stroke of commercial genius, Hollywood films represented each political side in terms of their response to the closing of the frontier. Therefore, Hollywood could continue its production of frontier narratives in responding to the American imagination. The new politicized films of the Hollywood Renaissance created political narratives that favored the particular standpoint of the Left and

the Right, while simultaneously creating frontier narratives that embodied a nostalgic longing for the now, lost, frontier life in America. This is how Hollywood retained its ability to create narratives that ultimately stemmed from the national myth in dramatizing the myth's fragmentation. This chapter will argue that Hollywood's "politicization" of the frontier myth, as seen in Left and Right cycle films, created paradoxes and contradictions that violated the most fundamental political message of both the Left and the Right.

By analyzing the contradictory nature of Left and Right cycle films, this chapter will argue that the longing for a traditional lifestyle and a sense of "frontier individualism" has long been the most powerful concept in the American imagination. Ever since the fragmentation of the national myth, this nostalgia has been strong enough to go beyond the political division between the Left and the Right. Therefore, the concept of the frontier in the American mind transcends political strife, as any attempt to politicize a frontier narrative is destined to have its political message overshadowed by the internal dynamics of the frontier myth. This chapter will investigate the ideological wedlock between Hollywood, the reconciliatory pattern, the frontier myth, events in American society and the American audience. This is crucial in understanding why mythic characters, narratives and memories are so prevalent in 21st century America, which is the motivation behind this thesis.

2.2 Hollywood, the Reconciliatory Pattern and the National Myth

The formal and thematic aspects of Hollywood films developed side by side. With the creation of a medium that could speak more directly to its audience, the technological advances that launched Hollywood out of the silent era and into the era of the "talkies" offered writers and directors an opportunity to create a more integrated and detailed sense of conflict and resolution between the different values that permeated American society. The films of the silent era tended to operate within the realm of folk tales and "everyday" personal dramas that rarely engaged in the broader aspects of opposing values in the United States. This tendency would end as the thematic paradigm of Classic Hollywood emerged in the 1930's and transformed Hollywood cinema into a discourse of fundamental topics in the American imagination.

Vital to the success of Classic Hollywood was, as Robert Ray notes, the ability to organize the thematic elements of cinema around "the common wishes and fears of the mass

audience.”⁹ In order to connect with the most fundamental aspects of the American imagination, Hollywood was challenged to find narratives and images that could represent and respond to underlying psychological concepts of the American mind. Ray notes that the adoption of the national myth by Hollywood was one of the primary differences between the thematic aspects of silent films and those of Classic Hollywood.¹⁰ The semiological structure of the talkies created images that represented symbolic, cultural and connotative codes,¹¹ connecting the thematic aspects of its films to the consciousness of its audience. At its most basic level, through sound and visual effects, Hollywood created narratives.¹² This became the paradigm of the talkies, featuring a “systematic subordination of every cinematic element to the interests of a movie’s narrative.”¹³ Hollywood film-makers were able to seamlessly interconnect the formal aspects of sound and images to the thematic structure of a film, resting on semiological codes and narratives. Together, this created an illusory spectacle resting on “a delicate balance of faith and disavowal.”¹⁴ With the introduction of sound, Hollywood film-makers seized the opportunities inherent in new narrative forms, presenting a film’s narrative authentically enough to make “American Cinema one of the most potent ideological tools ever constructed.”¹⁵

In defining the key characteristics of Hollywood’s audience, Robert Ray explores the history and development of the American imagination. Ray quotes the psychoanalytic work of Erik Erikson’s *Childhood and Society* in noting how:

the functioning American, as the heir of a history of extreme contrasts and abrupt changes, bases his final ego identity on some tentative combination of dynamic polarities such as migratory and sedentary, individualistic and standardized, competitive and co-operative, pious and free-thinking, responsible and cynical, etc... To leave his choices open, the American, on the whole, lives with two sets of “truths.”¹⁶

Erikson argued that the frontier experience in America was the primary cause of the bifurcated American mind.¹⁷ Not only was the American population divided ideologically through different historical processes, they each embodied an inherent duality of character. As Ray illuminates, this played to Hollywood’s favor, as the duality of the American imagination enabled Hollywood to reconcile opposing values. The success of a talkie relied upon the understanding of how the various ideologies and sentiments of its audience could be reconciled within the imaginary consensus space of the national myth. According to Ray, The employment of the national myth in Hollywood films:

reflected the national ideology's eagerness to assert an American exceptionalism as the basis for avoiding difficult choices. Typically, that exceptionalism turned on notions about the availability of uncivilized, open land (the frontier) and about the American continent's remoteness from Europe (North America as frontier).¹⁸

Where the American frontier experience had divided the American mind, Hollywood's frontier-based mythology would attempt to reconcile it.

The films of Classic Hollywood would often oppose political symbols with cultural norms, and then resolve their opposition within the consensus space of the frontier myth. For example, "a sensitive violinist was also a tough boxer (*Golden Boy*); a boxer was a gentle man who cared for pigeons (*On the Waterfront*)."¹⁹ By presenting and resolving issues that responded to the duality of the American mind, Hollywood film-makers made sure an ideologically divided audience would be able to enjoy the same film. As explained in chapter 1 of this thesis, the frontier myth encompassed the ways in which the American mind was accustomed to perceiving the frontier process in American history as a permanent legacy of endless possibilities and opportunities, negating the apparent need to choose between opposing lifestyles and cultures. Americans agreed upon the notion that the imaginary space of America was large enough for multiple ideologies to coexist. This is how Hollywood exploited the duality within the American mind, recognizing how its audience was prone to accept "the other" of two values presented in a film. Through its mythic language, Classic Hollywood created films that would "serve an ideological purpose: the concealment of the necessity for choice."²⁰

The era of the talkies enabled Hollywood film-makers to not only refer to a mythic consensus space in their films, it also enabled Hollywood to modify the frontier myth by its own terms. Hollywood films tended to read American history by its own premises, negating oppositions in the bifurcated American mind through the reconciliatory space of the national myth. According to Ray, Hollywood films would align their thematic discourse with a body of American literature and academic writing, such as Turner's Frontier Thesis, arguing that the necessity of choice was fundamentally un-American.²¹ Hollywood's mythic ability to "not choose" was projected as a "real" (natural, timeless) approach to history (the man-made). The dualities in the American character as explained by Erikson could peacefully coexist in the consensus space of the national myth, dramatized by Hollywood films.

Hollywood's thematic paradigm established itself through the production of a series of films that employed the mythic ability of self-authentication. According to James Oliver

Robertson in *American Myth, American Reality*, “myths carry with them the implication that they have resolved the paradoxes and contradictions they contain.”²² Ray shares this sentiment, arguing that the authenticity of the national myth was established through a long series of films portraying the reconciliatory pattern.²³ This worked both ways, as films that were unorthodox to the thematic paradigm of Hollywood would generally have a meager success at the box office.²⁴

Hollywood films did more than merely rejuvenate the popularity of the national myth in American society from the legacy of American literature. Hollywood’s version of the frontier myth (its reconciliatory pattern) quickly became the dominant way of perceiving the myth itself. Hollywood’s ability to decide the premises of its own mythic representations revealed the power of Hollywood to influence the very mythological landscape it had entered, as films would not only adhere to the mythical language of the industry, but Hollywood’s own momentum in myth-creation. According to Michael Wood, Hollywood “ha[d] a moral and physical geography of its own: a definite landscape.”²⁵ Robert Sklar writes in *Movie-Made America* that the era of Classic Hollywood marked a dramatic shift in the hierarchy of mythological projection in America. “In traditional American society the task of describing the world and communicating that vision to its members had belonged ... to the clergy, political statesmen, educators, businessmen, essayists, poets and novelists.”²⁶ Now that Hollywood had adopted the national myth as its thematic paradigm, “moviemakers [became] aware in a more sophisticated way of their mythmaking powers, responsibilities and opportunities.”²⁷ Although this self-consciousness was beneficial primarily to maintain a high level of commercial success, it inevitably accelerated the pace in which Hollywood could dictate the premises of values and the structures of mythology in the American mind. Therefore, Classic Hollywood did more than merely dramatize and strengthen certain myths in the American imagination; it became its own source of mythology.

2.3 The American Consensus Space: *King Kong* and *Frankenstein*

The reconciliatory pattern in Classic Hollywood exemplified the way in which Hollywood negated the choice between the opposite values dramatized in its films. Films in Classic Hollywood dramatized how a protagonist was forced to make a choice between two opposing values competing within him or herself. Each of these values often represented sentiments

shared by members of the audience. Through melodrama, the duality of the protagonist would be revealed. Melodramatic ways of portraying the inner struggles of a character carried over from theatre and Hollywood's silent era, and had proved to be a popular format for the portrayal of emotion and conflict.²⁸ The most successful films in Classic Hollywood would have their protagonist challenge a fundamental value in American society, creating a narrative that seemingly demanded that a choice had to be made. However, through one or more scenes of reconciliation, the necessity of choice quickly dissolved.

One of the most radical examples of this thematic structure is found in *King Kong* (1933). Here, the young Ann Darrow must choose between an "ordinary" life in New York, and her yearnings for the untamed and sexualized King Kong on Skull Island. *King Kong* features two crucial melodramatic scenes revealing each of the incompatible values pertaining to Darrow's character. As Ann travels from New York to Skull Island and back, two opposing values in American society are first presented in their original context, before being confronted with one another at the end of the film. Although the duality of Ann's character has been greatly amplified through *King Kong's* later reworkings (1976 and 2005), its basic structure is still visible in Classic Hollywood's 1933 version.

The first important melodramatic scene of *King Kong* takes place on the way to Skull Island, as Ann reveals her feelings for First Mate Jack Driscoll and her dreams of a successful life in the big city. *King Kong* presents a norm in American society in the 1930s through Ann's ambitions of a "normal life" in New York. Marrying Driscoll would surely secure her place in the social hierarchy of the metropolis, which is what Ann "should" do. This sentiment is countered by the second melodramatic scene of the film, taking place when Ann is alone with the giant ape. This scene is a climax of previous revelations of Kong's willingness to protect Ann against the dangers of Skull Island. Finally alone with the young lady, the film allows Kong to "speak," revealing his simple, curious, yet benevolent nature. Through this scene, the ape is allowed to display both his humanity and vulnerability, creating the foundation for an emotional attachment with Ann. This is how Classic Hollywood's version of *King Kong*, although very tentatively, hints toward a reciprocal emotional relationship between the woman and the Ape.

These two melodramatic scenes juxtapose two prevalent values in the American imagination of the early- to mid 20th century. The first scene reveals a widely accepted norm in 1930s American society. Young women should pursue a career, marry a white man, have children, gain financial security and establish a social network. In *King Kong*, this is "part

one” of Ann’s duality. However, presumably in lieu of her background, her poverty and struggles in the city, Ann follows her temptation for exotic travel and adventure which ultimately leads her to Skull Island. The second melodramatic scene reveals a very different set of values than the first. Ann’s interaction with Kong represents the temptation of trying to approach and understand the “dangerous” and “fertile” African-American culture in 1930s America. Indeed, the unapologetic racist overtones in the film’s dramatization of the natives on Skull Island and their ape-king strongly suggest that King Kong is to symbolize an African American.²⁹ The taboo of giving in to the temptation of understanding Kong is visible in Ann’s distress when experiencing a melodramatic moment alone with the ape. Although she fears the raw power of the creature, Ann experiences his “soft” side which, inevitably, leads to their emotional bond. The taboo in early 1930s “white” America of connecting with a member of the African American community is challenged by *King Kong*’s demonstration of the possibility, however tentatively, of sharing emotions with the ape. Through these scenes, the film suggests that the African American race is misunderstood and, in fact, benevolent; posing the idea that reconciliation between “black” and “white” America is indeed possible.

Ann’s emotional bond with the ape is “part two” of the duality within her, representing the second set of values presented in the film. In order to prevent members of the audience from storming out of the cinema, *King Kong* faithfully employs Hollywood’s reconciliatory pattern, mediating the juxtaposition between the two values. This is evident in the film’s ending, where the ape (representing African-American culture) attempts to climb New York’s Empire State Building (one of the most iconic symbols of American civilization) before being gunned down by airplanes. This symbolizes the impossibility of having African-American culture coexist with “white” America, thus pleasing the “conservative” half of the ideological spectrum of Hollywood’s audience. Indeed, in *King Kong*, the ape’s (failed) attempt to climb the sky scrapers of America normatively reifies the impossibility of upward social mobility for the African-American race.³⁰ Denham’s comment that “it was beauty that killed the beast” is emblematic of the predictability of the ape’s demise in Ann’s attempt to reconcile the nature of Kong with white American culture. *King Kong*’s ending suggests that “black transgression of the dominant order should be met with violent retribution.”³¹

Therefore, by displaying the death of the ape, the reconciliatory pattern of *King Kong* avoids choice between the two values, by displaying – and to a certain degree, choosing – to favor both values. The death of the ape does not negate the revelation of Kong’s benevolent nature. Similarly, Ann’s emotional relationship with the ape is not powerful enough to

reconcile the ape with “white America.”

Other films in Classic Hollywood would have its characters embody an even deeper and perhaps more fundamental issue in American history and society. *Frankenstein* (1931) is a film based on the novel *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus* written and published by Mary Shelly in London in 1818. Hollywood’s cinematic re-enactment of Shelly’s literary critique of British industrialism makes visible the truly “American” aspect of Hollywood’s reconciliatory pattern. The film makers behind *Frankenstein* were able to adopt the foreign-made gothic story by Mary Shelly because its thematic baseline could be easily translated to themes in American life by simply retrofitting key aspects of the story’s narrative. The film juxtaposes the belief in American modernity against the critique of the diminishing role of the individual in a mechanized society – a defining issue in American history.³²

In Hollywood’s version of *Frankenstein*, the monster becomes a representation of a machine-made man, whose very existence is interconnected with a brutal and inhumane belief in technology. Here, technology becomes an image of modernity and its endless progress towards greater productivity and mechanization. Dr. Frankenstein, the mad professor, becomes a representation of the belief that the individual can be fully deconstructed and understood through the lens of technology and science. The professor’s adherence to the scientific processes of modernity blinds him to the grizzly prospect of searching for the body parts of dead people, sewing them together, and animating his creation. The twist to *Frankenstein* reveals itself as the professor’s creation comes to life. The focus on the physiological and technical aspects of recreating a human being has also blinded the professor to the prospect of giving his creature any sort of psychological and cultural identity. According to psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek, the most shocking thing about Shelly’s novel is how she allows the monster to speak and express his feelings. In its violent confusion, the monster reveals itself as something strikingly humane; a “deeply hurt and desperate individual, yearning for company and love.”³³ As the monster is given a voice, the humanity that was trapped and hidden within his brutish and grizzly exterior begins to blossom. “In *Frankenstein*, the monster is not a ‘thing’, a horrible object no one dares to confront; he is fully subjectivized.”³⁴ Although the monster *is* modernity in its technological brilliance and bold ingenuity, he is also its tragic victim, shunned by society and robbed any sense of “self.”

The monster in *Frankenstein* is a character that undergoes the same type of melodramatic transformation as King Kong. Both *King Kong* and *Frankenstein* surprise the audience by revealing how both monsters are both fully capable of expressing emotions and

ideas. Their ability to express themselves and reveal to the audience how they are, in fact, the victims of society, is “part one” of the duality of their character. In *Frankenstein*, as in *King Kong*, the reconciliatory pattern of Classic Hollywood appears at the end of each film as the monsters are brutally lynched by the communities they have ravaged. “Part two” of the duality within the Frankenstein-monster is symbolized by his lynching, suggesting a belief that modernity can redeem itself by simply discarding failed experiments. The villagers’ wish to have society returned to normal implies that modernization should continue despite the occasional abuse of technology. Dr. Frankenstein, much like his monster, is seen as a mere aberration from normal life. In choosing to reveal the brilliance of modernity on the one hand, and the human costs of scientific experiment on the other, *Frankenstein*’s reconciliatory pattern chooses neither, allowing both values to remain valid independent of the film’s ending. The death of Frankenstein’s monster does not negate his status as a victim of modernity, much like how the revelation of his suffering does not counterbalance the validity of scientific progress.¹

King Kong and *Frankenstein* are two popular films of Classic Hollywood that illustrate how film makers in the Classic period were able to justify the reconciliatory pattern by adopting the consensus space of the national myth in its narratives. On the one hand, Hollywood filmmakers walked a fine line in displaying “both” of the opposing values that divided its audience. By applying the consensus space of the imaginary frontier to issues in American society, Hollywood was able to raise issues without resolving them, and “examine them without seeming to look at them at all.”³⁵

2.4 The Core Mythic Heroes of Classic Hollywood

Hollywood solidified its role as the largest entertainment-based industry in America through its creation of genres and cycles of films. Many of the most recognizable genres in Hollywood today emanated in the Classic period. In Classic Hollywood, genres and cycles encompassed

¹ The function of Hollywood’s reconciliatory pattern is made particularly visible through the ways in which Hollywood’s adaptation *Frankenstein* violates the novel’s original ending to the story. Mary Shelley’s version ends in a remarkably different way than Classic Hollywood’s film, offering no space for reconciling the monster’s duality at the end. The end in Shelley’s novel is mostly concerned with the conscience of Dr. Frankenstein as he recognizes the vulnerability and needs of the monster he has created. The final confrontation in Shelley’s novel between the monster and his creator is a result of how Dr. Frankenstein’s chose to destroy his newly begun second monster, which was a project to create a “bride” to his first monster in order to quell its loneliness and crisis of identity. In the end, the monster survives and remains a permanent symbol of the mechanization of society.

the way its film-makers were able to frame issues in American society, history and public opinion within the consensus-framework of the national myth.³⁶ Through genres, Hollywood created narratives that were similar in terms of characters, thematic framework and overarching message.³⁷ Hollywood genres represented bodies of films that employed a common semiological language, inviting “the viewer to associate the story with others of a similar kind of ‘genre’ that he or she may know.”³⁸

One of the most durable genres in Hollywood history has been the Western and its many offshoots and modifications. The Western gained its popularity as a genre largely due to how “the West was already a mythologized space when the first moviemakers found it.”³⁹ Indeed, the Western relied on an “acceptance of a special kind of space: an imaged landscape which evokes authentic places and times,” while at the same time representing a mythic space, devoid of historical accuracy.⁴⁰ Where the Westerns of Classic Hollywood typically spun out on the frontier as a physical setting, disguised and urban Westerns would dramatize frontier narratives in a more contemporary, modern setting. Regardless of form, Westerns embodied the frontier narratives of Hollywood.

As explained in chapter 1 of this thesis, both the historical and mythical aspects of the American West had already been long established in the American mind throughout the colonization, settlement and post-revolutionary expansion across the continent. However, by the middle of the 20th century, Hollywood had become the dominant provider of frontier narratives for the American audience, even surpassing the popularity of the images created by Frederick Jackson Turner and James Fenimore Cooper.⁴¹ Through its formal and thematic paradigm, Hollywood’s dramatization of the well-established mythic landscape of the West outperformed the popular ways in which American literature had previously dramatized the frontier. By combining the formal and thematic aspects of Hollywood cinema, “even the most manufactured narratives came to seem spontaneous and ‘real.’”⁴² This, combined with the mythic language of a Hollywood narrative, solved one of the inherent difficulties in the portrayal of the West. By merging a sense of photographic authenticity to a highly mythic landscape, Hollywood successfully embodied the duality of the West as a mythic space and a real place.⁴³

In *Gunfighter Nation*, Richard Slotkin notes “when history is translated into myth, the complexities of social and historical experiences are simplified and compressed into the action of representative individuals or ‘heroes.’”⁴⁴ The appropriation of the two most recognizable icons in American mythology, the outlaw and official hero, quickly became

Hollywood's way of representing the most fundamental duality in the American mind.⁴⁵ Geoff King writes: "the ideology of the Western was always riven by tensions – most notably those between the rival values of wilderness and civilization – which became increasingly explicit in the postwar period."⁴⁶ The outlaw and official hero in Hollywood represented the mythic struggle between an idea of wilderness and an idea of civilization, locked in a seemingly eternal struggle in the American West.

The opposition between what Erikson described as "migratory and sedentary"⁴⁷ traits in the American character is indeed traceable throughout American history, and is also one of the primary concepts in the historiography of Frederick Jackson Turner. The opposition between wilderness and civilization is indeed a central theme in the frontier myth. Ray Allen Billington's research of the frontier in American history suggests that the outlaw and official hero were incarnations of two ideas that were central to America's frontier experience. Billington writes that the promise of the frontier attracted some and repelled others, and created a divide between those who wanted "the quest for health, a desire for change, a thirst for adventure, and the mystical lure of the unknown" and their "stay-at-home neighbors in an exaggerated need for security."⁴⁸ The divide between ideas of individualism and community marked not only the difference between a life on the frontier and life along the civilized Atlantic coast; it was also a concept traceable within the frontier communities themselves. Many pioneers travelled to frontier areas in America charged with the idea of creating a morally just society through a frontier process; allowing the frontier environment to refine and purify a society's social values.⁴⁹ However, as settlements on the frontier solidified its sense of morality and law, the newly established frontier community would represent a social setting from which certain individuals felt the need to escape yet again.

Literary critic and essayist Philip Rahv gives a noteworthy analysis of this fundamental opposition in American culture in his essay *Paleface and Redskin*. In addressing the duality of the American character, Rahv writes "viewed historically, American writers appear to group themselves around two polar types. Paleface and redskin I should like to call the two, and despite occasional efforts at reconciliation no love is lost between them."⁵⁰ According to Rahv, the imaginary frontier delineates a fundamental psychological split found in American literature, as the paleface/redskin duality embodies the precarious confrontation between European culture and religion and the untamed wilderness of the American West. Rahv argues that this accounts for the division between the "highbrow" paleface, with his "religious norms, tending toward a refined estrangement from reality" and the "lowbrow"

redskin, glorifying his “Americanism” and “frontier psychology.”⁵¹

The outlaw hero and the official hero in Hollywood are mythic characters that were created on the basis of this persistent cycle of creation, escape, and recreation of society found on the frontier. Even though the heroes embodied two (seemingly) incompatible values, they were both firmly placed within the narrative of the imaginary frontier. Hollywood were able to create films glorifying each of the two heroes because of what they both shared at the most fundamental level; a consensus concerning the validity of the American national myth and the frontier in American history. The choice to prefer either of the two Western-types was ultimately a choice *for* the frontier myth. According to Smith, both types of heroes were “symbols of anarchic freedom,”⁵² one of the primary aspects of the frontier settlements in the mythic West. In Classic Hollywood, this became the basis for the reconciliatory pattern, as both outlaw and official hero Westerns participated in the consensus space of the national myth. The “natural man versus civilized man”⁵³ was ultimately a battle of small variations within the framework of something invariably agreed upon, namely that America still was a frontier nation, and that the national myth was a valid way of perceiving the American past.

The official hero became Hollywood’s way of mediating the “official values” in American society created by the frontier settlements in the American West. The historical roots of this hero were based on an image of the “defender” of America’s frontier communities. The official hero was a virtuous, spiritual and determined force of society that would strengthen the newly established communities on the frontier against their surroundings. Hollywood’s hero rested on a well-known historical character in the American mind. Richard Slotkin writes that John Filson’s 1784 Kentuckian frontier drama *The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boone* “constituted the first nationally viable statement of a myth of the frontier.”⁵⁴ Filson created a “literary dramatization of a hero’s immersion in the elemental violence of the wilderness and his consequent emergence as the founder of a nascent imperial republic.”⁵⁵ Embodied in the official hero was the understanding that a utopian society on the frontier could not be created merely by recreating the societies of the Atlantic coast. The cities along the Atlantic seaboard were known for their moral and political corruption, which had forced Americans to escape to the frontier. Nor could utopia be achieved by adopting the “natural” state of the Native Americans, as their fundamental savagery meant that they would never be able to become compatible with the morality of American culture.⁵⁶ Instead, “by standing between the Indian image of man’s natural potential for good and the European image of civilization” the frontier communities would have “the opportunity to shape their

own future with the full awareness of their possibilities for good and evil.”⁵⁷ The official hero and his frontier community were, in the words of Turner, “not conservative” but rather filled with “buoyant self-confidence and self-assertion ... In this conception were elements of evil and elements of good.”⁵⁸

The official hero represented a character imbued by a mythological status in his combination of “seminomadic wandering, violence, and opportunity-seeking with the agrarian imagery and morality expounded by Jefferson and Crèvecoeur.”⁵⁹ According to Slotkin:

Filson’s tale would have to dramatize convincingly the interdependence of Boone’s destiny, the historical mission of the American people, and the destiny appointed for the wilderness by natural law and divine Providence. ... The evidence suggests that ... Filson did, in fact, fulfill these requirements.⁶⁰

The story of Boone was an example of how the image of the official hero could be narrated by bringing together a sense of destiny and purpose to the efforts of sustaining society. Hollywood recreated the official hero in American literature time and again. Popular films in Classic Hollywood such as *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) were among many films dramatizing the sense of sacrifice and hardship in the life of the official hero in protecting his community from the outside pressures of hostile forces. Although bandits often threatened the peace of frontier America, Native Americans were the primary evil. According to Karen Wallace, “the [defeated] Indian in American narrative symbolizes the righteousness of American imperialism, allowing cinema to maintain the precarious balance of the mythic frontier.”⁶¹ Combined with his ability to protect his community from external forces, Ray explains how “the official hero, normally portrayed as a teacher, lawyer, politician, farmer, or family man, represented the American belief in collective action, and the objective legal process that superseded private notions of right and wrong.”⁶² In this way, the official hero also protected the internal dynamic of his community. The official hero represented the notion that firmly enforced laws, rigid social structures and a violent response against enemies (bandits and Native Americans) were natural institutions emanating from the frontier process in American history. The official hero was therefore a character that existed in a timeless mythological realm, much like the type of community he had vowed to protect.

The outlaw hero, on the other hand, represented the idea that not all Americans were comfortable in adhering to the official values in America. “The new ‘outlaw Western’ addressed the dark side of the progressive history which the [official hero Westerns] evaded or subsumed, and which had hitherto been the province of the gangster film and social

drama.”⁶³ The impulse to remain an “outlaw” – that is, to take a stance against any form of civilization – became the second dominant myth dramatized in Hollywood’s creation of the Western as a genre. “Embodied in the adventurer, explorer, gunfighter, wanderer, and loner, the outlaw hero stood for that part of the American imagination valuing self-determination and freedom from entanglements.”⁶⁴ Not surprisingly, the heroic aspect of the outlaw hero was not attained in the same manner as the official hero. The “outlaw” became a hero by representing a sensibility found deep within the American myth, namely the extreme propensity to favor individualism over tradition, norms and social institutions. Although criminal activity did to a certain extent define the outlaw heroes of Classic Hollywood, the films would often create a sense of justification for his actions. This was done by portraying the legal, political and social network around the outlaw hero as corrupt, claustrophobic and unjust. By recreating the kind of moral framework that supposedly drove people away from urban areas and into the American frontiers, the outlaw hero was given agency and justification in renouncing his membership in society, and by creating his own sense of justice.⁶⁵ Therefore, the outlaw hero could range from Jesse James to an “American” Robin Hood, depending on the type of justification presented for his actions.⁶⁶

D.H. Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature* gives a noteworthy critique of the opposition between the “civilized man” and the “natural man.” Lawrence posits the idea that the official hero was actually the true representation of American freedom, and that the “natural man” – the outlaw hero – was in fact the less “free” of the two. He writes “men are free when they belong to a living, organic, believing community, active in fulfilling some unfulfilled, perhaps unrealized purpose. Not when they are escaping to some wild west. The most unfree souls go West, and shout for freedom.”⁶⁷ Lawrence thus argues that the escape from civilization (from Europe to America, and from American civilization to the frontier) represented a necessity for the individual to announce his wish freedom, perhaps more than the necessity of actually becoming free.²

The reconciliatory pattern found in Hollywood films operated with the premise that “if the extreme individualism of the outlaw hero always verged on selfishness, the respectability of the official hero always threatened to involve either blandness or repression.”⁶⁸ Hollywood Westerns were in this way divided ideologically, forcing its audience to choose which type of film (and mythology) they favored, rather than having the film’s protagonist portray both

² This is also a key aspect of the imaginary frontier today, as the nostalgic adherence to frontier values, and the idea that America still is a frontier nation seems to far supersede the necessity of having “actual” new frontiers, reflecting the “safety-valve” aspect of the American frontier experience.

values.⁶⁹ The reconciliatory pattern was therefore draped over Hollywood as an industry, as both the outlaw and official-hero films still relied on the consensus of the national myth. The outlaw hero's "distrust of civilization," "childishness and propensity to whims," and "hostility toward political solutions" was ultimately part of the same narrative that had created the official heroes that were "preeminently worldly, comfortable in society, and willing to undertake even those public duties demanding personal sacrifice."⁷⁰ This is how Hollywood became a body of different films (myths) whose contradictory ideologies could coexist within the protective barrier of the industry's own consensus space. This enabled filmmakers abandon the prospect of mediating "both" values when creating Westerns. The outlaw and official hero films would instead take either side of the bifurcated American mind. Hollywood would in this way embody two types of films that together constituted the entirety of the frontier myth, relocating "choice" between values from within its characters to between its films.

2.5 The Fragmentation and Politicization of The National Myth

The widespread consensus around the national myth in America ended in the wake of the civil rights movements, the counterculture, the rise of the New Left, the escalation of the cold war and the assassination of key political figures in the 1960s and 1970s. Scholars tend to agree that there is a clear link between the upheaval of these two decades and an end to the national myth in the American imagination. Ray Allen Billington writes that the 1960s signified a time when:

the opportunity for expansion was declining, and ... the social order was evolving from its agricultural to its industrial stage. Everywhere, for all to see, were the physical manifestations of the new order: mushrooming cities, complexes of factories, transportation networks geared to the needs of international markets, [and] a growing labor force increasingly conscious of its class status.⁷¹

Speaking to this, Ray notes that "the events of the 1946-1966 period eroded the America that the reconciliatory myth invoked."⁷² This suggested that "the critical events of the 1960s became demonstrations of the shrinkage suffered by the physical and metaphorical space on which American institutions had presumably depended."⁷³

The social and political tensions that rose in the 1960s challenged the notion that

traditional American institutions could encompass the new sociopolitical developments at the time. For some, the violence in society represented the closing of the imaginary frontier and its role as a “safety-valve” for American society. Others refused to acknowledge the closing of the frontier, reaffirming the validity of traditional American culture. Ray notes how “ironically, the frontier, historically the figurative means for solving potential divisiveness, now proved a source of polarization.”⁷⁴ Richard Slotkin notes how Americans became divided in responding to the frontier and the violence of the 1960s, and how these years marked the period of time when American society had lost its consensus regarding the coexistence of opposing values:

Instead of contemplating a future of limitless economic and political improvement, Americans in the 1970s were asked to accommodate themselves to the limitations of “spaceship earth,” a world of exhausted frontiers whose rising and hungry population must draw on limited natural resources – a planetary ecology reduced to a ‘zero sum game’ in which every gain entails a concomitant loss.⁷⁵

For many, the violence of the 1960s symbolized a revolution of social justice and a wave of new lifestyles and ways of thought that heavily contrasted with the traditional morality and culture that had been created throughout America’s frontier era. The fragmentation of the national myth and the loss of America’s consensus space meant that Hollywood could no longer continue its reconciliation of opposing American values in its films. The new divisions in American society had effectively eroded the consensus space on which Classic Hollywood had based its thematic paradigm. Speaking to this, historian Robert Sklar writes that “during the 1960s deep divisions caused by the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement and struggles for empowerment by many groups eroded the social base for ideological consensus on which movie mythmaking depended.”⁷⁶

However, the invalidation of the reconciliatory pattern did not affect Hollywood as profoundly as one might suspect. Ray suggests that the fragmentation of the national myth did little to threaten Hollywood’s ability to continue its projection the imaginary frontier:

Because this mythology represented not American experience (historical, social or geographic), but the culture’s collective means of dealing with that experience, it could not be overthrown by events alone ... A “break” in the continuity of Hollywood Cinema ... could, therefore, only follow a “break” in the American ideological projection.⁷⁷

Despite how the closing of the frontier implied that traditional American lifestyles were outdated, the American people were still ideologically attached to the traditional tropes of

individualism and traditional American culture. Indeed, despite the fragmentation of the national myth, the nostalgia surrounding the American westward expansion, tales of the frontiersman and his traditional way of life remained dominant in the American imagination. Although the reconciliatory space of the heroes Hollywood Classic had eroded, the industry was still able to employ versions of its traditional characters in post-frontier America.

The remaining fragments of the national myth consisted of nostalgic narratives about America's frontier heritage. As previously explained, many of these frontier stories were originally popularized by Classic Hollywood and its Westerns. Indeed, the nostalgic images of individualism and traditional life in the American mind had been "decisively shaped"⁷⁸ by Classic Hollywood. By the 1960s, Hollywood had gained an immense momentum throughout its Classic period in reading American history through the consensus space of the national myth. This would now reveal its true impact on the American mind. Ray notes how "commentators inevitably read sixties developments through the traditional mythology's own most representative explanation of American life: Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis."⁷⁹ Responding to this, Hollywood films would now dramatize the politicization of the remaining fragments of the national myth, retrofitting the outlaw and official hero of Classic Hollywood to represent the new political division in American society. These political figures became post-mythic characters, mediating the non-consensus space of American society.

After the fragmentation of the national myth, the main division in American popular politics could be found between the progressive, liberal Left and the conservative Right. These two sides of the political spectrum were defined in reaction to the counterculture and the New Left movements. According to Hollywood films, the metapolitical issue that defined the two sides was also closely related to the issue of the frontier in American life. In Hollywood films, the Left and the Right were represented by their recognition of "limits" – or lack thereof, a key attribute of the acceptability of the frontier myth. The metapolitical discourse of the frontier that started in the 1960s became the focus point for thematic paradigm of post-consensus Hollywood films.

Hollywood responded to the changing conditions in American society by no longer having its films feature a choice between two mythic heroes. Hollywood films would now mediate a choice between the political values of the Left and Right side of the spectrum of American popular politics. The political opposition between the Left and the Right became the "experience towards real events"⁸⁰ Hollywood would have to mediate in its new films. In order to encompass rapid changes in American society, Hollywood moved from genres (and

disguised genres) to cycle films. As the counterculture and civil rights movements of the 1960s exploded across the landscape of American media, Hollywood was pressed for time in adjusting an entire genre of films to meet the new political reality. Cycle-films became Hollywood's way of deviating from an established body of films, while still retaining some of the key elements of an original genre. This accounted for the relatively short-lived lifespan of Hollywood cycles.⁸¹

Ironically, the Left and Right cycle films of the 1960s and 1970s created frontier narratives through the Western formula, either resembling those of Classic Hollywood, or in disguised and urban forms. However, the fundamental premise behind the new Westerns was rooted in mediating a political division – fundamentally violating both the thematic paradigm of Classic Hollywood Westerns, and the very concept of a “myth.” By projecting a post-consensus (post-mythic) version of its classic frontier narratives, Hollywood retained its dominant role in mediating and creating frontier ideology in America. Therefore, Left and Right cycle films represented the ways in which Hollywood emerged unscathed from the dissolution of America's consensus space in the polemic decades of counterculture.

The new politicized Hollywood Westerns would have to overhaul the traditional heroes of Classic Hollywood in order to embody the new sociopolitical divide in post-consensus America. Most notably, the new post-mythic narratives of Hollywood featured Left and Right cycle heroes that embodied a strong sense of contradiction. The contradictions found within the new cycles of Hollywood came to represent many of the underlying contradictions in the political responses to the closing of the frontier.

The fragmentation of the national myth had disconnected a great amount of symbols, images and narratives stemming from both the “natural man” and “civilized man” from their original location within the American consensus space. From this rubble of apolitical and mythic fragments, the new political heroes of the Left and Right cycle were created. Ultimately, these heroes embodied aspects of both the outlaw and official hero of Classic Hollywood, now combined with a distinct political position. Some aspects of the hero related to his political struggle, while others responded to the underlying nostalgia for the frontier – shared by both the Left and the Right. According to Ray, this became Hollywood's way of catering to “the audience's increasingly ironic attempts to deal with historical events in the traditional terms.”⁸² This is how Left and Right cycle films would cater to both the political and nostalgic sentiments of each audience.⁸³ As a result of the nostalgic relationship between the American mind and the concept of the frontier, films of the Left and Right cycle would

violate their own political message by having its heroes either glorify or inadvertently create the conditions they supposedly fought against.

2.6 Left Cycle Films and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

Left cycle films would have to encompass both the politics and the sense of nostalgia of the Left side of the spectrum of American popular politics. According to the Left, the events of the 1960s and 1970s were symptomatic of the inability and unwillingness of mainstream society to respond to a new sense of limits, causing violent uproar. Ray writes that “the Left’s position ... derived from Turner’s thesis, whose tacit Darwinism had linked cultural institutions to a geographic condition.”⁸⁴ According to the Left, political choices were now necessary in order to keep America intact after the closing of the frontier.⁸⁵ The political sentiments of the Left became an extension of Frederick Jackson Turner’s own response to the closing of the physical frontier in 1893, wherein he foresaw a wide range of necessary actions to guarantee the continuation of American culture and institutional heritage.⁸⁶ Historian Wilbur Jacobs explains how the Turner Thesis had an “emphasis on the importance of free land in the growth of American democracy” and a “belief that legislative action in the present [would have to] perform the tasks that earlier conditions had automatically brought about.”⁸⁷ Incorporating the notions of Turner, the Left promoted a closed-space doctrine wherein they saw “clearly outmoded institutions as symbols of the frontier’s close.”⁸⁸ Ideologically, the Left fought for the acknowledgement of the closing of the frontier, while simultaneously taking any action necessary to guarantee individual liberty and freedom from a system of government that no longer could be rejuvenated by the presence of a frontier in the West.

Hollywood responded to the politics of the Left by creating Left cycle films. Superficially, these films would favor an outlaw hero modeled on the “redskin” hero in Classic Hollywood, embodying a wish to escape society, family ties, economic and social restraints, symbolizing a preference of individualism in reaction to the problems of society.⁸⁹ However, in lieu of acknowledging the closing of the frontier, the hero of a Left cycle film would also have to embody “a new sense of community, stressing ecology, cooperation, and anticompetitiveness.”⁹⁰ Indeed, much like in Classic Hollywood, “the dominant figure of the Western hero [was] a frontiersman who combine[d] a feeling for the wilderness with some of

the qualities of civilization.”⁹¹ The contradictions of the Left became visible through Hollywood films as “the Left movies that superficially acknowledged the invalidation of Western lifestyles and values typically glorified the very myths they appeared to disown.”⁹² The Left cycle films would reveal this contradiction by featuring an outlaw hero that embodied a sense of individualism and escape from established norms on the one hand, decrying the outdatedness of America’s institutionalized individualism and “frontier mentality” on the other.

According to the outlaw hero of the Left cycle films, American society in the 1960s and 1970s had become unbearably conservative and repressive in its struggle to retain traditional institutions after the closing of the frontier. Those in power refused to acknowledge the invalidity of old ways of thought, reverting to an oppressive form of government in protecting America’s “official values.” The “noble outlawry” of the outlaw hero was opposed by corrupted financial and political structures in America of that seemed to overshadow nearly every aspect of society.⁹³ According to the Left, these structures were rooted in an outdated, traditionalist ideology representing the belief that American culture could continue its traditional course. Therefore, in Left cycle films, the community of the outlaw hero was under threat by the individualistic and unsympathetic frontier mentality of the official values in mainstream American society.

Ironically however, the outlaw hero’s sense of individualism was simultaneously threatened by the conformity and rigidity of traditional cultural institutions in America. The loss of the frontier and opportunity for cultural regeneration not only invalidated traditional institutions in America; it suggested the necessity of an entire overhaul of American culture, politics and morality. Therefore, the very structure of the official values and mainstream society in Left cycle films was presented as flawed. The preference for individualism in the imagination of the Left cycle audience meant that the outlaw hero would also have to embody a sense of frontier mentality of his own. This became possible as the Left cycle films chose to create disguised/urban Westerns. The sense of “lateness” to the outlaw hero’s struggle against society was dramatized by juxtaposing a modern, conservative and oppressive society against the traditional lifestyle of the outlaw hero.⁹⁴ This is how the sense of nostalgia on the Left was somehow impervious to its political critique of traditional America. Indeed, “their ideals were blatantly mythical: [idealizing] a passive dropping out that resembled the wandering outlaw life, and the small communal farms that seemed parodies of ... yeoman husbandry.”⁹⁵

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975) is a disguised “counterculture Western”⁹⁶

portraying the political, thematic and contradictory foundations of a Left cycle film. *Cuckoo's Nest* dramatizes an insane asylum / correctional facility in Oregon, and the arrival of its newest member, R.P. McMurphy. Within the confines of this establishment, McMurphy perceives a community of people where the individuals have lost all agency over their own lives. McMurphy's struggle against the oppressive system materializes as a revolt against the head nurse, Nurse Ratched. In doing so, McMurphy becomes an outlaw hero of the Left. In Left cycle fashion, the insane asylum becomes a symbol of the inability and unwillingness in American society to understand its outmoded ways of thought. Through the many sessions between the nurse and her patients, McMurphy realizes how Ratched is able to control, manipulate and distort the minds of her inmates instead of offering therapy and help. Ratched represents the Left's view of the "official hero," ruthlessly protecting an outdated system against any and all threats. The insane asylum represents a conservative "status quo" where dissent is violently struck down upon and sympathy is nonexistent.

McMurphy's "pronunciation of the nurse's name (to sound like 'rat shit')"⁹⁷ strengthened the inevitable opposition between the outlaw hero and the manipulative and unflinching incarnation of the all-powerful system. According to Ray, "to suggest the frontier's closing, the Left movies typically opposed their heroes ... with depersonalized villains who came to represent the incessant advance of modernity."⁹⁸ In *Cuckoo's Nest*, Nurse Ratched controls to the latest advances in technology and science in treating her patients, featuring electro-shock apparatuses and medicinal treatments carefully designed for each inmate. These inventions came to represent the tools of modernity in oppressing the wish for political reform, represented by the outlaw hero and the inmates.

As a response to this highly modernized, faceless and corrupted system, McMurphy recreates a community within the asylum. The outlaw hero, initially displaying a clear preference for individualism and immaturity, now reverts to the communal and anticompetitive nature of the outlaw hero. McMurphy is able to strengthen each member of the ward caught in the oppressive regime of Nurse Ratched by offering a healthy dose of "common sense," sympathy and humor. This is how McMurphy is able to establish a powerful opposition toward the establishment, revealing itself as a much more efficient way of opposing Nurse Ratched. After some time, McMurphy becomes friendly with Chief Bromden, a Native American inmate rumored to be a deaf/mute. As McMurphy reveals his own optimistic personality and willingness to understand and listen, the chief confides in him,

revealing, in turn, how he, like his father, had been trapped within the oppressive bureaucratic system of America:

Chief Bromden: My pop was real big. He did like he pleased. That's why everybody worked on him. The last time I seen my father, he was blind and diseased from drinking. And every time he put the bottle to his mouth, he didn't suck out of it, it sucked out of him until he shrunk so wrinkled and yellow even the dogs didn't know him.

McMurphy: Killed him, huh?

Chief Bromden: I'm not saying they killed him. They just worked on him. The way they're working on you.

Through the dialogue with Chief Bromden, the true nature of Ratched's institution is revealed to the audience. The mental asylum becomes a representation of American society without a frontier, stagnated into a conservative deadlock, revealing a conservative "hard-liner" ideology, keeping those without agency in check, and refusing to acknowledge the need for change and reform. The conservatism of closed-frontier America reveals itself through Nurse Ratched's abuse of her inmates. Chief Bromden, representing Native America, is marginalized, stripped of all history, and reduced to the apathy of his silent and repetitive task of sweeping the floor. Other inmates are disenfranchised by heavy medication, unable to participate in the seemingly democratic process of deciding whether to watch McMurphy's Super Bowl game on TV. Towards the end of the film, the system reveals its intolerance of dissent, and its willingness to annihilate the outlaw hero, McMurphy, as his rebellion gains momentum.

The last few scenes of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* portrays a set of contradictions and paradoxes between the film's frontier narrative and its political message. The morning after McMurphy's drunken party with prostitutes, the outlaw and official hero face off in a final confrontation. Ray explains how violent endings were glorified in Left cycle films, "portraying it as the last possible expression of individual freedom."⁹⁹ The (frontier) violence officially discredited in the Left's closed space doctrine is in *Cuckoo's Nest* both glorified and justified in responding to conservative America. As McMurphy loses his battle with the system, it becomes apparent for Chief Bromden that escape from the corrupted society in America is the only choice he has left. This is foreshadowed in the in scene where Chief Bromden reveals his ability to speak and his willingness to join McMurphy's struggle against the nurse:

McMurphy: "What are we doing in here, Chief? Huh? What's us two guys doing in this fucking place? Let's get out of here. Out."

Chief Bromden: “Canada... “

McMurphy: “Canada. We’ll be there before these sonofabitches know what hit ‘em.”

In the very last scene of the film, Chief Bromden compassionately ends McMurphy’s life and saves him from living the rest of his life trapped in the system like the many other patients. “In aestheticizing its heroes’ deaths, the Left cycle perpetuated the values it had nominally discredited: individualism, self-sufficiency, and escapism.”¹⁰⁰

The great paradox of *Cuckoo’s Nest* reveals itself as the Chief breaks out of the asylum and is seen running into the wilderness, north east, toward the forests connecting Oregon to British Columbia, Canada. By allowing Chief Bromden to escape the insane asylum, *Cuckoo’s Nest* replicates the most basic premise of the Right. By portraying the possibility of escape, the narrative of the film inadvertently creates a frontier. In *Cuckoo’s Nest*, Canada represents a place to escape the restraint and terror of closed-frontier America, and a viable “safety-valve” for escaping the corrupted society of the United States.³ The creation of Canada as a frontier reveals the contradictory nature of the Left’s response to the closing of the frontier in American society. Ray explains this contradiction by arguing that the Left, in their flight from conservative America, reverted to a set of traditional images and narratives stemming from the myths they fought against politically.¹⁰¹ In other words, the nostalgic adherence to a frontier and the necessity of having an imaginary “possibility of escape” could not be challenged by even the most severe assertions of the loss of the frontier – not even through the representation of American society as an insane asylum. The “counter-frontier” of the Left, visible in the representation of Canada as an imaginary safety-valve, becomes symbolic of the contradiction that emanates in promoting a political sentiment through a frontier narrative.

According to *Cuckoo’s Nest*, the counter-frontier of Canada is not a frontier for the authentication of the traditional institutions of the Right. The Right had its chance with the American frontier, which is closed both physically and in the American imagination, evident in the entrenched American society and the horrors of conservatism. Instead, Canada is an imaginary frontier exclusively for the authentication of the nostalgic sentiments of the Left. Through the chief’s escape, McMurphy finds redemption for his violence, immoral behavior, revolt and defiance against the system. *Cuckoo’s Nest* is therefore an example of how Left cycle films navigated between an underlying idealization of frontier mentality on the one

³ This reflected a real-world situation in the 60s and 70s, where tens of thousands of Americans would dodge the draft for the Vietnam War by travelling to Canada.

hand, and a political opposition against the Right on the other. McMurphy, an outlaw hero of the Left cycle, is the staunch protector of the community he creates within the mental asylum, keeping hopes up by the constant promise of escape, inadvertently creating an imaginary safety-valve for his community members. Through contradiction, McMurphy embodies “both” values – namely a critique of the Right’s open frontier mentality, and a representation of the Left’s nostalgia, rooted in images of traditional American life. By violating its own political message, *Cuckoo’s Nest* appealed to the contradictory ways in which the Left cycle audience responded the closing of the frontier.

2.7 Right Cycle Films and *Dirty Harry*

The Right responded to the notion that the imaginary frontier in America had closed in the 1960s and 1970 by refusing to see how the events of the New Left invalidated traditional American values. “To the Left’s vision of geographic and figurative closure, the Right responded with the insistence that new frontiers could still be found.”¹⁰² The Right’s adherence to the frontier myth and the concept of imaginary frontier created a political platform that was diametrically opposed to political reform.¹⁰³ By refusing to concede the loss of a frontier in America, the Right sought to reaffirm “the values of the community: law and order, international peace-keeping and respect for the middle-class family.”¹⁰⁴ In the 1960s and 1970s, the Right sought to rejuvenate the values and consensus politics of American society in the 1950s, embodying the conservative struggle for the “official values” in America. The Right claimed that the problems facing American society such were not symptomatic of any structural flaw in society. Quite the contrary, America was still was a frontier nation, merely undergoing a temporary surge in violence and discontent. The divisive events that took place in society were attributed to individual criminals, thugs and progressive nay-sayers no longer were being kept in check by those in power. The Right attributed the violence of the 1960s and 1970s to unorganized criminals and thugs, arguing how the Left’s image of “closed frontier America” was a fictitious justification for liberal political reform.

However, the Right did not suggest that the problems in society were easy to overcome, nor that the events that transpired were negligible. Ray writes that the assassination of John F. Kennedy was a particularly divisive event for the political spectrum in American popular politics. For the Left, the assassination of the president “signaled that the old

assumptions had failed, that there were was something deeply wrong with American institutions and culture. The Right, on the other hand, regarded the assassination as an individual act of evil whose source could be located and eliminated.”¹⁰⁵ President Kennedy promoted the term “New Frontier” at the beginning of his presidency, suggesting that the early 1960s was a time for new possibilities, opportunities and, indeed – frontiers for the American people. Therefore, the death of Kennedy was particularly symbolic of the death of the imaginary frontier in America.

The aftermath of the assassination of Kennedy featured an event that would clearly symbolize the Right’s adherence to the frontier myth, and Richard Slotkin’s idea of how a mythic hero “exemplifies and tests the political and/or moral validity of a particular approach to the use of human powers in the material world.”¹⁰⁶ Bill Alexander, the prosecutor of Jack Ruby who shot Harvey Lee Oswald, the assassin of President Kennedy, would in an interview reveal to the American people how Ruby genuinely believed the “traditional” tactic of gunning down one of the most hated men in the country would be an end justifying his means. At one point during the investigation, Alexander was quoted by saying that “Jack actually thought he might come out of this as a hero of sorts” and that “he thought he had erased any stigma the city had by knocking off Oswald.”¹⁰⁷ By killing the infamous assassin of John F. Kennedy, Jack Ruby became a real-world personification of the Right’s adherence and belief in traditional values and lifestyles. Ruby embodied the Right’s adherence to traditional mythology, exemplifying the belief that problems in society were redeemable by the direct, confrontational approach of the mythic official hero.¹⁰⁸

Hollywood reacted to the Right’s reassertion of traditional behavior by creating Right cycle films. Much like Jack Ruby, the hero of the Right cycle would abide to the “open-frontier” tactics of the old outlaw hero of Classic Hollywood, and at the same time fight for the “official values” of America, protecting traditional institutions and lifestyles. In many ways, the hero of the Right cycle films represented a sturdy individual who made the (contradictory) choice of putting himself above the law in the attempt to save the very foundation for legality itself. The hero of the Right was therefore a vigilante of society, named a “vigilant hero.” The vigilant hero would sacrifice his personal life and his status in society for a greater cause; the ability to convince America that traditional tactics were still viable in modern America. Right cycle films employed several thematic aspects to their films that would create an appropriate setting for the vigilant hero and his war on the enemies of society. The Western genre was reworked by the Right cycle films because of its close

attachment to the dramatization of the national myth, which centered upon the frontier as a setting. As the vigilant hero defeated his enemies in the most urban areas of the United States, he would become the personification of the rejuvenating force of the frontier on American civilization.

Dirty Harry (1971) is a film that not only represents the post-mythic imagery and sense contradiction of the Right cycle films; it is also a broader representation of how the Left and Right fought the ideology of each other. *Dirty Harry* is part of Hollywood's "urban vigilante genre,"¹⁰⁹ dramatizing the vigilant hero's struggle against a lone, desperate assassin who reaps havoc in the streets of San Francisco by raping, killing and torturing innocent victims. The serial killer in *Dirty Harry* is an example of how Right cycle films were prone to adopt the Left's outlaw hero, invert his moral identity, and retrofit him as the ultimate enemy of society. Ray explains how this tendency took place in both Left and Right cycle films, as:

the vicious southern cops of the Left's *Easy Rider*, *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Cool Hand Luke* were transformed into the heroic Buford Pusser of the Right's *Walking Tall*; the sympathetic hippies of *Easy Rider* became the psychopathic killer of *Dirty Harry*, equipped with a peace symbol for a belt buckle.¹¹⁰

Dirty Harry is both an attack on the Left (and the Left cycle) and their ideology as much as it is an affirmation of the validity of the traditional, mythic tactics of the outlaw hero from Classic Hollywood. The Right adopted a remaining fragment of the outlaw hero, namely the "ad-hoc" and anti-establishment approach to eliminating the enemies of society.¹¹¹ Jack Ruby's Western style showdown in attacking and killing Oswald in front of representatives of the "official values" in America, (police officers, the press and members of the judicial system) is identical to inspector Callahan's preferred way of solving the problems in the streets of San Francisco. Much like Jack Ruby, Inspector Callahan breaks the law in his fight for justice. By entering the home of the serial killer Scorpio without a warrant, Harry becomes a vigilante, fighting for justice outside the confines of the "official values." Through his renunciation of "official tactics," Harry reveals to the audience how bureaucracy and inefficiency have overrun the official values for which he fights, which has forced him to become a kind of "outlaw." The film is introduced with a fitting image of this inefficiency. In the second scene of the film, the mayor of San Francisco read aloud Scorpio's extortion letter. The mayor pauses abruptly as the letter reads the word "nigger." Even though the mayor is surrounded by his closest colleagues, he is still unable to deviate from the social norm of political correctness. This uncomfortable pause signals to the audience that the political

leadership in the city is unwilling to “get their hands dirty,” which is why *Dirty Harry* is given the job.

In traditional Right cycle fashion, *Dirty Harry* attributes the source of society’s problems to the extreme nature of the city’s crimes without further contemplation of what might have triggered the city’s mayhem. The lack of willingness to understand the source of San Francisco’s surge in violence is redeemed by the final scene of the film where Harry throws his police badge into the water along with Scorpio’s dead body. The death of the criminal symbolizes the restoration of balance and harmony to society, and simultaneously a justification for the extralegal ad-hoc tactics of the vigilante hero. Callahan’s famous line: “I don’t know what the law says, but I do know what’s right and wrong” represented Frederick Jackson Turner’s own image of the typical frontiersman, writing that “he knew how to preserve order, even in the absence of legal authority.”¹¹²

Dirty Harry is therefore an example of how the Right cycle films, much like the Left cycle films, removed any sense of choice from the thematic structure of their films. Callahan did not choose to have the New Left respond violently to the closing of the frontier, nor have a society with psychopathic killers on the loose. McMurphy, in his battle against Nurse Ratched, the very symbol of the Right, is too without choice in fighting for what he believes in. For Callahan, the only choice remaining is to fight the criminals in society in any way necessary, even through vigilante-style action, in order to protect the traditional values in America. Ray writes that “in their self-righteousness and refusal to admit competing possibilities, both sets of films appeared to be arguing that a choice had been made before each film began, with the action that followed only the logical results of having settled on a particular set of values.”¹¹³ The lack of viable options available for Inspector Callahan reflected the necessity for traditional tactics in protecting the values of the Right – pleasing the political sentiments of the Right cycle audience.¹¹⁴

Dirty Harry reflected a strong sense of contradiction that emanated on the Right regarding the question of the frontier’s survival in American society. Urban Westerns such as *Dirty Harry* differed from the Westerns of Classical Hollywood by what Slotkin calls a “post-Frontier” setting.¹¹⁵ According to Ray, “although the Right argued for the continued applicability of Western tactics, it did so in urban crime movies that constantly implied the loss of the frontier conditions on which those tactics were premised.”¹¹⁶ As if it were a Left cycle film, *Dirty Harry* portrays the closed-space reality of American society. Indeed, if America truly was a frontier nation, the vigilante hero would be redundant, as the violent

crimes of Scorpio would be kept in check by the rejuvenating and mythical forces of the frontier. Paradoxically, a “post-frontier” setting was required in order to have the conservative political standpoint of the Right triumph over its adversaries.

The Right cycle’s insistence on placing its hero in an environment suitable for the elimination of the Left also led to the adoption of one of the most powerful symbols of the Left cycle films in representing the closing of the frontier – namely the sense of “lateness” to the relationship between the hero and his surroundings. Although this was a powerful tool in portraying the vigilant hero as a solitary character and a remnant of a more virtuous moral era in American history, it simultaneously acknowledged that those days had passed.¹¹⁷ *Dirty Harry* exemplifies how conservative America could be seen as triumphant only by contradicting its political standpoint through a frontier narrative. On the one hand, *Dirty Harry* triumphs over the radical liberalism of the Left, while guaranteeing the victory of frontier-based values in a visibly closed-frontier environment on the other. Therefore, much like the films of the Left cycle, *Dirty Harry* is an example of how Right cycle films, through frontier narratives, violated their own political message in the presentation of their political standpoint.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed the development of Hollywood’s discourse of the imaginary frontier, illuminated through Robert Ray’s *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema*. For the purposes of this thesis, this chapter has illuminated two tendencies visible in the development of Hollywood’s projection of the frontier myth. In responding to changing conditions in American society and the fragmentation of the national myth, Hollywood films externalized the choice between its incompatible values, and revealed a set of contradictions between the political standpoint and the thematic foundation in its films. Both these tendencies culminated in the Left and Right cycle films, marking the end of Classic Hollywood. The Hollywood Renaissance reflected the new politicized and polarized state of Hollywood’s thematic paradigm concerned with the political divide in post-consensus America.

This chapter has revealed how the Left and Right cycle films were, above all, engaged in the task of fighting the sentiments of each other. Indeed, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*

and *Dirty Harry* are quite similar in what they glorify and what they fight against. Both films responded to an audience that, at its most fundamental level, favored individualism and traditional tactics over institutions and established moral norms.¹¹⁸ The main objects of these films were not so much concerned with the framing of a response to the closing of the frontier as framing a response to each other. Both films claim that the values of the “other side” is in charge of society, leaving the outlaw and vigilant hero little choice but to fight for his own sense of frontier-based nostalgia. As we have seen in analyzing *Cuckoo’s Nest* and *Dirty Harry*, both films reify the notion of frontiers in America, either consciously or inadvertently, while fighting for their own sense of traditional culture. This is how the nostalgia for the lost American frontier life transcended political strife in the 1960s and 1970s, a tendency that is still visible, now in 21st century America.

Notes, Chapter 2

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- ³ Richard Maltby and Ian Craven, *Hollywood Cinema* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 60.
- ⁴ Ray, 26, quoting Cobbett Steinberg, *Reel Facts: The Movie Book of Records* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 47-49.
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- ⁶ Ray, 14.
- ⁷ Ray, 15.
- ⁸ Ray, 55-56.
- ⁹ Ray, 13.
- ¹⁰ Ray, 55-56.
- ¹¹ Robert Edgar-Hunt, John Marland and Steven Rawle, *The Language of Film* (Lausanne: AVA Publishing, 2010), 29.
- ¹² Edgar-Hunt, 44.
- ¹³ Ray, 32.
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- ¹⁶ Ray, 58, quoting Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1963), 286.
- ¹⁷ Erik Erikson, "Reflections on the American Identity" in *The Contrapuntal Civilization* ed. Michael Kammen (New York: Cornell University, 1971), 51.
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- ¹⁹ Ray, 58.
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- ²¹ Ray, 67.
- ²² James Oliver Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1986), 14.
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- ²⁶ Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 195.
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- ²⁸ Ray, 13.
- ²⁹ David N. Rosen. "King Kong Race, Sex, and Rebellion" *Jump Cut* No. 6, (1975): 7-10, <<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC06folder/KingKong.html>> (12 January 2012)
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- ³¹ Thomas E. Wartenberg, "Humanizing the Beast" in *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness* ed. Daniel Bernardi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2001), 157.
- ³² Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), 147.
- ³³ Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, (London: New Left Books, 2009), 39.
- ³⁴ Žižek, 39.
- ³⁵ Wood, 21.
- ³⁶ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 8.
- ³⁷ Edgar-Hunt, 85.
- ³⁸ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, (1992), 233.
- ³⁹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, (1992), 234.
- ⁴⁰ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, (1992), 233.
- ⁴¹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, (1992), 234.
- ⁴² Ray, 55.
- ⁴³ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, (1992), 234-235.
- ⁴⁴ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, (1992), 13.
- ⁴⁵ Ray, 58-59.

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- ⁴⁶ Geoff King, "Spectacular Narratives: Twister, Independence Day, and Frontier Mythology in Contemporary Hollywood" academia.edu
<http://brunel.academia.edu/GeoffKing/Papers/600173/Spectacular_Narratives_Twister_Independence_Day_and_Frontier_Mythology_in_Contemporary_Hollywood> (12 February 2012), 32.
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- ⁵¹ Rahv, 120.
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- ⁵⁴ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 269.
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- ⁵⁶ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, (1973), 276.
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- ⁵⁸ Turner, 45.
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- ⁷³ Ray, 253.
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- ⁸⁵ Ray, 254.
- ⁸⁶ Ray, 301.
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- ⁹² Ray, 310.
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- ⁹⁴ Ray, 306.
- ⁹⁵ Ray, 255.
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- ⁹⁸ Ray, 303.
⁹⁹ Ray, 311.
¹⁰⁰ Ray, 312.
¹⁰¹ Ray, 255.
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¹⁰⁶ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, (1992), 13-14.
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¹⁰⁹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, (1992), 634.
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¹¹² Turner, 47.
¹¹³ Ray, 299.
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3 Conservative America and Hollywood's Vigilant Hero

3.1 Introduction

This chapter and the next will illustrate how Hollywood's discourse of the imaginary frontier is still prevalent in 21st century American life, most visibly expressed in the arena of popular politics. This chapter will analyze how commentators on the right side of today's political spectrum is choosing to adopt post-mythic narratives and characters stemming from Hollywood's Right cycle films. This chapter will argue that that the merger between political rhetoric and Hollywood narratives today displays the perseverance of Hollywood's influence on American society in framing the contemporary metapolitical discourse in America. This chapter, as well as chapter 4 will be part of the overall argument of this thesis, suggesting that the remnants of the frontier myth in Hollywood films are today being politicized and retrofitted into the world of popular politics. The ways in which political commentators are today reasserting Hollywood frontier narratives of the 1960s and 1970s suggests that contemporary popular politics in America can be read through Left and Right cycle films. The two following chapters will approach examples of left and right-wing ideology through a reading of Robert Ray's *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema*.

As explained in chapter 2 of this thesis, the frontier narratives of the Left and Right cycle films came to represent the political strife in America that emanated as the national myth fragmented. During the Hollywood renaissance, the official and outlaw heroes of Classic Hollywood were disconnected from the mythic consensus space of the frontier myth and transformed into post-mythic, political heroes. The outlaw and vigilant heroes of Left and Right cycle Hollywood were characters created to mediate the political gap between the political Left and Right who responded to the violence and counterculture that began in the 1960s. Today, these Hollywood heroes have been brought into the discourse of 21st century popular politics in America, employed to champion political positions. This chapter will reveal the ongoing tendency for Hollywood's post-mythic narratives to be employed by political commentators today as a means to popularize their political standpoint. The adoption of Hollywood's frontier narratives now suggests the ways in which Hollywood's imaginary

frontier is still a defining issue for the political division between the Left and the Right.

As seen in chapter 2, the post-mythic (political) divide between Hollywood's vigilant and outlaw hero became Hollywood's preferred way of responding to the loss of America's consensus space. The current process of merging the Left and Right cycle heroes with contemporary political rhetoric represents a continuation of the tendency in America to mediate sociopolitical developments through the frontier narratives of Hollywood. In the 1960s and 1970s, Hollywood film-makers were actively engaged in presenting contemporary issues in their films. Today, political commentators employ both formal and thematic elements of Hollywood films in framing their political standpoint. This is especially visible as the many contradictions and paradoxes visible in both Left and Right cycle films are now reappearing in the metapolitical rhetoric of popular politics in America. This, and the following chapter will constitute the two main arguments of this thesis; one, that commentators in the arena of popular politics today are employing Hollywood narratives to promote their politics, and two, that these narratives feature the same contradictions found in the Left and Right cycle films.

This chapter will analyze the ways in which the Right side of the political spectrum in America is clothing some of its most cherished political figures in the post-mythic garments of a Hollywood-type hero. Today, conservative forces on the Right are recreating near mirror-images of the vigilant hero of the Right cycle films in an attempt to create a champion of today's conservative ideology. This chapter will argue that this is an attempt to incorporate the fundamental concept of the Right cycle hero; the belief that the (imaginary) American frontier is open, into the political foundation of the Right. Today, the "real" Hollywood heroes of the Right serve as personified symbols of conservative politics and its defense of traditional American culture. The Right's notion that America still is a frontier nation is seen as a justification for defeating the (left-wing) enemies of contemporary society. According to the Right, the Left can be defeated by using the traditional "ad-hoc" tactics of Hollywood's vigilant hero. Much like the vigilant hero of the Right cycle, the political hero of today is locked in an eternal struggle against both the closed-space doctrines of the Left, and the members of his own political base seen as too weak or "politically correct" to join his battle. This new hero represents the "official values" of conservative America, and is representative of the political struggle to restore the traditional American culture, once created in the consensus-space of the national myth.

3.2 Pat Buchanan, the Vigilant Hero of Real America

The Last Conservative, Pat Buchanan is an article written by conservative columnist and president of the Edmund Burke Institute Jeffrey T. Kuhner, published in the opinion column in the online version of the Washington Times on October 13, 2011. Jeffrey Kuhner is a popular radio host and contributor to various conservative media outlets. Kuhner is a fierce opponent of liberal culture, and labels himself “The Last Honest Man in Washington” and “Liberalism’s Worst Nightmare” in his struggle for a return to conservative American values.¹ His recent article concerns conservative author, journalist, politician and broadcaster Patrick J. Buchanan and his recent publication *Suicide of a Superpower*. Kuhner’s article is but one of many examples of how, in the last few years, Pat Buchanan’s popularity has once again risen among conservative ranks since his heyday in the 1980s and 1990s. Buchanan has appeared as a political commentator on the Right for decades, and since the 1980s, he has run for president, made numerous television appearances and authored several books. Today, Buchanan is a controversial, yet a well-recognized name on the Right in American popular politics.

Pat Buchanan is well known for his racially charged rhetoric against Jews, African-Americans and Latin-Americans, and is also a strong opponent of popular culture and the increased role of government in American life. The paleoconservative nature of Buchanan’s rhetoric is visible in his wish to restore the values and politics that he argues America once stood for. Buchanan is vocal in his wish for white supremacy, segregated schools, a strict roman-catholic morality, economic nationalism, and argues for political and economic isolationism. As an example of Buchanan’s view of America’s past, he argues that the inequality between blacks and whites in America’s past was an intended sociopolitical situation created by the founding fathers, visible through a “correct” analysis of America’s constitutional documents.² Buchanan’s views have firmly placed him outside the Republican Party, whose members repeatedly label him as an extremist. This is one of the main issues in Kuhner’s attempts to vindicate Buchanan and his conservative views on American foreign, domestic and economic policy.

Pat Buchanan is today being celebrated by conservative commentators such as Jeffrey Kuhner in ways that strongly resemble the vigilant-hero characteristics of a Right cycle film. In his defense of Pat Buchanan, Kuhner blends a Hollywood frontier narrative with the

promotion of real-world political figure. His article is an example of the metapolitical discourse in 21st century American popular politics. Kuhner's creation of a Hollywood hero in the realm of American popular politics represents a wish to crystallize a set of political, cultural and social values within a person, creating a real-world Avatar for a political platform. Through his narrative, the hero-figure becomes a symbol of a political sentiment, imbued with an ideological force meant to represent the totality of a certain standpoint. The hero becomes a tool for his community, applicable in the political struggle in American society today. When the hero speaks, his political community is given a voice. When the community is in peril, the hero can be sacrificed. Because the hero can easily be discarded, he can be used as a weapon to fight ideological battle of his people. The political hero is therefore, by his very nature, an uncompromising character, and a pure representation of an abstract set of values.

Jeffrey Kuhner's article creates an image of Pat Buchanan as a man unsoiled by political compromise, as a "pure conservative" unafraid of unconventional methods, and as an outsider of his own political base. Partly by commentators such as Kuhner, but also by his own merit, Pat Buchanan has been given the role of a hero for the political Right. Because Kuhner, to a large degree, bases his arguments on the rhetoric visible in Buchanan's recent book, *Suicide of a Superpower*, it is too a useful source in analyzing the ways in which Buchanan is pictured as a hero of the Right today. Ultimately, this offers a more nuanced insight into the ways in which contemporary right-wing political rhetoric can be read through Hollywood frontier narratives.

Kuhner's article expresses in detail how Pat Buchanan has been alienated from the conservative circles in mainstream America because of his polemic rhetoric against those who threaten his view of America's traditional past. Kuhner creates an image of Pat Buchanan as a champion of the political Right and a vigilant hero of "America" by addressing the waves of criticism that have been launched against Buchanan by other conservatives. Kuhner's article suggests that those on the Right who criticize Buchanan are symptomatic of a certain degeneration and weakness of the conservative base in America. Therefore, Kuhner argues that the criticism launched against Buchanan is not representative of any extremism on Buchanan's part. Instead, "Mr. Buchanan is the last true conservative" and "a Burkean traditionalist who champions the organic society and America's distinct cultural identity."³

Kuhner's article contains a narrative that carefully molds Pat Buchanan into a heroic character, featuring many, if not all of the features of Hollywood's Right cycle hero.

Buchanan represents a staunch, consistent, and relentless man, locked in a violent struggle for “pure” conservative causes against the Left on the one hand, and his political peers on the other, who are unable or unwilling to be sufficiently extreme in their rhetoric. Much like a vigilant hero, Buchanan too sacrifices everything for the sake of his cause. Kuhner’s narrative canonizes Buchanan into a caricature of the real man, and imbues its creation with the self-righteous, individualistic, “hard-liner,” and most importantly – contradictory character traits of Hollywood’s vigilant hero. Buchanan’s struggle for the “official values” of America is, at its most fundamental level, concerned with the restoration of traditional American institutions that are now under threat by liberal forces spearheaded by the ultimate left-wing villain, President Barack Obama. Ray notes: “In the right’s view, difficulties required only an individual hero strong enough to stand up to the villain for the sake of ineffective communities.”⁴ Jeffrey Kuhner’s article indicates that the conservative base has failed in its struggle against liberal progressivism, and must look to Pat Buchanan, the only remaining individual with a moral and political leadership strong enough to carry the Right and protect traditional America.

3.3 Real America

Pat Buchanan is a conservative. His political ideas are fundamentally concerned with the restoration and protection of traditional American institutions and values. In presenting the political actions necessary to reach his goals, Buchanan quotes a speech made by former Alaska governor Sarah Palin. Buchanan writes “in retort to Obama’s expressed desire to be a ‘transformational’ president, Palin told the throng, ‘We must not fundamentally transform America, as some would want; we must restore America.’”⁵ Indeed, when reading Buchanan’s book, it becomes clear how his image of America’s past is overwhelmingly presented as a “lost image.” In *Suicide of a Superpower*, Buchanan creates a narrative explaining how contemporary American society is nothing like the America he grew up in. Buchanan’s political motivation is based on the idea that Americans should understand and appreciate the values they once celebrated. For Buchanan, traditional American values represent the “official values” of American society, now forgotten in the malaise of liberal politics. Kuhner’s article is introduced by a grim prediction concerning America’s future. Buchanan’s prophetic message of how “America is in decline” and how liberals are ushering in the “disintegration

of America”⁶ represents the overall narrative in Buchanan’s rhetoric. By taking a closer look at the “official values” that are now under threat by liberalism in America, we can perceive the fundamental values for which Pat Buchanan struggles. Buchanan longs for a memory of America as an organic society, structured on firm religious values and a peaceful cohesion between segregated races. As we will see, this image has strong resemblances to the type of community and society championed by the vigilant hero of Hollywood’s Right cycle films.

The official values championed by Buchanan can best be described by a term prevalent in the rhetoric of contemporary right-wing political figures. “Real America” has in the last few years quickly become a term favored by the Right in describing the values conservatives strive for in today’s political discourse. Real America represents an image of America’s past, suggesting that that American society was once structurally intact and unified in regard to its moral precepts, its creed and its culture. The conservative website conservapedia.com writes that Real America is:

a term used to describe the real spirit, ambitions, values and attitude of the United States. “Real America” generally refers to the traditional values on which the United States was founded, such as gun ownership, faith in Jesus, and conservative ideology.⁷

The widespread use of the term and its many connotations is in itself indicative of a nostalgic return to an idealized society that may or may not have existed. Regardless of its historic accuracy, it does stand as an image of what most conservatives today wish to conserve.⁸

Despite its ambiguous nature, one can be fairly certain of which period of time Real America alludes to. Indeed, in *Suicide of a Superpower*, Buchanan is adamant in explaining exactly when America was at its most “real.” Buchanan is vocal about the urgent nature of restoring the Christian morality, economic stability and the sense of “American optimism” featured in postwar America. Indeed, Buchanan longs for the time when “black and white lived apart, went to different schools and churches, played on different playgrounds, and went to different restaurants, bars, theatres and soda fountains.”⁹ He argues that the segregation in the 1950s represented a time when “we shared a country and a culture. We were one nation. We were Americans.”¹⁰ Buchanan longs for a lost American civilization that was once founded on a social cohesion, political unity and a set of moral precepts that are no longer visible today. Buchanan writes that America today is no longer a country with “a people of a common ancestry, culture, and language who worship the same God, revere the same heroes, cherish the same history, celebrate the same holidays, share the same music, poetry, art [and] literature.”¹¹ Buchanan laments how America used to have “the Ten Commandments in

public schools [and] crosses in public parks.”¹² He argues that, “in the past, public or private charity were thought to be necessary but were viewed as temporary fixes until the breadwinner could find work,” because “almost everyone, with hard work and perseverance, could make his or her won way and support a family.”¹³ According to Buchanan, these issues symbolize how the values of Real America have faltered under the liberal politics that have permeated society since the 1950s.

The social and political values championed by Buchanan strongly resemble the official values represented by the vigilant heroes of Hollywood’s Right cycle films. Kuhner’s article presents the restoration of Real America as the primary object of contention in the political struggle today between Buchanan and the liberal ideologies in America whose “centrifugal forces pulling us apart are growing inexorably.”¹⁴ Pat Buchanan confirms this sentiment, writing in a 2011 article titled *What Do Conservatives Wish to Conserve?* that the type of society in America in the 1950s is indeed the primary object of contention in today’s politics.¹⁵ As explained in chapter 2 of this thesis, the glorification of American mainstream society in the 1950s was prevalent in Hollywood’s Right cycle films. Much like in a Right cycle film, the social explosion of the 1960s defines the beginning of the end for traditional America. Buchanan notes how:

second-generation conservatives, Middle Americans who grew up in mid-century, were engulfed by a set of revolutions that turned their country upside down and from which there is no going home again. [This] began with the freedom riders and March on Washington of August 1963.¹⁶

According to Buchanan, the political and social revolt of the New Left divided America into two irreconcilable halves. Buchanan longs for the time when American society was based on a sense of political consensus. His book is introduced by the notion that “where one half of America sees progress, the other half sees decadence. The common moral ground on which we once stood united is gone.”¹⁷ Buchanan laments how America lost its consensus space in the social upheaval in the 1960s and 1970s. This is how the foundations of Buchanan’s struggle are identical to that of a Right cycle Hollywood hero. Where Right cycle heroes would condemn the counter-cultural villain in society for his violent response to traditional America, Buchanan lambasts contemporary political figures on the Left and the Right for their continuation of the political sentiments of the New Left, harking back to the violent fragmentation of the cohesive society of America’s past.

Jeffrey Kuhner argues that the “liberal enemies” of Buchanan represent the same

political ideology harbored by the enemies in Right cycle films. By reading Jeffrey Kuhner's article through *Dirty Harry*, it becomes clear how Pat Buchanan and Inspector Callahan are portrayed in similar ways. Both Buchanan and Callahan face enemies that are bent on promoting a closed-space doctrine and the notion that traditional America is an outdated type of society. According to the Left, American culture is invalidated as a result of the closing of the American frontier. Kuhner's article can therefore be read as a right-wing response to the frontier's closing. Kuhner's narrative of Buchanan's heroism is, much like *Dirty Harry*, concerned with the idea that the imaginary frontier is still open in American society, serving as a justification for traditional American culture. Buchanan must therefore protect his frontier community, namely "America," against the closed-space ideology of the Left and their call for political, social and cultural reform.

3.4 The Enemies of Buchanan and the Contradictions in Kuhner's Frontier Narrative

The ways in which Pat Buchanan resembles a Hollywood-made vigilante hero is to a large degree made visible through Kuhner's characterization of Buchanan's enemies. Because the enemies of the vigilante hero is a central factor in Hollywood's frontier narratives, Kuhner creates a narrative where the enemies of Buchanan are "unambiguously defined and against which a clear definition of virtuous self can be articulated."¹⁸ Looking at Kuhner's article, it is clear that Buchanan requires a group of enemies to fight, for without enemies and a community in peril, there would be no need for a hero. Kuhner argues that the struggle to regain America's past is the most fundamental breaking point between Buchanan and his progressive opponents in today's America.

The characterization of "enemies" in both Kuhner's article and Buchanan's *Suicide of a Superpower* is strikingly similar to the ways in which San Francisco's thugs, vagrants and desperados are depicted in *Dirty Harry*. Buchanan's enemies are, according to Kuhner's article, clearly identifiable, much like villains in a Right cycle film, where "problems had sources in particular individuals with names and faces, who could be located, tracked down, and eliminated so that society could return to normal."¹⁹ Buchanan's progressive opponents, i.e. the "villains" he must defeat, are represented by a collection of individual social structures, policies, and cultural phenomena who all pose a threat to his image of a Christian,

ethnically homogenous and morally intact America.

In the last chapter of his book, Buchanan describes the collective impact exerted by the enemies of Real America:

Our intellectual, cultural and political elites are today engaged in one of the most audacious and ambitious experiments in history. They are trying to transform a Western Christian republic into an egalitarian democracy made up of all the tribes, races, creeds and cultures of planet Earth. They have dethroned our God, purged our cradle faith from public life, and repudiated the Judeo-Christian moral code by which previous generations sought to live.²⁰

According to Kuhner, the enemies of traditional America jeopardize “the very future of [the] republic.”²¹ In order to restore America to its glorious past, Kuhner lists the various “thugs and criminals” of contemporary American society that must be defeated by Buchanan. These enemies represent the closed-space doctrine promoted to transform the traditional heritage of American society into a new, liberal society. Those who threaten Real America appear in the form of “Mr. Obama’s trillion-dollar deficits,” “Obamacare,” “cherished programs [such as] Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps,” “defence spending,” “MTV,” “abortion, pornography, homosexual marriage, drugs [and] euthanasia.”²² These “enemies” are specific in nature and can easily be singled out and destroyed through legislative action. These are but few of many examples of the liberal forces which are, according to Buchanan and Kuhner, furthering the gap between Real America and the future of the United States.

For Buchanan, President Obama represents the very symbol of the tribal politics, atheism and ethno nationalism that has now supposedly established itself as a hegemonic force in American society. According to Buchanan, President Obama’s ethnicity, as well as his political, religious and social views constitutes a totality of the threats facing Real America. Buchanan’s attacks on President Obama are similar to the ways in which Inspector Callahan views the serial killer, Scorpio, in *Dirty Harry*. In his deranged mind, Scorpio threatens to kill, rape, kidnap and torture victims from every strata of society, targeting members of the middle class, religious icons, police officers, children and minorities without discrimination. Indeed, Scorpio’s way of disturbing society as a whole means that the peaceful and organic nature of Callahan’s community is in upheaval. Although Callahan encounters a group of armed and dangerous bank robbers in the early stages of the film, they are but clumsy caricatures compared to Scorpio. In many ways, Scorpio represents the eye of the storm raging through the streets of San Francisco, conjuring lesser thugs and criminals in his wake. Similarly to the totality of Scorpio’s evil deeds, for Buchanan, President Obama

represents every threat to the unity, segregation and religious authority that once dominated America's past.

As explained in chapter 2 of this thesis, In *Dirty Harry*, Scorpio stands as a personification of the Right's view of the Left. In urban Right cycle Westerns such as *Dirty Harry*, the villains of society are representative of the Left's critique of traditional institutions. For instance, as previously explained, McMurphy's violent showdown with Nurse Ratched was glorified by *Cuckoo's Nest*. In the Right's view however, this glorification of individualism and dissent from society came to represent the cutthroat criminals running rampant in the streets of America.²³ *Dirty Harry* is an example of a Right cycle film that characterizes its enemies through the prism of a conservative ideology. Essentially, Scorpio represents how the Right perceives the Left and their response to the closing of the frontier.

However, because it is a Hollywood film, *Dirty Harry's* struggle against the Left is limited to attacking the superficial exterior of the Left cycle hero. This limitation is transcended in Kuhner's narrative as he fuses the contemporary rhetoric of the Right with a post-mythic frontier narrative. Regardless of how Kuhner characterizes the enemies of his hero through the prism of a Hollywood frontier tale, he is still able to be specific in its attacks on real-world political figures. Kuhner's Hollywood-style hero fights "real" enemies who promote the idea that that America lacks the imaginary space for traditional behavior. Kuhner's transformation of Pat Buchanan into a vigilant hero of the "real world" of American society enables his hero to transcend the limitations of a Hollywood film. This reveals the power of Hollywood's frontier narrative once installed in a real world setting.

Despite the benefits for Kuhner's rhetoric in adopting a Hollywood frontier character, his frontier narrative is also subject to the very same rhetorical contradictions that Ray identifies in Hollywood's Right cycle films. Because Kuhner's narrative is framed within Hollywood's discourse of the imaginary frontier, Buchanan is also faced with the thematic paradoxes found in the frontier narratives of Hollywood.

The contradictory nature of Kuhner's narrative becomes clear by looking closer at the "lost image" of America's past. Kuhner is adamant in presenting the corrupted state of contemporary American society:

Mr. Buchanan argues that our leaders have embraced the "New World Order." Unlimited immigration, free trade, open borders, strident multiculturalism, globalism, a cradle-to-grave welfare state, neo-pagan morality, massive deficit spending and democratic imperialism – together they have triggered the moral, economic and spiritual disintegration of America.²⁴

Buchanan too admits that the America he once knew is now a thing of the past. In fact, *Suicide of a Superpower* is a 400-page statement of how Real America is no more, lamented through chapters such as “The Death of Christian America,” “The End of White America,” “The Triumph of Tribalism” and “The Passing of a Superpower.”²⁵ Kuhner’s article explains how Buchanan sees contemporary America as a spiritually disintegrated place, with corrupt political leaders and a dilapidated moral foundation. Therefore, in order for Kuhner to give his hero agency to fight for traditional American values, he is forced to situate his hero in a dysfunctional environment, creating a defunct image of American society. By claiming that American society has become polarized and corrupted by the Left, Kuhner inadvertently recreates “the crowded, decaying cities of the Right movies [that] implicitly acknowledged the frontier’s closing.”²⁶ Kuhner’s article creates an image of America as a decaying country (city), whose progressive liberals (thugs and criminals) have ushered on the “moral, economic and spiritual disintegration of America.”²⁷ In true Right cycle fashion, Kuhner inadvertently implies the closing of the American frontier by promoting his political standpoint through a frontier narrative. This contradiction invalidates the most fundamental basis for conservative thought, so passionately championed by his vigilant hero.

Even though Jeffrey Kuhner creates a frontier narrative to support his political rhetoric, he refuses to acknowledge its inherent contradictions. It is not possible for the Right to claim that the imaginary frontier still exists in America and simultaneously accuse the Left of fundamentally polarizing American society. Such an idea would go against the Right’s belief in the frontier myth and its powers of social regeneration. Indeed, if the frontier myth still was a valid way of perceiving contemporary American life, the enemies of society such as those in *Dirty Harry* and Buchanan’s book would never have emerged. If the frontier myth was still applicable to American society, it would have provided sufficient imaginary space for the survival of traditional culture well into the 21st century. This is why Kuhner is forced to violate the most fundamental sentiment of the Right.

How, then, does Kuhner’s narrative account for the violent uproar of the New Left, leading to the loss of the “common ground” for which all Americans once stood? His article addresses the loss of America’s consensus space much like a Right cycle film, ignoring the message of Turner’s Frontier Thesis by staunchly claiming that “changed conditions [do] not demand changed institutions, attitudes or lifestyles.”²⁸ Although his narrative strongly implies the closing of the frontier, Kuhner does not consciously see the changes in society as an invalidation of traditional American institutions. The way in which his narrative implies the

closing of the frontier is therefore only means to a greater end; to create a hero that can crystallize the political agenda of the Right. Regardless of how his image of a decaying American society might imply the closing of the frontier, Kuhner's narrative, much like a Right cycle film, simply ignores the implication.²⁹

The enemies in Kuhner's narrative, much like in a Right cycle film, appear as aberrations of normal American life, and do not represent any structural problems in American culture. The enemies of Real America are portrayed as simple, superficial problems redeemable by the actions of one man – the vigilant hero of the community. Ray writes that the “Right movies reduced enormous social issues (war, crime, urbanization) to localized emergencies solvable by simple, direct action involving no long-term commitment to reform.”³⁰ In *Dirty Harry*, The removal of Scorpio from the streets of San Francisco creates a justification for Callahan to use his old-fashioned no-nonsense police work to track and kill his enemies. Similarly, for Buchanan, the clutter of liberal politics needs only to be eliminated and removed from the face of society in order to restore traditional American institutions. The underlying premise in Kuhner's article is that the values of traditional America are still valid and still exist. They are but temporarily buried underneath the rubble of liberal politics.

The moral, cultural and political gap between Buchanan's idealized past and American society today can be measured by the actions that the vigilant hero must undertake in order to protect the official values of his community. In Kuhner's narrative, Pat Buchanan is a political creature that has been imbued with the mythic weapons of Hollywood's vigilant hero, having every “ad-hoc solution” and array of “traditional methods” available at his disposal. As previously explained, the enemies of Buchanan are not only easily identifiable; they alone are the cause of society's problems, representing nothing more than the flaws of their own moral character. Therefore, in Kuhner's narrative as well as Buchanan's book, a (political) “man-to-man showdown”³¹ is presented as a viable and justifiable solution to America's sociopolitical problems. As previously explained, Buchanan's forceful rhetoric can be seen as a weapon wielded by his community, having the vigilant hero represent the full force of conservative America.

In Right cycle films, the task of the vigilant hero is to do whatever it takes in order to come face-to-face with the enemies of society. Buchanan's preferred way of dealing with his enemies and is as if taken from a scene in *Dirty Harry*. The following dialogue is taken from the scene where Inspector Callahan meets with the mayor of San Francisco and other police officials in deciding the official course of action after reading Scorpio's extortion letter:

Mayor: All right. Give the message to the *Chronicle*. We'll agree to pay, but we'll tell him we need time to get the money together.

Insp. Harry Callahan: Wait a minute. Do I get this right? You're gonna play this creep's game?

Mayor: It'll get us more breathing space.

Insp. Harry Callahan: It also might get somebody killed. Why don't you let me meet with the son-of-a-bitch?

Chief: No, none of that. You'd end up with a *real* blood-bath.

Mayor: I agree with the Chief. We'll do it this way, all right?

Callahan's wish to "meet with the son-of-a-bitch" represents the Right's adherence to the traditional "ad-hoc" tactic of solving problems. This is also the way Buchanan approaches his enemies. By presenting the problem-makers of society as superficial aberrations from a normal American way of life, Buchanan's enemies can be easily eliminated.

The last chapter of *Suicide of a Superpower*, titled "The Last Chance," features a list of actions that Buchanan deems necessary for the restoration of the official values of America. This list contains a number of immediate political choices that should be taken in order to eliminate the enemies of society. Buchanan reveals his ability and willingness to slash, cap, and dismantle his political enemies through direct, confrontational political action. Buchanan demands "A halt to foreign aid unrelated to national security,"³² writing that "the border fence should be completed"³³ and suggests "substantial cuts" in the funding of "entitlement programs [such as] Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security ... and food stamps."³⁴ These are but few of many specific political choices proposed by Buchanan which would return American society to its traditional roots. However, this reveals yet another contradiction. Real America was defined by its political consensus and the powers of the frontier myth in negating political choice. And yet, Buchanan is adamant in promoting legislative action; the preferred weapon of the Left in responding to the frontier's closing.

The underlying premise of Buchanan's text is that in Real America, the mythic powers of the frontier provided what the government does today. According to the Right, because America still has an imaginary frontier, there is no need for expensive government programs. Therefore, both spending and taxation can be minimized. Once the American people are sufficiently free from government intervention and having to pay for public services, (when society is free from its thugs and villains) the social regeneration, wealth and democratic prosperity gained from the American frontier in the past can finally be restored.

3.5 The Vigilance and Sacrifice of Pat Buchanan

Much like Inspector Callahan in *Dirty Harry*, Pat Buchanan is forced to fight a war on two fronts. Inspector Callahan must not only defeat Scorpio, he must also battle the police officials who deem his tactics illegal and immoral. Similarly, Pat Buchanan must eliminate the liberal forces that threaten America's official values, and at the same time struggle against the hierarchy of his own political base who labels him an extremist. Pat Buchanan and *Dirty Harry* are both forced to fight the wide variety of enemies that are running rampant within their communities, as well as the inefficient bureaucracy (protecting the official values) that has proven itself unable or unwilling to deal with the threat of liberal culture.

Kuhner writes that "Mr. Buchanan has been ostracized for years by some conservatives. In particular, they argue that he represents the worst traits of the 1930s old right - nativism, anti-Semitism, protectionism and isolationism - that make his politics beyond the pale."³⁵ This is how Buchanan has, for years, been forced to sacrifice his status in society on behalf of his political agenda. Buchanan's criticism toward other conservatives in America is one of the main reasons for why he has become an outcast of the Republican Party. Kuhner notes how:

Mr. Buchanan was one of the few conservatives to directly challenge the Great Society Republicanism prevalent throughout the George W. Bush administration. ... [Buchanan] argues that the GOP establishment ha[s] lost its ideological way, abandoning principle in favor of power.³⁶

Indeed, Buchanan's legacy does to a large degree speak to the internal conflict he has created within his own political community by calling out those who might favor his rhetoric, but are unable or unwilling to be as politically uncompromising. Buchanan's polemic rhetoric has firmly placed him outside the main circles of his political base, and it is visible how Buchanan has chosen to sacrifice party comradery through his relentless and uncompromising political rhetoric. This mirrors the "outcast" status of the Right cycle's vigilant hero. *Dirty Harry* is also a story of sacrifice, as Inspector Callahan breaks his ties to the police by tracking and killing Scorpio through extralegal action. The vigilant heroes of the Right cycle films would on occasion resort to extralegal ways of solving problems, expressed by *Dirty Harry*'s "stock Western phrase, 'I don't know what the law says, but I do know what's right and wrong.'"³⁷ The sacrifices made by Buchanan and Inspector Callahan are made in the name of the official values of America. This sense of sacrifice is the crucial factor that separated the vigilant hero from Classic Hollywood's official hero. Although Buchanan and Inspector Callahan both

champion a set of official values grounded on principles of law and justice, the extreme nature of the enemies of society requires extralegal solution-making on their part, ultimately making them outcast of the very society they wish to protect.

The sacrificial nature of Kuhner's hero is coupled with a sense of "lateness" to his struggle for America. Not only is the title of the article "The Last Conservative" indicative of a sense of lateness to Buchanan's role in 21st century America, Kuhner also expresses how "Mr. Buchanan represents a dying breed."³⁸ Ray writes that this was an effective way for Hollywood films to portray its hero as a last specimen of a large stock of moral figures that once existed, which would emphasize the pure and tenacious nature of the last remaining vigilant hero.³⁹ The hero would in this way set the standard for morality and effort for which the corrupted community should strive. However, the lateness of the traditional hero in modern times would be yet another example of how Right cycle films implied that America had lost its frontier.⁴⁰ By labeling Buchanan as a vigilant hero, Kuhner is able to transport a Western-style hero through time, situating him against 21st century-versions of Right cycle villains. Despite this contradiction, the success of traditional values and tactics become visible as the "old" hero is successful in fighting "new" enemies.

Kuhner portrays Buchanan as a lonely character in today's political climate. The image of Buchanan's political vigilance demands a sense of loneliness that can emphasize the ways in which his traditional ideology is in contrast with the society of today. Commenting on this tendency, Ray notes that "if the Left's outlaws were unusually community-oriented, the Right's characters, nominally official heroes, were extraordinarily alone."⁴¹ This was caused by the constant stream of criticism and distrust launched at the heroes from mainstream society.⁴² In *Dirty Harry*, Callahan is also very much alone. Much like Buchanan, his loneliness is partially self-imposed. When Harry is told he has a new partner in bringing Scorpio to justice, he replies by saying: "You gotta be kidding. I don't got any time to break in any newcomers. Why don't you do this boy a favor ... if I need a partner, I'll get me someone who knows what the hell he's doin'."

Despite how Jeffrey Kuhner describes Pat Buchanan as a lonesome cowboy in contemporary American society, he is not entirely without political peers. Kuhner's article reflects a tendency among the Right today to refer back to Ronald Reagan's two terms in office as a golden age of conservative politics. Kuhner notes how Buchanan was a proponent of the Reagan revolution and Reagan's vision for a strong, yet limited American foreign policy.⁴³ Throughout his article, Kuhner is adamant in comparing Buchanan to Ronald

Reagan. By doing so, Kuhner attempts to use Reagan's reputation as a religious, "small-government" and principled conservative in vindicating Buchanan. However, the most important part of Reagan's legacy is not so much concerned with his political standpoint. Reagan's media-appearance and his Hollywood-style approach to politics are the key elements to his resurgence as an icon for the conservative Right in the United States today.

3.6 Ronald Reagan as America's "Entertainer-in-Chief"⁴⁴

According to journalist, author and film critic Neal Gabler, the necessity to conform to a formula of entertainment has long been visible at the highest levels of American popular politics. Gabler argues that Ronald Reagan's presidency is a fitting example of how Hollywood's discourse of the imaginary frontier was able to reach the uppermost tier of American popular politics on the Right. Ronald Reagan was the first president to truly understand the effectiveness of applying both the formal and thematic elements of entertainment to a political platform. Therefore, according to Gabler, Ronald Reagan was primarily an "entertainer-in-chief."⁴⁵ Subsequently, this suggests that today, political narratives are presented to an *audience* rather than an *electorate*.⁴⁶ Gabler argues that the success of Ronald Reagan's two campaigns for presidency relied on an understanding of how to mix a political statement with one's own media-presence. Although presidents before him such as John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon both had a keen awareness of the ways in which they would be perceived by the electorate, they were severely outperformed by Ronald Reagan, being an experienced Hollywood actor by the time of his inauguration. "Reagan intuited that in a society where movies are the central metaphor, everything boiled down to perception and that therefore there was nothing but perception."⁴⁷

The popularity of Reagan's Hollywood career certainly influenced the popularity of his political standpoint. Reagan combined a conservative message that stressed economic and religious strength with a Hollywood frontier-narrative based on individualism and the American Dream.⁴⁸ Around the end of Reagan's presidency, scholars expressed how "a key attribute of Reagan's appeal [was] that he seemed more capable of governing, understood in terms of various personality traits associated with leadership."⁴⁹ This is due to how the "formal" aspect of Reagan's media appearance was closely attached to the "thematic" aspects of his presidency. According to Slotkin, "the central theme of Reagan's two presidential

campaigns ... was the systematic resanctification of the symbols and rituals of ‘public myth.’”⁵⁰

The inauguration of Ronald Reagan in 1981 crystallized the merger between Hollywood entertainment and American politics. In what would later appear as a highly symbolic initiation to Reagan’s first 4 years as president, the Joint Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies decided to move the inauguration ceremony from the East Front to the West Front of the United States Capitol Building.⁵¹ Reagan became the first president to face West during his inauguration, appealing to the frontier heritage of America’s past:

Ronald Reagan: This is the first time in our history that this ceremony has been held, as you’ve been told, on this West Front of the Capitol. ... Standing here, one sees a magnificent vista, opening up on this city’s special beauty and history. At the end of this open mall are those shrines to the giants on whose shoulders we stand.⁵²

Indeed, beneath the formal theatrics of Reagan’s on-screen persona resided a thematic foundation upon which Reagan’s political platform would rest. By moving the “stage” of Reagan’s “performance” from the East to the West, Reagan’s presidency would embark toward the figurative frontier of his presidency.

The frontier-rhetoric of Ronald Reagan’s presidency suggested “that Americans, individually and as a nation, need depend on no one.”⁵³ Reagan’s political appearance became inseparable from his own past as a Hollywood cowboy, a connoisseur of the “West,” and a prophet of conservative America. This is how Reagan’s presidency ushered on “the triumph of entertainment over political ideology of any sort.”⁵⁴

Exemplified by Jeffrey Kuhner’s article, Ronald Reagan is today resurging as an immensely popular political icon for right-wing commentators and politicians. Documentaries, biographies and commemorative effects in Reagan’s memory are today constantly being produced. Most recently, a 2011 documentary titled *Reagan* sought to capture the nostalgic return to Reagan’s conservative presidency.⁵⁵ His successful recipe for the presentation of politics is today sought after by politicians fighting for the limelight of the media. Indeed, Pat Buchanan is but one of many political figures today seeking to rekindle Reagan’s popularity. On September 7 2012, MSNBC hosted a GOP debate for the Republican 2012 nomination in the Ronald Reagan Foundation and Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California. The debate was introduced by a commentator saying “we will hear from the eight candidates who would like to claim [Reagan’s] legacy.”⁵⁶

For the GOP hopefuls and others on the Right such as Pat Buchanan, the key move is

to incorporate a Hollywood frontier narrative in their political appearance. In an interview with journalist Bill Moyers, Neal Gabler echoed the ways in which the opposition between the hero and the villain is present in contemporary politics:

Movies are about vanquishing a villain, that's what movies are about. And what happens in American politics is that ... [the] idea of vanquishing the villain, in this case Barack Obama, has become the political meme.⁵⁷

These are the ways in which Hollywood's post-mythic frontier narrative has permeated the Right side of the spectrum of 21st century popular politics, dictating the political discourse of conservative America as it appears in the media.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed the ways in which Jeffery Kuhner, a right-wing commentator, demonstrates a tendency on the Right to create political heroes out of real-world political figures, replicating Hollywood characters from the Right cycle films of the 1960s and 1970s. In his article *The Last Conservative, Pat Buchanan*, Kuhner vindicates Buchanan and his new book, *Suicide of a Superpower* by creating an image of Pat Buchanan as a vigilant hero of America. In Kuhner's article, Buchanan's political struggle in contemporary American politics is described and narrated in ways that strongly resemble a Hollywood-type frontier narrative. Buchanan's struggle to protect traditional American institutions from the liberal forces in America represents a conservative attempt to restore the social and political environment of the 1950s. At that time, American society featured a consensus politics which rested on a unified belief in the frontier myth. It is therefore fitting that Kuhner invokes a frontier narrative in creating a hero for Real America in the 21st century.

In many ways, Kuhner's narrative attempts to vindicate Buchanan by fusing the social values of traditional America with the very essence of his Hollywood-type vigilant hero. It is therefore tempting to compare Real America to the vigilant hero of Hollywood and the "heroic" aspects of Pat Buchanan. All three "characters" can be perceived as male figures following their own moral compass. They are all protectors of a morality founded on religious principles, and they all bear resentment against immoral behavior. They believe in warfare and a sense of political isolation, and are distinguished by a "no-nonsense" and "hawkish" approach to friends and foes. However, beneath this political exterior lies the most vital

essence that fundamentally connects the three. American society in the 1950s was based on a cultural acceptance and consensus surrounding the national myth. The vigilant hero of Right cycle films was based on a mythic character of Classic Hollywood, forged in the mythic consensus space of American society before the 1960s. He fought for the imaginary frontiers in America and reinvigorated the notion that America still was a frontier nation. Not surprisingly, this is a defining characteristic of Pat Buchanan as well. According to Kuhner, Buchanan “understands that a nation is held together by a common culture, language, civilization, heroes, history and myths.”⁵⁸

Notes, Chapter 3

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- ¹ Jeff Kuhner, Jeffkuhner.com, 2011, <<http://www.jeffkuhner.com>> (4 April 2012).
- ² Patrick J. Buchanan, *Suicide of a Superpower* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2011), 191.
- ³ Jeffrey Kuhner, "The Last Conservative, Pat Buchanan" *The Washington Times*, 13 October 2011, <<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/oct/13/americas-moment-of-truth-30967220/>> (12 February 2012).
- ⁴ Ray, 307.
- ⁵ Buchanan, *Suicide of a Superpower*, 399, quoting Silla Brush and Gautham Nagesh, "Controversial Beck Rally is an Event Heavier on Religion than Politics," thehill.com, 28 August, 2010.
- ⁶ Kuhner, "The Last Conservative, Pat Buchanan"
- ⁷ Conservapedia, 2012, <http://www.conservapedia.com/Real_America> (14 March 2012).
- ⁸ Patrick J. Buchanan, "What Do Conservatives Wish To Conserve?" *cnsnews.com*, 25 October 2011, <<http://cnsnews.com/blog/patrick-j-buchanan/what-do-conservatives-wish-conserve>> (14 February 2012).
- ⁹ Buchanan, *Suicide of a Superpower*, 424.
- ¹⁰ Buchanan, *Suicide of a Superpower*, 424.
- ¹¹ Buchanan, *Suicide of a Superpower*, 2.
- ¹² Buchanan, *Suicide of a Superpower*, 5.
- ¹³ Buchanan, *Suicide of a Superpower*, 34.
- ¹⁴ Buchanan, *Suicide of a Superpower*, 7.
- ¹⁵ Buchanan, "What do Conservatives Wish To Conserve?"
- ¹⁶ Buchanan, "What do Conservatives Wish To Conserve?"
- ¹⁷ Buchanan, *Suicide of a Superpower*, 3.
- ¹⁸ King, "Spectacular Narratives: Twister, Independence Day, and Frontier Mythology in Contemporary Hollywood", 7.
- ¹⁹ Ray, 307.
- ²⁰ Buchanan, 400.
- ²¹ Kuhner, "The Last Conservative, Pat Buchanan"
- ²² Kuhner, "The Last Conservative, Pat Buchanan"
- ²³ Ray, 300.
- ²⁴ Kuhner, "The Last Conservative, Pat Buchanan"
- ²⁵ Buchanan, *Suicide of a Superpower*, Contents.
- ²⁶ Ray, 306.
- ²⁷ Kuhner, "The Last Conservative, Pat Buchanan"
- ²⁸ Ray, 306.
- ²⁹ Ray, 306.
- ³⁰ Ray, 307.
- ³¹ Ray, 307.
- ³² Buchanan, *Suicide of a Superpower*, 416.
- ³³ Buchanan, *Suicide of a Superpower*, 422.
- ³⁴ Buchanan, *Suicide of a Superpower*, 410.
- ³⁵ Kuhner, "The Last Conservative, Pat Buchanan"
- ³⁶ Kuhner, "The Last Conservative, Pat Buchanan"
- ³⁷ Ray, 318.
- ³⁸ Kuhner. "The Last Conservative, Pat Buchanan"
- ³⁹ Ray, 306.
- ⁴⁰ Ray, 306.
- ⁴¹ Ray, 315.
- ⁴² Ray, 315.
- ⁴³ Kuhner, "The Last Conservative, Pat Buchanan"
- ⁴⁴ Gabler, 108.
- ⁴⁵ Gabler, 109.
- ⁴⁶ Gabler, 108.
- ⁴⁷ Gabler, 109.
- ⁴⁸ James R. Killingsworth, "The Reagan Image," *Dialogue* Vol. 5, No. 1 (Fall 1982): 12-17, online via JSTOR, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25610387>> (13 March 2012), 12.

⁴⁹ Fred Alford, "Mastery and Retreat: Psychological Sources of the Appeal of Ronald Reagan," *Political Psychology* Vol. 9, No. 4 (Dec., 1988): 571-589, online via JSTOR, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3791528>> (13 March 2012), 580-581.

⁵⁰ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 1992, 643

⁵¹ Donald Ritchie, "Who Moved the Inauguration? Dispelling an Urban Legend" 22 January, 2009, <http://blog.oup.com/2009/01/moving_inauguration/> (26 March 2012).

⁵² "Ronald Reagan First Inaugural Address delivered 20 January 1981," *Americanrhetoric.com* <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ronaldreagandfirstinaugural.html>> (12 April 2012).

⁵³ Alford, 582.

⁵⁴ Gabler, 116.

⁵⁵ Duane Bygre, Review of *Reagan*, by Eugene Jarecki, hollywoodreporter.com, 23 January 2011, <<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/sundance-review-reagan-74826>> (10 April 2012).

⁵⁶ "Full GOP Debate, Reagan Library - Politico/NBC - 09/07/2011" youtube.com, (September 7, 2011), <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xFsaeBLJns>> (10 April, 2012).

⁵⁷ Bill Moyers, "How Pop Culture Influences Political Expectations." *Truth-Out.org*, 25 February 2012, <http://truth-out.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=6890:how-pop-culture-influences-political-expectations> (13 March 2012).

⁵⁸ Kuhner, "Pat Buchanan: The Last Conservative"

4 *Avatar* and the Frontier Nostalgia of Left-wing Politics

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will reveal how there is a close relationship between political rhetoric, Hollywood frontier-narratives and the national myth on the Left side of the spectrum of American popular politics. The process of framing political questions in America within narratives responding to the closing of the frontier is today a major part of both left and right-wing rhetoric. As chapter 3 in this thesis suggests, the Right is currently engaged in the task of adopting the frontier narratives of Hollywood's Right cycle films into their political narratives. Commentators on the Right, such as Jeffrey Kuhner, are attempting to popularize their political rhetoric by adopting Hollywood's frontier narrative and dressing contemporary political figures in the clothes of Hollywood's vigilant hero. Although commentators on the Left also follow this tendency, they do so by different means. In fact, the Left is doing the inverse of the Right. This chapter will illustrate how the most vocal expressions of political left-wing rhetoric today emanate from Hollywood itself. Today, Hollywood films, talk shows and satirical news programs have become a major platform for left-wing politics, enjoying the popularity of Hollywood's formal and thematic paradigm for the promotion of its political message. The Left is therefore not mimicking the Right in creating Hollywood "outlaw heroes" out of contemporary or historical left-wing icons.⁴

Hollywood films that are able to interconnect a frontier narrative to the political sentiments of the Left today are usually successful at the box office. James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) is an example of this, being the highest-grossing production in the history of Hollywood with a worldwide profit of almost 2.8 billion dollars.¹ This chapter will argue that *Avatar* is an example of a left-wing Hollywood film that has connected its political discourse to the narrative of American origins. *Avatar* represents how commentators the Left today are weaving the framework of a Hollywood frontier narrative around their political rhetoric. This

⁴ A noteworthy example of a 21st century recreation of a Left cycle outlaw hero can be found in the recent resurgence of popularity concerning of the life and work of Paul Goodman. *Paul Goodman Changed My Life* (2011) is a recent documentary praising his pacifism and radical politics. His most famous work, *Growing Up Absurd* is scheduled for reprint in September 2012, the first since its initial publication in 1962.

chapter will therefore read *Avatar* as a political text authored by a political commentator – in this case, writer and director James Cameron.

On the surface, *Avatar* is an epic science fiction film, blending themes from other films such as *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Dances With Wolves* (1990), becoming something as described by film-maker Neil Diamond; “*Dances with Pocahontas in Space*.”² *Avatar* is a futuristic version of the American origins narrative, portraying the struggle of the natives on the distant planet of Pandora, called the Na’vi, against the invasion of settlers and prospectors from Earth searching for resources. The year is 2148, and human civilization has landed on Pandora in search of Unobtanium, a vital resource for the survival of mankind. The physical frontiers on Earth have been exhausted, forcing humanity to expand into outer space. Pandora is inhabited by cat-like humanoid creatures, strongly resembling a wide array of Native American tribes in their clothing, weaponry, war paint and worship of pantheistic deities. “The Na’vi are a translucent pale blue, with powerful, long-waisted bodies, flat noses, and wide-set eyes. In their easy command of nature, they are meant to evoke aboriginal people everywhere.”³ The landscape of Pandora features a thick temperate forest, at some points resembling the rainforests of South America, at others, the Sequoia trees of Northern California. In a story similar to *Pocahontas* where John Smith explored the New World, *Avatar* features Jake Sully, a paraplegic marine taking the role of the white male representative who gains contact with the native tribe in the untouched world of Pandora. In *Avatar*, Jake must infiltrate the Na’vi and convince them that war with the humans is imminent. However, upon contact with the native tribe, Jake becomes romantically attached to Neytiri, their princess, as well as the flora and fauna of the new planet. Jake decides to join the struggle of the native population against the human military forces.

Beneath the surface, Cameron’s film contains many of the key elements of a disguised Western. *Avatar* features a Hollywood-type frontier narrative, only relocated to a setting outside the stock “Western” environment. The battle between Jake and the Colonel is Cameron’s way of creating a confrontation between the outlaw and official hero, which is one of the primary features of the Western genre,⁴ seen in both *Cuckoo’s Nest* and *Dirty Harry*. However, disguised within its formal appearance, the sci-fi tale of Jake and the Na’vi reveals itself as a left-wing critique of the American frontier experience. In *Avatar*, the American origins narrative becomes a platform for the promotion of political sentiments responding to current events in the sociopolitical situation of 21st century America. This creates a set of problems that will be discussed to some detail in this chapter.

In terms of *Avatar* and its place in current cinema, critics tend to focus more on the formal than the thematic aspects of Cameron's film. The 3D experience of *Avatar* has been described as an altogether new type of film,⁵ shifting the paradigm of future sci-fi films.⁶ The thematic aspect of Cameron's film is, however, less groundbreaking. Previous Hollywood productions such as Terrence Malick's *The New World* (2005) and Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves* have been popular films portraying aspects of the American origins narrative. However, neither of these two films is as politically pointed as *Avatar*. Thematically, *Avatar* does not seem to be part of an old nor a new Hollywood cycle. Instead, Cameron's film is part of a political effort by the Left in America to promote its rhetoric through Hollywood-type frontier narratives.

The formal and thematic aspects of *Avatar* do, however, strongly resemble those of a Left cycle film of the 1960s and 1970s. By looking a closer at the political agenda of Cameron, and the many contradictions in the narrative structure of his film, it is tempting to label *Avatar* a "retrofitted" Left cycle film. Indeed, this chapter will reveal how Cameron's political message is faced with the same contradictions and paradoxes found in the Left cycle films of the Hollywood Renaissance. The analysis of *Avatar* in this chapter will complete the two main arguments of this thesis; one, that commentators on both sides of the spectrum of popular politics are employing characters from Hollywood's frontier narratives to promote their politics, and two, that any narrative in contemporary political rhetoric employing Hollywood's post-mythic narratives will feature the contradictions found in the Left and Right cycle films.

4.2 *Avatar* and the Politics of the Left

In *Avatar*, James Cameron promotes his political standpoint through a futuristic American origins story, framed within the thematic and political framework of a Left cycle film. Three key political issues for the Left are presented in *Avatar*. Cameron creates a body of politics that promotes minority rights, anti-war sentiment and a call for activist environmental action. These political issues are defined and explored by the outlaw hero, Jake, as he becomes the hero of the Na'vi tribe and the ecology of Pandora. On its most basic level, *Avatar* glorifies the native culture of the Na'vi and advocates the conservation of their forests in response to a ferocious human military force. These three political issues are recognizable causes for which

the Left struggles today, and are seamlessly interconnected in *Avatar* to ultimately create a body of left-wing criticism against the Right.

In the many interviews made with Cameron during the release of *Avatar*, Cameron was adamant in expressing how “*Avatar* is very much a political film.”⁷ Indeed, Cameron’s film is an example of a 21st century political narrative that is, much like Jeffrey Kuhner’s article *The Last Conservative, Pat Buchanan*, explicit about its political choices on the one hand, while employing the frontier narrative of Hollywood films on the other. Because the political message of James Cameron *is* a Hollywood film, and because *Avatar* incorporates many of the visual and thematic concepts of Hollywood’s Left cycle, one can argue that Cameron’s *Avatar* is a contemporary representation of the Left’s response to the closing of the frontier. In other words, the ways in which Cameron portrays his politics becomes a 21st century representation of the Left’s closed-space doctrine. However, as *Avatar* is firmly placed within the thematic confines of Hollywood films known for their contradictory nature, Cameron’s political message is unable to escape the inherent paradoxes found within Hollywood’s representations of the imaginary frontier. This suggests that Cameron’s political message is faced with the same contradictions and paradoxes found in Left cycle films from the 1960s and 1970s.

As a text representing many of the fundamental issues for the Left in today’s landscape of popular politics, *Avatar* is a statement about how certain American institutions and ideas are outdated. According to Cameron, the politics of the Right and their vocal attempt to conserve traditional values is a representation of an outdated way of approaching American life in the 21st century. In *Avatar*, the Colonel becomes Cameron’s way of representing the conservative effort to preserve traditional American culture. As explained in chapter 2 of this thesis, Left and Right cycle films would often mold their enemies out of the hero-characteristic of the opposing cycle.⁸ In *Avatar*, the Colonel becomes a caricature of the Right; a relentless, hard-liner, no-nonsense, militaristic and “hawkish” character, resembling an amalgam of the drill sergeant from *Full Metal Jacket* and Nurse Ratched from *Cuckoo’s Nest*. Both these characters are examples of the ways in which the Left perceived the Right. In *Avatar*, The Colonel is a bitter, ageing, relentless war-monger with an open-frontier mentality, a wish for geographic and economic expansion, vocal about his distrust of minorities (the Na’vi).

By having the ferocious Colonel face off in battle with the innocent natives on Pandora, *Avatar* dramatizes the closing of the American frontier in explicit and implicit ways.

Avatar implies that a continued frontier mentality for America today is both immoral and unjustifiable. The simple and direct action favored by the Colonel in invading Pandora and defeating the Na'vi through a “shock and awe” campaign is continuously ridiculed and criticized in Cameron’s film. The Colonel becomes a caricature of the Right’s ideology as perceived by the Left, favoring war, intimidation and power-politics in its approach to the challenges in the wake of the closing of the frontier.

The army presence on Pandora is carefully designed to represent the Left’s view of the military forces and operations that is today taking place in Afghanistan, as well as former combat operations in Iraq. Subsequently, the language of the officers, marines and the Colonel is meant to replicate the rhetoric and symbolism used in the contemporary discourse of American foreign policy. The enemies facing the human settlement on Pandora, although inferior in technology, greatly outnumber the human forces. In briefing the newly arrived soldiers about the imminent threat of war, the Colonel describes a guerilla-type enemy:

Colonel Quaritch: Out there beyond that fence every living thing that crawls, flies, or squats in the mud wants to kill you and eat your eyes for jujubes.

The link between the war on Pandora and the war in Iraq and Afghanistan is further emphasized by key phrases often heard in today’s news media concerning the two wars. The chief administrator of the corporation in charge of extracting Unobtanium, Parker Selfridge, emphasizes the importance of “winning the hearts and minds of the natives.” As he explains, this has been attempted, by him and his employees, by giving the Na’vi “medicine, education [and] roads.” This is, of course, a softer approach to the Na’vi than the Colonel’s preferred way of dealing with the natives, using what he calls a “pre-emptive attack” as a way to “fight terror with terror” through a “shock and awe campaign.” The war on Pandora even features mercenaries, much like the infamous Blackwater group in Iraq, hired by the corporation:

Jake Sully [voice over]: “Back on Earth, these guys were army dogs. Marines. Fighting for freedom. But out here, they’re just hired guns. Taken the money. Working for the company.”

In critiquing the contemporary combat operations led by the United States, Cameron also recreates the domestic sociopolitical discourse employed by the Left concerning the treatment of returning war veterans, adding to the critique of America’s combat-operations today. In *Avatar*, former members of the army such as Jake Sully are faced with difficulties in coping with life after having been in combat, as healthcare services are unavailable upon his return home. As Jake arrives on Pandora, his paralysis is made clear to the audience.

Moreover, *Avatar* reveals how Jake seems to be part of a shrinking socio-economic class back on Earth, unable to afford medical treatment for his injuries:

Jake Sully [voice over]: “They can fix a spinal. If you’ve got the money. But not on vet benefits, not in this economy.”

This line is taken from one of the first scenes in *Avatar* where the audience is introduced to Jake’s physical handicap. In these first few scenes of the film, Cameron is able to both frame and critique his view of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the social struggles for returning veterans, and the financial interests involved in the two wars. After learning that the Colonel wants to wage war on the Na’vi in search of Unobtanium, Jake restates a popular sentiment among the Left today in its critique of American wars: “This is how it’s done. When people are sitting on shit that you want, you make ‘em your enemy. Then you justify you taking it.”

Avatar’s critique of contemporary military actions led by the United States today blends with an activist environmentalist message as Jake protects the Na’vi against the Colonel, the corporation, and their military forces. This is made explicit in one of the scenes leading up to the battle between the Na’vi and human forces. In an uncanny resemblance to a caricature-like image of environmental activism, Jake extends his arms out, standing his ground against the approaching bulldozer razing the forests of Pandora. This image draws a strong resemblance to the struggles of environmentalist groups in South America, often led by natives, fighting against the on-shore drilling of multinational corporations. At this point in the film, Jake has connected with the Na’vi and their princess, Neytiri, now caught in the path of the oncoming machine. This scene also illustrates Cameron’s view of the Right, pictured as a mechanized, relentless force, seemingly bent on destroying anything in its past. Similarly, the Left – spearheaded by Jake, is pictured as a morally superior, immovable object, firmly standing its ground against the approaching onslaught. The oncoming machinery of the human forces represents the “incessant advance of modernity”⁹ bent on carrying out the ideology of the Right.

The ways in which the framework of *Avatar* mirrors that of a Left cycle film is visible in how its political choices revolve around recognizing “limits.” Films of the Left cycle such as *Chinatown* (1974) and *Silent Running* (1972) spearheaded the notion of recognizing environmental limits as a way of responding to the closing of the frontier. In *Chinatown*, Jack Nicholson’s character uncovers a cartel consisting of land-owners in cahoots with corrupt politicians controlling the remaining sources of water supply in California. In *Silent Running*, an astronaut goes rogue in protecting the last remaining plant-life from Earth, now artificially

kept alive in a space-ship after an ecocide on Earth. To the distress of Astronaut Lowell, the space ship and all its contents is marked for termination. In a melodramatic scene, Lowell engages in a heated argument with his fellow astronauts after being ridiculed for enjoying his home-grown cantaloupe. This is where the sense of “limits” in *Silent Running* is made explicit:

Freeman Lowell: It [the cantaloupe] calls back a time when there were flowers all over the Earth, and there were valleys, and there were plains of tall green grass that you could lie down in. ... There were blue skies, and there was fresh air, and there were things growing all over the place, not just in some domed enclosure blasted some millions of miles out into space. ... There's no more beauty, and there's no more imagination, and there are no frontiers left to conquer!

Avatar is also vocal about a sense of environmental limits, something that has been made visible by Cameron himself in numerous interviews. Commenting on the way in which *Avatar* addresses the politics of America's quest for natural resources, Cameron said in an interview with the San Francisco Chronicle that:

we're in a century right now in which we're going to start fighting more and more over less and less. The population ain't slowin' down, oil will be depleted - we don't have a great Plan B for energy in this country right now, notwithstanding Obama's attempts to get people to focus on alternative energy.¹⁰

Indeed, the closed-frontier politics of *Avatar* reaffirms the notion that American society must reform its politics by recognizing ecological limits. Contained within this argument, *Avatar* denies the possibility of endless growth and expansion through new frontier experiences, invalidating the Right's view of Pandora as a viable frontier for the exploitation of Unobtainium. Much like the Left cycle films of the 1960s and 1970s, *Avatar* critiques the Right and its “insistence that new frontiers could still be found.”¹¹ Ray writes that the Left's closed-space doctrine and its insistence on limits “made such ad-hoc decision making disingenuous.”¹²

Avatar is also adamant in addressing how America's search for resources around the world creates conflicts in regard to native rights and property issues. In an interview with NPR, Cameron expressed the ecopolitical message of *Avatar*:

At a very generalized level, [*Avatar* is] saying our attitude about indigenous people and our entitlement about what is rightfully theirs is the same sense of entitlement that lets us bulldoze a forest and not blink an eye. It's just human nature that if we can take it, we will. ... we can't just go on in this unsustainable way, just taking what we want and not giving back.¹³

In an uncanny resemblance to the Left cycle film *Little Big Man* (1970), *Avatar* inverts the way in which Westerns usually portrayed Native Americans. The “Indians” in *Avatar* are both morally (and unlike the aforementioned film) physically victorious in their struggle against their enemies, becoming a fitting representation of the closing of the frontier.¹⁴ Indeed, the inability of the human forces to defeat the native populations on the frontier and access the “West” of Pandora does indeed suggest the end of the American frontier experience.

The closed-space imagery in the formal aspects of *Avatar* also mirrors that of a Left-cycle film. The beginning *Avatar* features a claustrophobic close-up of Jake’s face lying in his pod awaiting arrival to Pandora. Much like *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), “the cramped space capsules, cloistered living quarters, and claustrophobic spacesuits ... belied the new promise of outer-space-as-frontier.”¹⁵ During the human attack on Pandora, the pilots in the aircraft cockpits are, although suspended in the vast spaces of Pandora, trapped in a metal cage, entrenched in physical manifestations of the lack of space that brought them to the new planet. In the closed-space existence of human life, Jake the outlaw hero is kept at bay. These images reappear every time Jake enters his Avatar suit, reminding the audience of the grey, metallic confines of humanity’s closed-space existence. When Jake’s consciousness controls his normal human body, he is constantly placed in cramped locations inside the barracks of the human military camp and seen hunched down in his wheelchair. Jake’s paralysis is suggestive of the ecological limitations of humanity today.

4.3 Jake as the Left’s Outlaw Hero: His Avatar as a Political Body

As explained in chapter 2 of this thesis, both the Left and Right cycles of Hollywood created frontier narratives in their response to the closing of the frontier. Therefore, the heroes of Left and Right cycle films opposed a set of problems in society that ultimately stemmed from the question of whether or not America could justify its traditional culture and institutions. The problems in society were attributed to the “other” side of the political spectrum as the Left blamed the Right for the violence of the counterculture, and vice versa. Therefore, the enemies of the outlaw and vigilant hero were seen as rooted in a political rhetoric. This tendency is also visible in *Avatar*. Here, Jake’s arch enemy – the Colonel – is a political creature, emanating from the political ideology (of the Right) to invade Pandora. Subsequently, Jake is imbued with the political agency of the Left, to politically, morally and physically defeat the Colonel. Through Jake, the political message of *Avatar* is revealed. This

is how Jake, the outlaw hero of the Na'vi, is a fundamentally political character.

The majority of the closed-space politics in *Avatar* are only visible through Jake's alter-ego as a Na'vi creature. Indeed, the transformation Jake Sully undergoes by controlling his humanoid Avatar gives him the possibility of both illuminating and solving the problems on Pandora. Only by entering the Avatar simulation is Jake able to access the new planet, connect with the Na'vi, and perceive the destruction of the landscape by the human forces. Through the use of his Avatar, Jake is able to perceive both ends of the ecological exploitation taking place on Pandora, revealing both the corrupted interior and the destructive exterior of the official values represented by the Colonel and the head of the mining corporation, Parker Selfridge. Jake's Avatar takes the audience into the woods of Pandora and reveals the finite nature of its wilderness, forests, and wildlife, and the fragile nature of the native population. The human threat to the Na'vi is visible first-hand throughout the film as Jake has the ability to relocate his consciousness between his Avatar and human body in the military camp. Jake's apolitical past, being a military soldier blindly following orders, is redeemed by stepping into the political suit of Cameron.

Part of what enables *Avatar* to create a political message within the thematic structure of a frontier narrative is due to how the film mediates representations of place and space on Pandora. In the first half of *Avatar*, the corporation and military forces on the new planet perceive a frontier space for exploitable resources and profit. For the Colonel and Parker Selfridge, Pandora represents a space for the extraction of resources and settlement. However, where these characters see a frontier space, Jake (now politically imbued with his Avatar suit) sees a network of places, each attributed with value, exemplified by the Na'vi camp, the tree of life and the islands in the sky. The contrast between seeing Pandora as a frontier space and as a network of places defined by its inhabitants, landscape and religious symbols gives Jake agency to fight for the Na'vi. Because these "places and objects define space," Pandora is given a "geometric personality."¹⁶ The way in which Jake distributes value to the places on Pandora reflects how "enclosed and humanized space is place."¹⁷ Jake's political body "humanizes" aspects of Pandora, creating a sense of place that is vital for the possibility of political change. The battle between the Na'vi and human military forces in *Avatar* becomes a tale of how "in open space one can become intensely aware of place," revealed through Jake's exploration of the native culture, "and in the solitude of a sheltered place the vastness of space beyond acquires a haunting presence"¹⁸ prophesized by the Colonel's warning of the dangers outside his military camp. The relative insulation provided by the forests on Pandora in the

first half of the film creates a sense of safety for the Na'vi, physically protecting their culture against their surroundings. Jake adopts the Na'vi word "sky people" in describing humans, representing the limitlessness of human access to Pandora from outer space, as well as human access to the Na'vi settlement from Pandora's vertical space. Therefore, for the Na'vi, "space and freedom are a threat."¹⁹

The moment Jake becomes aware of his new abilities after waking up in the laboratory in the military camp on Pandora, the staple characteristics of the outlaw hero become visible. Jake escapes the confines of the science lab, and reveals the true nature of his personality. Avatar-Jake is spontaneous, childish, curious, and follows his individualistic nature, much like an outlaw hero of a Left cycle film.²⁰ Jake's reckless nature ultimately leaves him stranded in the wilderness of Pandora, where he meets the native population. However, as explained in chapter 2, the outlaw hero of a Left cycle film was a divided character. On the one hand, the outlaw hero responded to a sense of individualism and escape from society. On the other, he embodied a sense of community, solidarity and fraternity for his friends and family.²¹ In analyzing other films featuring a frontier narrative, Geoff King writes that "these films imply that the frontier experience offers more than just hedonistic thrills for the individuals involved. There is also the possibility of redemption, at both the individual and social levels."²² This thematic concept is also visible in *Avatar* through Jake's character. Although Jake's individualistic tendencies land him at the feet of the Na'vi tribe, he sees the value of tribal life, and after rigorous training, is accepted as part of the community. The community-oriented nature of the outlaw hero in Left cycle films, having borrowed traits from the official hero in Classical Hollywood²³ gives Jake the role as a mediator between the place of his community and the looming threat of human invasion. Through his Avatar, Jake becomes a prophet of the left's closed-space doctrine, announcing how all human frontiers are closed. In warning the Na'vi of the human wish to raze the forests of Pandora in search of Unobtanium, Jake attaches himself to the tree of life, describing how the frontier on Earth has closed, and how he can be the hero of the Na'vi tribe:

Jake: I need to give you a heads up. If Grace is with you, look into our memories. See the world we come from. There's no green there. They killed their mother. And they're gonna do the same here. More sky people are gonna come. They're gonna come like a rain that never ends. Unless we stop them. ... I will stand and fight.

Much like McMurphy in *Cuckoo's Nest*, Jake realizes that the full force of his community will be needed in order to defeat the forces of the Right.

In talking to NBC, Cameron stated that *Avatar* is a film where the human forces are depicted as “doing the same thing on another pristine planet that we've done here on Earth. So it's a way, sort of looking back at ourselves from this other world and seeing what we're doing here.”²⁴ Therefore, by creating a sense of place in *Avatar*, the human efforts to colonize Pandora are invalidated, as the intrinsic value of its nature and inhabitants are given value by Jake. Indeed, the rhetoric employed by Cameron suggests that the frontier on Pandora is what is truly “unobtainable,” much like the unobtainable nature of new frontiers for American society today. As Jake and the Na'vi expel the Colonel and his military forces from Pandora, *Avatar* explicitly states how Earth (a metaphor for America) has lost its frontier:

Jake [voice over]: The aliens went back to their dying world.

Jake's political suit allows Cameron to paint a picture of the Right, and argue that the wish to colonize Pandora is an invalid solution the loss of the frontier back on Earth. In Left cycle fashion, Jake identifies the forces threatening the Na'vi as “complex, impersonal and pervasive.”²⁵ This is meant to reflect the complex ecological and ideological problem on his home planet. The “official values” back on Earth are now defined by the conservative measures of the Right in finding new frontiers in a desperate attempt to uphold traditional institutions. In *Avatar*, the Colonel and Parker Selfridge both represent the Right's refusal to acknowledge the frontier's closing, representing a mentality that reveals the invalidity of traditional ad-hoc tactics. Because they refuse to acknowledge the complexity of the problems on Earth, favoring a traditional frontier-style “land-grab” mentality over institutional reform, they both are depicted as simplistic, naïve and foolhardy characters. This reflects the tendency in Left cycle films to have “caricatures – silly, lifeless people”²⁶ represent the official values of society.

Cameron exemplifies the simplistic ideology of the Right by contrasting the frontier ideology of the Colonel and Parker Selfridge to a scientific and complex understanding of the Pandora. As Jake and Grace (the scientist analyzing Pandora's flora and fauna) are brought back to human form after having defended the Na'vi from the human bulldozers, a confrontation ensues between them and the military and corporate leaders:

Grace: What we think we know, is that there is some kind of electro-chemical communication between the roots of the trees. Like the synapses between neurons. And each tree has ten to the fourth connections to the trees around it. ... It's more connections than the human brain. Get it? It's a network. It's a global network, and the Na'vi can access it, they can upload and download data, memories, at sights like the one you just destroyed.

Selfridge: What the hell have you people been smoking out there? [laughs] They're just goddamned trees!

The scientific approach to Pandora is further undermined as Jake's personal log reveals how he secretly doubts whether the human interests on Pandora can be reconciled with the Na'vi. The Colonel promptly responds by saying: "so, since a deal can't be made, I guess things get real simple." The Colonel realizes how his traditional ad-hoc tactics are now seemingly justifiable, as his earlier remarks about how "the Avatar program is a bad joke" run by "a 'buncha limp-dick science majors" has proven true.

As the Colonel is finally able to launch his attack on the Na'vi, Cameron's film mirrors the way in which Left cycle films portrayed the invalidity of Hollywood's reconciliatory pattern in post-consensus America. The war between the Na'vi and the forces of the Colonel confirms how *Avatar* reflects the non-consensus space Hollywood and American society, displaying how that here are but two sides to any issue in today's popular politics; the Left and the Right, locked in an eternal struggle between Hollywood's two responses to the closing of the frontier. Therefore, the characters representing the official values are not the only ones depicted as one-dimensional. Despite the engrossing, groundbreaking 3D-experience of *Avatar* in IMAX theatres, there is but one dimension to any of the characters in Cameron's film. The shallow interests of the Colonel and Parker Selfridge are not less intricate than the simple portrayal of the Na'vi, as they too are trapped in Cameron's way of painting the thematic aspects of *Avatar* black and white. The Na'vi are nothing more than a superficial amalgam of different North American tribes, reduced to naïve and peaceful forest-dwellers imbued with "stock" magical powers seen time again in other films. Mediating the two opposing sides of the war is Jake, remaining a fool-hardy and simple spirit throughout the film. The simplistic portrayal of the characters in *Avatar* leaves no room for reconciliation, as any discourse between the two sides is rendered impossible by Cameron's endless glorification of the values of the Left, resulting in a superficiality that matches the simplicity of his right-wing characters.

Concerning *Avatar*'s displacement of choice, Jake is given no alternative to fighting for his community, as the choice to invade Pandora and exterminate the Na'vi has already

been made by the Right. This lack of choice can be further traced back to ecological destruction back on Earth and how humanity has chosen to exhaust itself of natural resources. In *Avatar*, humanity is forced to expand or die, much like Jake is forced to fight the human forces or see his community perish. In such a conflict, all one can do is to pick sides and fight. The lack of choice for the outlaw hero is displayed in the scene where Jake must warn the Na'vi of the advancing human forces:

Jake: They sent me here to learn your ways. So one day I could bring this message and that you would believe it.

Neytiri: what are you saying, Jake? You knew this would happen?

Jake: Yes.

Through the frontier-narrative of *Avatar*, the political choices of the Left prove victorious after having defeated the simplistic, greedy and war-mongering frontier mentality of the Right. Through training, struggle and much hardship, Jake's character gains enough political strength to overcome the open-frontier mentality of the human forces. However, much like Jeffrey Kuhner's adoption of a frontier-narrative for his right-wing politics, *Avatar* is also limited by a series of contradictions between its thematic structure and political message.

4.4 Contradiction and Paradox in *Avatar*

As chapter 2 of this thesis suggests, Left and Right cycle films were filled with contradictions in their responses to the closing of the frontier. As exemplified through *Dirty Harry* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the films haphazardly reassembled fragments of the American national myth, mixing the ideological foundations of the outlaw and official hero from Classic Hollywood with a politically oriented nostalgia towards traditional American life. *Avatar* too features an outlaw hero embroiled in a politicized frontier conflict. Cameron's film exemplifies how a political message, in this case the message of the Left, becomes overshadowed by a set of contradictions its efforts to employ a Hollywood frontier narrative.

On the one hand, Cameron argues for "permanent institutional changes designed to deal with an increasingly complex society."²⁷ For example, in talking to Time Magazine in 2009, Cameron confirmed the strong environmentalist themes in *Avatar* by stating that "the best thing people can do right now to help the planet is to understand how we've got to make a fairly rapid transition to alternative energy."²⁸ In a private industry screening of the film,

Cameron stated that “this movie reflects that we are living through war” and that “there are boots on the ground, troops who I personally believe were sent there under false pretences, so I hope this will be part of opening our eyes.”²⁹

However, Cameron’s call for institutional and cultural reform is firmly placed within a frontier narrative that draws upon a strong sense of nostalgia and longing for traditional American life. This creates a set of contradictions. Cameron’s critique of the out-datedness of an American frontier mentality paradoxically features Jake, an outlaw hero who glorifies “a passive dropping out that resemble the wandering outlaw life, and the small communal farms that seemed parodies of the yeoman husbandry that Jefferson himself had declared outmoded as a basis for American life.”³⁰ Cameron’s glorification of the Na’vi through the eyes of the outlaw hero reveals a preference of values such as “sexual freedom ... and a vague spirituality,”³¹ a common theme in Left cycle films. However, concealed within this countercultural trope, the behavior of Cameron’s outlaw hero collides with the metapolitical intent of the film. Ray writes that “in the heart of their vision lay yet another metaphorical frontier.”³² Indeed, Cameron’s film is relentlessly glorifying lifestyles, ideas and tactics that diametrically violate the Left’s political message, which is to promote a closed-space doctrine and permanent institutional reform.

On the one hand, *Avatar* glorifies a pastoral lifestyle in the magical wilderness landscape of a new planet. On the other, the film launches a fierce critique the Right and its adherence to traditional frontier-values. Cameron dismisses the idea that Pandora can be a viable frontier for the supply of natural resources by arguing that the idea of endless expansion is rooted in a traditional ideology that has long been outdated. However, he does so by displaying the intrinsic value of the wilderness of Pandora and the innocence of the Na’vi culture, glorifying the simplicity and traditional nature of life on the new planet. *Avatar* features a romantic portrayal of Pandora’s ecology, having Jake access an unspoiled wilderness inhabited by a peaceful native population. Jake’s experience on the Pandora frontier becomes a politically correct recreation of the American origins narrative. However, in recreating the New World, Cameron creates the foundations for a frontier “ready for the taking.” Paradoxically, the outlaw hero of *Avatar* is given a frontier in his need to escape the Right and announce the closed-frontier existence of humanity.

In an interview with Times India, Cameron stated that “I think Pandora is kind of a fictionalized fantasy version of what our world was like, before we started to pave it and build malls, and shopping centers. So it's really an evocation of the world we used to have.”³³ This

is how the creation of a frontier-landscape on Pandora *allows* Cameron to contradict himself. Pandora becomes a bucolic space designed for the nostalgia of the Left, evoking the dream of entering an unspoiled American landscape with benevolent, left-wing intentions. In *Avatar*, Jake is allowed to use the wilderness experience of Pandora to transcend the closed-space experience of human life and his paraplegic human body. The wilderness of Pandora gives way for the duality of the outlaw hero, providing a “frontier process” of spiritual and ecological regeneration for his individualistic tendencies, while representing a “safety-valve” for his community-oriented side.

By dramatizing Jake’s wish to live with the Na’vi, Cameron illustrates the bucolic dream in America of escaping society by venturing into an unspoiled landscape free from the oppressive structures of civilization. Indeed, Jake’s attribution of “place” and “value” on Pandora is part of how Cameron echoes the pastoral ideal in America. The ability to “withdraw from the great world and begin a new life in a fresh, green landscape” was, according to Leo Marx, central to the history of the American imagination.³⁴ It is tempting to argue that in *Avatar*, Pandora becomes a futuristic version of Arcadia in Virgil’s *Eclogues*. Cameron’s narrative mirrors the “pastoral ideal”³⁵ visible in the literature of Crèvecoeur and Thoreau, promising the possibilities of an escape from the entrenched nature of society, venturing into the vast American space. Cameron’s creation of Pandora attaches itself to the American idea of fulfilling a mission in the West, entering the garden of the world and enjoying the life of an Eden-like existence.³⁶

The similarities between *Avatar* and the pastoral dream in America reveal a great irony to Cameron’s anti-traditionalist political message, as the bucolic dream of the American West is one of the oldest and most traditionally bound concepts in the American imagination.³⁷ Much like Canada in *Cuckoo’s Nest*, Pandora is a political counter-frontier, exclusively available to those who embody left-wing values such as cooperation and conservation. The left-wing frontier of Pandora is firmly closed to the right-wing values of exploitation, violence and profit. *Avatar* thus “implies that the personal redemption gained by [the outlaw hero] is more generally available to those who regulate their lives according to an honest and instinctive rhythm, redolent of what the frontier stands for in the mythology.”³⁸

Indeed, the first step for Jake in becoming an outlaw hero for the Na’vi is becoming upright and entering the vertical (frontier) space of Pandora. Stepping into his Avatar, Jake regains the ability to walk, becoming physically rejuvenated through the frontier process on the new planet as experienced by the human forces. Jake enters the frontier space of the planet

and completes his transformation from a human paraplegic to a wilderness hero. As previously mentioned, in the first half of *Avatar*, Jake attributes value and a sense of place to the Na'vi and their communities, counterbalancing the sense of space humans create out of the financial possibilities of Pandora.

Yet, in the second half of *Avatar*, the attribution of space and place by the Na'vi and human forces becomes inverted. The bucolic, vertical space of Pandora is opened as Jake is launched into the air, flying on the backs of the bird-like creatures. As part of this process, the forest is given a sense of spaciousness. Jake's dream of flying over the canopies of Pandora is now realized, negating the way in which the forest previously was seen as a "cluttered environment" and the "antithesis of open space."³⁹ Now, as Jake is elevated into the vertical frontier space of Pandora, the forest is a "means by which a special awareness of space is created, for the trees stand behind each other as far as the eye can see, and they encourage the mind to extrapolate to infinity."⁴⁰ Conversely, the human forces actively engaged in razing the forests of Pandora land on the ground, surrounded by the "place" of the forest where "distant views are nonexistent."⁴¹

This is how Pandora becomes a frontier space for the Left. "As Cameron surges through the picture plane, brushing past tree branches, coursing alongside foaming-mouthed creatures, we may be overcome by an uncanny sense of emerging, becoming, transcending—a sustained mood of elation produced by vaulting into space."⁴² Racing down the mountainsides, Cameron recreates imagery of the plains Indians on horses traversing the steppes of the American frontier. The heroic image of Jake becomes "upright," and attaches itself to the vertical axis of Pandora's vertical frontier space, fully giving Jake the status of a hero and conqueror of the bucolic space of the American imagination. The formal paradigm of *Avatar* therefore represents Pandora as a frontier for Jake's escape from the closed-space reality of human life. The camera shots used in these scenes capture the colorful and spacious freedom on Pandora, having the Na'vi predominantly appear in medium or long shots with the occasional shot reverse shot in melodramatic scenes. The 3D effect of the wilderness of Pandora is also ramped up considerably compared to the ways in which the human world is pictured.

As Cameron gives his protagonist the necessary space to escape the oppressive nature of the official values, Jake is allowed to revert to a traditional outlaw-lifestyle, create a sense of "place" and become political. Even before knowing much about Pandora, Jake has visions of the green planet and his future life:

Jake Sully [voice over]: When I was lying in the V.A. hospital with a big hole blown through the middle of my life, I started having these dreams of flying. I was free.

Jake's Avatar-suit, as previously mentioned, gives him the agency to perceive a set of necessary political choices by witnessing first hand the complex situation on Pandora. This is physically possible for Jake because of the suit's ability to transcend his human ecological limitations as a paraplegic. As Jake is fitted with an Avatar-suit, he becomes one with the primitive environment of Pandora, walking, talking and acting like a native. At the very end of the film, Jake literally becomes a Na'vi by completing a magical ritual that merges his human consciousness with his Avatar body.

In return for infiltrating the Na'vi and providing intelligence to the military forces, the Colonel offers to give Jake "his legs back," promising him the necessary funds for his much-needed medical procedure. In doing so, the Colonel offers Jake a fair slice of the wealth that would be attained by extracting Unobtainium on Pandora. In other words, the Colonel offers Jake the possibility of experiencing Pandora as a frontier for exploitation and conquest. Jake's refusal of the Colonel's does not mirror the political message of the Left in denying any and all new frontiers for humanity. Instead, Jake refuses the Colonel's offer because he has found his own frontier and his own way of undergoing a cultural and ecological rejuvenation.

Indeed, the ways in which Jake undergoes a physical, spiritual and emotional regeneration through his Avatar on Pandora are as if taken directly from Turner's Frontier Thesis. Turner famously wrote that "the wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin."⁴³ In *Avatar*, the frontier process of Pandora is near-identical to the frontier process described by Turner. This is how one can argue that Cameron's politics are literally dressed in the frontier clothes of Pandora, incarnated as an outlaw hero who actively and consciously reverts to a traditional way of life in escaping the open-frontier mentality of those representing the official values.

The counter-frontier of Pandora is powerful enough to transcend Jake's status as an outlaw hero. At the end of the film, Jake has undergone the ultimate frontier transformation; no longer representing an outlaw hero, but an official hero of the Na'vi. Jake explicitly states how the human forces are now the "aliens." Subsequently, the Na'vi are no longer a foreign people, but rather fully representative of the Left – their nostalgia and the contradictions of

their politics.

Another inconsistency between the political sentiment and narrative structure in *Avatar* is visible in the film's distrust and marginalization of technology. Initially, the film hesitantly presents three "approaches" to life on Pandora. The Na'vi culture can be approached through the Avatar project, one may study Pandora as a scientist in an attempt to understand their culture and measure their environment, or one may fight the Na'vi as part of the human military forces. Despite a few soldiers joining Jake's struggle, these three approaches are paradigmatic in *Avatar*. However, in true Left cycle fashion, *Avatar* refuses to admit a middle-ground between the native culture and the human war-machine.

As violent conflict erupts between the human forces and the Na'vi, the scientists and their wish to understand and measure Pandora are squeezed between the two fighting sides. The scientific mission on Pandora becomes completely marginalized, and is suddenly treated with contempt. Similarly to the ways in which the Colonel and Parker Selfridge are ridiculed for not understanding the inherent value of Pandora and the Na'vi, the scientist Grace receives her fair share of ridicule for her inability to appreciate the spiritual dimension of Pandora. This is exemplified in the scene where Jake takes Grace to the tree of life in an attempt to save her life from after being hurt in the war. Previously in the film, Grace had established a scientific measurability of the Tree of Life's ability to connect with the Na'vi. As she is being carried toward the tree, Grace whispers "I need to take some samples." This scene is meant to provide some comic relief regarding the severity of her wounds, portraying her everlasting passion for scientific discovery. Though the Na'vi attempt to merge Grace's consciousness with her Avatar body, she is too weak and dies.

This scene is crucial in understanding how Cameron's film follows the tendency of the Left cycle to resent modernity, technology and science. *Avatar's* refusal to allow the values of the Left and the Right to coexist on Pandora creates an impassable divide between the Na'vi, Jake and wilderness of Pandora on the one hand, and the Colonel, Selfridge and Grace on the other. The human presence on Pandora, either in search for Unobtainium or scientific discovery, is equally presented as a threat to Jake's organic community. Grace's wish to understand the Na'vi through science is ultimately seen as an equally invalid approach to Pandora as the military forces waging war on the Na'vi. In *Avatar*:

technology is important, but not transcendent. It is also subject to the kind of hands-on improvisation associated with frontier life, where pioneers are supposed

to do everything for themselves, to be directly involved in all aspects of life, rather than the narrow specialization of technocratic society.⁴⁴

Avatar's critique of technology and science is highly paradoxical concerning the ways in which Jake's Avatar, a dazzling technological achievement by humanity, is solely responsible for illuminating the politics of Cameron's film. The anti-technological sentiments in *Avatar* are also ironic considering the immense technological achievement of *Avatar* as a Hollywood production. Cameron has himself stated that "the ideal movie technology is so advanced that it waves a magic wand and makes itself disappear."⁴⁵ Indeed, the technological brilliance of Cameron's film has been hailed by critics worldwide, claiming that "*Avatar* is creating a paradigm shift in the film industry with its commercial success as a 3D film"⁴⁶ and that *Avatar* is Hollywood's "next 3D frontier."⁴⁷ Not only is the bucolic space and sense of adventure on Pandora "offered as a spectacular intrusion into (or escape from) everyday life," *Avatar* is a film that "can also be understood as promising a kind of surrogate 'frontier' experience for the viewer at the level of audio-visual spectacle."⁴⁸

The final battle between the Na'vi and the human military forces reveals the last great paradox of *Avatar*. The initial presentation of the Na'vi as a joyful, childish and peaceful people is suddenly erased as the Na'vi tribe is transformed into a ferocious and aggressive army. With Jake leading the way mounted on his red flying dragon, the inevitable battle against the human forces is outfought. Much like in *Cuckoo's Nest*, *Avatar* glorifies a sense of violence on the frontier.⁴⁹ Cameron creates a final confrontation between the Colonel and Jake at the very end of the film. Initially, the battle between the outlaw and official hero could resemble any Clint Eastwood Western, as the two engage each other in a Western-style shootout. In their battle, both the Colonel and Jake are controlling "an extension of their organic powers"⁵⁰ attained through each character's frontier experience on Pandora. The colonel's "Avatar" is of metal and ammunition, suited for frontier violence and the acquisition of land. Jake has an organic humanoid-body suited for joining the Na'vi community, charming their princess, and reverting to a traditional frontier lifestyle in the bucolic space of Pandora.

Interestingly, *Avatar* goes to the extent of borrowing a vital ingredient from Right cycle films in portraying the victory of the Na'vi and Jake over the human army. As Jake kills the Colonel, life on Pandora is returned to its peaceful, organic self. Therefore, the complex problem of the closed-space situation on Earth is not addressed by *Avatar*, contrary to the Left's promotion of political reform. For Cameron, violence appears as a sufficient and

justified response to the Right's insistence on acquiring new frontiers.

Taking the many contradictory aspects of *Avatar* into consideration, it becomes visible that the final confrontation between Jake and the Colonel is not a battle between the open-frontier mentality of the Right and the closed-space doctrine of the Left. Instead, the scene reveals the most fundamental concept in the American mind. Regardless of the differences between the colonel and Jake, they both adhere to the American nostalgia for the frontier. The Left, although politically fulfilling its "break" with the consensus of the national myth, still adheres to a frontier narrative, disguised through irony and contradiction. Indeed, by betraying its overall political premise, *Avatar* is able to appeal to the cognitive dissonance of its audience. Therefore, where the reconciliatory pattern in Classic Hollywood offered an homogenous American audience "both values," the contradictions of the Hollywood renaissance – now prevalent in the framing of politics in America – are employed in order to cater to the audience's political adherence on the one hand, and its sense of nostalgia on the other.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed the way in which *Avatar* is a film that encapsulates many of the major political topics of the Left visible in today's political discourse. Through his film, James Cameron promotes an anti-war sentiment, activist environmentalism and the recognition of minority rights. The record-breaking box office success of *Avatar* speaks to the way in which Cameron has successfully merged popular politics with Hollywood's discourse of the imaginary frontier. By employing some of the remaining fragments of the national myth and creating a frontier narrative in promoting the politics of the Left, the thematic aspects of *Avatar* are trapped within the paradoxes and inconsistencies that defined the Left cycle films of the 1960s and 1970s. In *Avatar*, the outlaw hero Jake retreats into a bucolic space, enjoying a rustic, simple lifestyle in escaping an encroaching sense of modernity and the frontier mentality of contemporary American foreign policy. By doing so, Cameron follows a Left cycle tendency to inadvertently create a new frontier both thematically and formally, in this case made up by the latest and greatest in modern technology and 3D effects Hollywood has to offer. Evident in the paradoxes of *Avatar*, Cameron's film is an example of how commentators on the Left are attempting to combine the popularity of Hollywood's post-

mythic entertainment with a distinct political message. The success of *Avatar* not only suggests that Cameron has been successful in his attempt, it also suggests that Hollywood is still very much concerned with its traditional thematic paradigm; framing values and political choice around different responses to the closing of the frontier. In addition to this, *Avatar* is also successful in its blatant portrayal of contradictions in its metapolitical narrative. Cameron's film is an example of how the fragmentation of the national myth has been politically sidestepped and remedied by contradictory narratives that are able to offer "both" for the Left; a political message stressing limits, as well as a nostalgic return to a seemingly limitless American past.

Indeed, in *Avatar*, after the inevitable defeat of the official hero at the hands of the Left's outlaw hero, Pandora is, as if a Right cycle film, returned to its normal, organic past. Even though the Colonel represents a "complex" problem back on Earth, the traditional ad-hoc Western tactics of the Left are portrayed as sufficient in restoring peace and order. Politically, *Avatar* offers little in terms of solving the closed-frontier reality of America today. Instead, *Avatar* glorifies a violent struggle against the Right's open-frontier mentality. Cameron's film does not reveal the success of cultural, environmental and political reform, nor does it even admit to its possibility. Ironically, today, the political contradictions of the Left have, despite their anti-imperialist narratives, "invade[d] every available theatre in the world."⁵¹ This is how political ideology in 21st century America has merged with the frontier narratives of Hollywood.

Notes, Chapter 4

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5 Technology and Frontier Narratives

5.1 Introduction

Thus far, this thesis has revealed how the frontier narratives of Hollywood have imposed a “full circle” of ideological development in American society. Hollywood’s appropriation of the national myth, its response to the myth’s fragmentation, and its reassembly of post-mythic versions of traditional American narratives have had an immense impact on the American mind. The previous chapters of this thesis have highlighted the ways in which the frontier-based ideological framework of Hollywood has permeated American politics as played out in the media. This has revealed Hollywood’s ability to fundamentally dictate the development of American ideology within its own premises. Not only has Hollywood been able to create and project mythology in America by its own terms, it has also been able to justify its frontier narratives by referring to “nostalgia” – also a product largely of its own making – when doubts concerning the myth have risen. This is evident in the popularity of employing post-mythic characters and narratives from the Left and Right cycle in contemporary politics. This is how Hollywood has been able to completely dominate notions of America’s past, present and future through its frontier narratives.

The power of Hollywood to be able to frame questions in American history and society within the mythic (and post-mythic) realm of the imaginary frontier speaks to a sense of ideological inertia in American thought. In essence, the ways in which the frontier-narratives of Hollywood are able to resurge time and again represents a cyclical tendency in American historiography. Despite the closing of the physical frontier in the late 19th century and the fragmentation of the frontier myth in the 1960s, the American mind seems to still hold on to the concept of the frontier. Although both the Left and the Right are adamant in incorporating frontier narratives for political ends, the nostalgia of traditional American life seems to transcend any political division in America. This chapter will provide a brief overview of ideas and literature that may help us further understand how frontier narratives have been used to approach American life, as well as other aspects of American society that have appropriated frontier narratives in promoting their cause.

5.2 America As Second Creation¹

David Nye's *America as Second Creation* investigates the ways in which the story of American origins can be seen through narratives depicting the technological advances that made westward expansion across the American continent possible. In terms of American studies, Nye's work is a continuation of previous academic writing such as Leo Marx' *The Machine in the Garden*. Through the lens of technological progress, Nye analyzes the historical legacy and mythic representations of the American West. According to Nye, second creation stories, also known as technological creation stories appeared just after the American Revolution. These narratives were part of the 19th century belief in Manifest Destiny, encompassing the American frontier experience, appearing as late as the early 20th century. The term "second creation" encompassed the idea that God had created the North American continent as an original, yet incomplete landscape. The New World awaited the technological ingenuity of the newly arrived settlers, who in the wake of their war for liberation entered the open frontiers of North America, representing the "second" creation of the continent.²

America as Second Creation describes four milestones of technological innovation in this period of time; the American Axe, the mill, the canal and railroad, and finally, large-scale irrigation. These four advances in technology enabled Americans to subdue the North American landscape and "recreate" the continent into their own image.

According to Nye, second creation stories did more than merely "describe ... the creation of new social worlds, ranging from frontier settlements to communities based on irrigation."³ The perception of American origins through second creation stories resonated with a new way of perceiving and representing the American landscape. "In the 1780s and later, Americans formally embraced a new sense of space that found expression in a vast rectilinear grid projected thousands of miles in all directions," accounting for "the idea of surveying federal land into perfect squares."⁴ Relying heavily on the visions of Thomas Jefferson, "the grid was the outward expression of a culture wedded not simply to democracy, but to markets and exchange as well."⁵ The post-revolutionary way of perceiving American space created the framework for an egalitarian and financially structured way of approaching the American West, merging the political ambitions of the founding fathers and the American people to the technological creation of the United States.

Despite the popularity of perceiving American history through second-creation stories,

not everyone saw the positive aspects of the technological advances that were made upon the American continent. As a reactionary response to second creation stories, counter-narratives emanated as a way of emphasizing the sense of ecological destruction and social injustice in the wake of technological achievement.⁶ The polemic relationship between second creation stories and their counter-narratives came to represent the divide between two ideological bases in America. At their most fundamental level, second creation stories and counter-narratives were divided by different ways of responding to the history of the American frontier process. For example, the second creation story of settlers subduing the West with the American axe and the log cabin was challenged by a counter-narrative stressing the ecological destruction in the wake of forest-clearing.⁷ The second creation story of the mill and its use of natural power for the production of foodstuffs and lumber was challenged by counter-narratives emphasizing its environmental destruction and the poor treatment of working-class Americans.⁸ Similarly, the second creation stories of the railroad and large-scale irrigation of rivers also spawned counter-narratives insisting on the environmental and social tolls of each technological invention.

Second creation stories, despite their resonance with real events in American history, were seen as utopic, mythic and timeless. Technological foundation stories evolved from the qualities of life in America, making sense of the American experience through mythology. This contrasted with counter-narratives, appearing as politically oriented, rooted in a limited, yet specific time and place in American history. Nye writes that “counter-narratives tended to shift from abstraction toward the particular, the individual, and the local.”⁹ Counter-narratives created a sense of place, stressing a sense of environmental limits, social injustice and political freewheeling.¹⁰

However, technological creation stories remained dominant in the American mind despite the gradual rise of counter-narratives. Not only did second-creation stories encompass the physical ways in which Americans accessed American space, stories of second creation merged with the national mythology of the American mind.¹¹ The ideological force of technological creation stories created a consensus regarding the future and history of the American civilization. By perceiving American history through the sociogeographic concept of the grid, second creation stories could be applied to both the past and the future.¹² This is how second-creation stories became part of the national myth, creating the consensus space of the American imagination.

Nye’s concept of second creation stories and counter-narratives is applicable to the

ways in which Robert Ray analyses the thematic foundations for Hollywood's Left and Right cycle films. The perseverance of second creation stories relied on two factors that were also central to the frontier narratives of Hollywood; a sense of nostalgia and a pattern of reconciliation. The opposition between stories of second creation and counter-narratives can be traced to the division between Left and Right cycle films. This is due to how both "sides" were concerned with responding to the concept of the frontier in American history. The frontier process, much like the fragmentation of the national myth, created a political divide. However, according to Nye, a sense of nostalgia here too surpassed the political opposition in the wake of technological advance. Once a second creation story became defunct and surpassed by another technology, it became transformed into narratives of "technological nostalgia."¹³ According to Nye, these "nostalgic stories [did] not reply to counter-narratives; they simply restate[d] the major elements of a second-creation story, emphasizing the automatic unfolding of inevitable events."¹⁴ Where nostalgia in Left and Right cycle films were pointed politically towards each other, the stories of technological nostalgia merely became ways of perceiving the transition between one second creation story and the next. Therefore, the nostalgia surrounding old technologies were laid rather than used as a pointed discourse against counter-narratives.

However, Nye views the dynamic relationship between second creation stories and their counter-narratives much like Ray sees the reconciliatory pattern in Classic Hollywood. Despite how second creation stories were attacked by politically pointed counter-narratives that emanated in their wake, the idea of second creation persisted. This was due to how counter-narratives were subordinate to the original mythic narrative, appearing merely as a reactionary political response. Indeed, Nye identifies a "reconciliatory pattern" in what he calls "recovery narratives." Nye writes that "Rather than reject the technological creation story outright, many twentieth-century American embraced another story: the recovery narrative."¹⁵ These narratives created a new way of perceiving ecologically destroyed places corrupted by pollution and the tolls of technological advance. Recovery narratives surpassed the counter-narrative as a progressive response to second creation. Closely attached to the consensus space of the national myth, these narratives proposed stories of how ecologically destroyed places could be rejuvenated by conservation and proper use of the land.¹⁶ This is how stories of second creation were able to survive throughout the 20th century, largely uninterrupted by counter-narratives.

Essentially, Nye argues that that the never ending discourse of the imaginary frontier

in American history – and the consensus space that supported it – has created a sense of inertia in the American mind. Nye argues that despite the fragmentation of the myth of second creation in the early 20th century, technological foundation stories remain deeply wedged in the nostalgia of the American imagination. He writes that “even if the beliefs implicit in the stories have become intellectually indefensible, Americans remain loath to abandon the vision of second creation.”¹⁷ This is how Nye suggests that American culture has been arrested by the consensus of second creation stories. The cyclical tendency of rejecting stories of second creation with counter-narratives speaks to the way in which aspects of American historiography seem to be reinterpreted rather than discarded. This suggests that American culture has been unable to move forward as it constantly refers back to frontier narratives in explaining new phenomena.

Nye’s historiographical way of approaching American history through stories of second creation and counter-narratives is also applicable to the frontier narratives of popular politics today. For example, Nye’s critique of the cyclical nature of American ideology can be applied to 21st century frontier narratives such as James Cameron’s *Avatar*. Cameron’s film can be read as a counter-narrative to the story of American origins, stressing the injustices of a technology-driven expanse into Pandora. *Avatar*’s outright dismissal of technology, exemplified by the marginalization of Grace and her team of scientists, is a clear indication of how Cameron’s film is a counter-narrative to technological progress. Nye writes that “whereas second-creation stories treat the land as empty space ... the counter-narratives are told from the view point of the indigenous community and/or emphasize the ecological effects of technological change.”¹⁸ In *Avatar*, the Colonel, his war-machine, and the company in search of Unobtainium represents the Left’s view of contemporary foreign policy and the historical process of American expansion into the West. This is countered by a narrative that reveals the social injustice, marginalization of natives and environmental destruction in the wake of second-creation.

Because *Avatar* can be seen as a counter-narrative, it is directly attached to a story of second creation. Nye writes that “the technological creation story has by no means disappeared. On television, pioneers still enter the empty space of the American West.”¹⁹ According to Nye, this is also related to the ways in which Americans perceive outer space, today perhaps the ultimate frontier for America and humanity. Nye argues that ever since the American space program of the 1960s, outer space has become a new frontier in the American mind. Stories of second creation have quickly been fused with the exploration of outer space,

promoting the colonizing the moon and worlds beyond.²⁰ The ways in which outer space and space exploration is being described as a new frontier for American society can best be analyzed by taking a closer look at a recent publication by Astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, titled *Space Chronicles: Facing the Ultimate Frontier*.

5.3 Space Politics²¹

Neil deGrasse Tyson is an astrophysicist with a Distinguished Public Service Medal from NASA for his contributions to the American space program. Politically, he stands as a popular figure on the Left. In recent years, Tyson has made numerous media appearances, participating in debates concerning philosophy, religion, politics, and, above all, space exploration. Tyson was mentored by Carl Sagan in his early education, a famous astrophysicist and cosmologist in the 1980s. Neil deGrasse Tyson's latest publication investigates the ways in which the exploration of "the space frontier"²² has had a cultural impact on American society. However, Tyson also argues that certain socio-political factors have dominated the American exploration of space, and that the consensus in American society surrounding Kennedy's space program and the first moon landing is today a thing of the past. Tyson's latest publication is, perhaps, one of the most recent examples of the frontier-mentality of the American mind. It is also the last example in this thesis of how the concept of the frontier has come to permeate ideas about the future in 21st century America.

For Neil deGrasse Tyson, space and space exploration represents a frontier space, fully capable of providing 21st century America with what could be called a "frontier process." Tyson's promotion of the space-frontier mirrors the way in which Carl Sagan heralded space as the ultimate place for technological innovation, discovery and cultural progress for American society in the 1980s. In his thirteen-part television series *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*, Sagan famously stated that:

we're the kind of species that needs a frontier – for fundamental biological reasons. Every time humanity stretches itself and turns a new corner, it receives a jolt of productive vitality that can carry it for centuries. There is a new world next door. And we know how to get there.²³

Tyson's way of approaching the exploration of outer space as a kind of a "frontier" creates a distinct set of resemblances to the technological foundation stories in Nye's text. Space

exploration is, much like the stories of second creation, fundamentally based on technological innovation and ingenuity in approaching “new worlds.” The American space program has discarded old aspirations and technologies throughout its existence, much like technological foundation stories.

In promoting the exploration of outer space, Tyson suggest a revival of the “Sputnik moment” of the Kennedy administration in the 1960s. In doing so, Tyson wants to recapture the boldness and enthusiasm that he claims “set the highest of bars for America’s vision and leadership in the twentieth century.”²⁴ In many ways, Tyson argues that the “frontier process” of space exploration can be once again be attained by such a venture. Beginning in the 1960s, American society as a whole was heavily influenced by NASA’s aspirations in low Earth orbit. Indeed, the investment in technology needed to reach the moon generated an enormous upsurge in technological innovation across other aspects of society. Therefore, Tyson argues that by accessing the next frontier – that of outer space, “the nation and the world thrive on NASA’s regional innovations, which have transformed how we live.”²⁵ Tyson’s frontier narrative also presents outer space as a “mirror of America’s history that permitted one to gaze backward from the present to the origins of the frontier experience.”²⁶ By using “America” and “Earth” interchangeably, this is the core of Tyson’s argument. He writes that “we should explore Pluto and its family of icy bodies in the outer solar system, because they hold clues to our planetary origins.”²⁷

Tyson’s text explains how the American space program is now at a watershed moment. Today, NASA is undergoing budget cuts, effectively ending many of its operations in low Earth orbit. The next step could, and should – according to Tyson, be to invest resources in the exploration of outer space. Tyson suggests that current space program should aim for outer space as opposed to the “old frontiers” of the 20th century:

When I think of tomorrow’s space exploration, I don’t think of low Earth orbit – altitudes less that about two thousand kilometres. In the 1960s that was a frontier. But now low Earth orbit is routine. It can still be dangerous, but it isn’t a space frontier. Take me somewhere new.²⁸

This is how Nye’s concept of narratives based on technological nostalgia is also applicable to Tyson’s text. Tyson writes “in the 1960s, discoveries in space were something that people looked forward to. Today many people – including me – are looking back at them.”²⁹ Tyson laments how the technological aspirations of the 1960s are yet to be replaced by a new venture into new space-frontiers.

In suggesting ways to rekindle a new “Sputnik moment,” Tyson analyzes the

sociopolitical situation that enabled the space exploration of the 1960s. *Space Chronicles* is introduced by explaining how space exploration lacks a sense of political consensus in America today. Tyson writes that “on this landscape [of different ideologies in America] we find intractably diverse political views, with no obvious hope of consensus or even convergence.”³⁰ Tyson notes that “until recently, space exploration stood above party politics. NASA was more than bipartisan; it was nonpartisan.”³¹ Tyson argues that this was largely due to the Cold War and the space race with the Soviet Union. Because the creation and maintenance of the American space program was largely a product of the Cold War, space exploration became a tool in a political conflict, enabling NASA to grow and come to fruition.

Tyson argues that an exploration of outer space is a financial and ideological investment that presupposes a strong national commitment and unity. Those in favor of NASA must therefore overcome the opponents of space exploration. The battle for the funding of NASA can be read through the concept of second creation and counter-narratives. Tyson notes that “expensive projects are vulnerable because they take a long time and must be sustained across changeovers in political leadership as well as through downturns in the economy.”³² Because space exploration is a “hypothetical” second creation story, its counter-narratives are also based on theory. *Space Chronicles* presents the opposition towards NASA and the venture into outer space by highlighting the required financial investments, fatal accidents throughout history and astrophysical limitations. This is how Tyson reflects the metapolitical sense of limits held by the Left. These appear as politically pointed counter-narratives, specifically addressing the downsides to the American space program. Tyson attempts to promote consensus around the American space program by revealing and counter-arguing the most prevalent counter-narratives to NASA.

Tyson analyzes the exploration of outer space through a frontier narrative that resonates with technological, cultural, and political aspects of American society. His book can therefore be read through both Nye’s historiographical concept of second creation and Ray’s analysis of Hollywood frontier narratives. *Space Chronicles: Facing the Ultimate Frontier* is an example of a 21st century technological creation story that reaches for a sense of reconciliation between a second creation story and its counter-narrative. In a rhetorical language that strongly resembles the dynamics of the original frontier myth, Tyson argues that the counter-narratives opposing the American space program somehow can be redeemed through second creation stories. This becomes clear as Tyson recounts a meeting with

representatives of a European space program negotiating the use of American space equipment. According to Tyson, the overall premise of this meeting was based on a sense of limits:

Aerospace is a frontier of our technological prowess. If you're truly on the frontier, you don't sit at a table negotiating usage rights. You're so far ahead of everybody, you're not even worried about what they want. You just give it to them. That's the posture Americans had for most of the twentieth century.³³

This is how Tyson expresses a deep sense of nostalgia towards the mythic consensus space of the American imagination in the past. Therefore, the idea of negotiating space exploration "as if it were soybeans"³⁴ suggests that the space-frontier is addressed through a rhetoric based on limits, which, in turn, becomes a counter-narrative to his technological foundation story.

As is visible from his rhetoric surrounding this encounter, Tyson argues that the counter-narratives of space exploration both respond to and derive from the narrative of second creation. This is how the idea of outer space as a frontier is able to survive a sense of limits. According to Tyson, the frontier process of outer space exploration, (which would lead to an immense boost to the financial and technological sectors of the United States) would negate the counter-narratives to the American space program altogether.

5.4 Conclusion

Neil deGrasse Tyson's *Space Chronicles* is a most recent example of how the American mind is still closely attached to the concept of the frontier. Much like the political rhetoric on both sides of the spectrum of popular politics in 21st century America, the underlying premise in Tyson's book is centered on nostalgia for the American consensus space. David Nye's ability to recognize the cyclical tendency in America to create, deconstruct and reconstitute the frontier myth time and again makes *America as Second Creation* a highly valuable text in understanding concept of the frontier in the American mind today. Much like Ray's text, Nye's work provides a keen insight into the sense of opposition and reconciliation found in American society after the fragmentation of the national myth. The frontier narratives crafted in the consensus space of the national myth which were popularized by Hollywood are still visible in American society, kept alive by a sense of contradiction and undying sense of nostalgia. As exemplified by Tyson's latest publication, not even ideas about the exploration of outer space have been able to escape the concept of the frontier.

Notes, Chapter 5

- ¹ Adapted from David Nye, *America as Second Creation* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004).
- ² Nye, 1.
- ³ Nye, 11.
- ⁴ Nye, 22.
- ⁵ Steinberg, 60.
- ⁶ Nye, 15.
- ⁷ Nye, 71.
- ⁸ Nye, 117.
- ⁹ Nye, 41.
- ¹⁰ Nye, 287-288.
- ¹¹ George Basalla, review of *America as Second Creation*, by David Nye, *Winterthur Portfolio* Vol. 39, No. 2/3, Summer/Autumn (2004). <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/433200>> (12 February 2011).
- ¹² Nye, 24.
- ¹³ Nye, 18.
- ¹⁴ Nye, 19.
- ¹⁵ Nye, 294.
- ¹⁶ Nye, 294.
- ¹⁷ Nye, 292.
- ¹⁸ Nye, 15.
- ¹⁹ Nye, 288.
- ²⁰ Nye, 288.
- ²¹ Neil deGrasse Tyson, *Space Chronicles: Facing the Ultimate Frontier* (New York: Norton, 2012), 3.
- ²² Tyson, 5.
- ²³ Sagan, *Cosmos*.
- ²⁴ Tyson, 12.
- ²⁵ Tyson, 9.
- ²⁶ Jacobs, 7.
- ²⁷ Tyson, 201.
- ²⁸ Tyson, 71.
- ²⁹ Tyson, 102.
- ³⁰ Tyson, 4.
- ³¹ Tyson, 4.
- ³² Tyson, 200.
- ³³ Tyson, 208.
- ³⁴ Tyson, 208.

6 Conclusion

Much like a Hollywood frontier narrative, this thesis has now reached full circle. We began by locating Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis in American historiography. We then looked at the formation of the national myth and how preconceived ideas about the American West merged with the Turner Thesis, forming the all-pervasive frontier myth in American society. We then analyzed the formal and thematic relationship between Hollywood films and the national myth. We saw how Hollywood responded to the fragmentation of the consensus of the national myth in American society in the 1960s and 1970s, and how film-makers were forced to disconnect the thematic elements of their cinema from the myth of the frontier. Through Left and Right cycle films, Hollywood film-makers were able to promote the politics of the Left and the Right by employing post-mythic frontier narratives, featuring retrofitted versions of the Western heroes of Classic Hollywood. Through these films, the *politics* of the frontier became the thematic paradigm of new Hollywood productions. This revealed how Hollywood film-makers were able to retain frontier narratives in their films, only now retrofitted in responding to a post-mythic and post-consensus era in American society. This is how Hollywood frontier-narratives survived the transition from Classic Hollywood to Left and Right cycle films. The main motivation behind this thesis has revealed how Hollywood frontier narratives have remained intact through yet another transition; from the flickering screens of the American cinema to the rhetorical language of American popular politics. Therefore, the frontier is once again a pervasive concept in the American mind.

A key observation in this thesis has been how Hollywood's post-mythic frontier narratives embody a sense of contradiction and nostalgia that responds to the American mind, and how these contradictions are still present in 21st century America. Today, the frontier narratives of Hollywood are being employed by political commentators in approaching fundamental issues in history, politics, economy and culture. Thus, we have reached a point where American society is once again united in its celebration of frontier narratives. This thesis has relied on a reading of Robert Ray's *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema* in analyzing contemporary representations of Hollywood narratives. By reading examples of contemporary films, political propaganda, historiography and ideas of outer space exploration through Ray's text, this thesis has revealed how the concept of the frontier still is being employed in explaining and promoting ideas in America, ultimately dictating the development

of the sociopolitical discourse in the United States.

Paradoxically, Hollywood's Left and Right cycle films were able to politicize the frontier myth – in itself a highly apolitical concept, by reading political positions in American society through particular responses to the closing of the imaginary frontier. Not only did Left and Right cycle films mirror the ways in which political commentators read the political divide in America through the prism of the American frontier, Hollywood also employed its ideological power over the American mind to assert the authenticity of its frontier narratives.

Those who promote political positions in America today are keenly aware of the ways in which the formal and thematic aspects of Hollywood entertainment must coincide with one's political platform in order to be successful. James Cameron's *Avatar* and Jeffrey Kuhner's *The Last Conservative, Pat Buchanan* are examples of political texts whose rhetoric has been carefully constructed through the frontier narratives visible in Left and Right cycle Hollywood films. As political commentators of the 21st century employ frontier narratives in promoting their politics, they rely on firmly established preconceptions about the frontier. The popularity of their message rests on how Hollywood films have, for decades, validated the notion of perceiving political issues in America through the prism of imaginary frontiers.

The ways in which the formal and thematic aspects of the film industry in America have able to assert themselves in other arenas of society (such as politics) suggests an immense influence on the discourse of ideas in America by Hollywood. This thesis has relied on the scholarly work of Neal Gabler in analyzing the ways in which American life at the turn of the century has become inseparable from entertainment and fiction. Gabler argues that today, the success and failure of politics relies upon criteria of entertainment-value. He writes that “the deliberate application of the techniques of theater to politics, religion, education, literature, commerce, warfare, crime, *everything*, has converted them into branches of show business.”¹ This speaks to the ways in which Hollywood frontier narratives have come to dictate the development of ideas of the American mind. This thesis has revealed how the American imagination is yet to be liberated from the ideological inertia of having a century-old concept dictate the discourse of past, present and future issues in American society. Neil deGrasse Tyson's latest publication, *Space Chronicles: Facing the Ultimate Frontier* is an example of how the very latest ideas concerning technological innovation and the exploration of outer space are still trapped within the confines of a romantic, agrarian myth that began in the early 19th century.

Because this thesis has approached a broad topic, namely the relationship between

myth and contemporary American society, there are many issues that have been left untouched. For instance, future research on the ways in which new patterns of mythic reconciliation might be found in American society would illuminate the current state of the national myth in American society today. As this thesis suggests, the strong sense of nostalgia toward traditional frontier life in the American imagination has transcended the political differences between the Left and the Right. If political consensus would be reached, then a possibility for mythic reconciliation would indeed be possible. Alternatively, by reading myth through a structuralist / post structuralist theory, one might conceptualize myth as something that responds to a Hollywood discourse. The frontier myth could then be read as a Hollywood creation, perceiving how Hollywood films project an “American mind” upon their audience rather than being bound by historical and social developments in society.

Alternatively, an analysis could be made of the possibilities of escaping the concept of the frontier altogether, complementing the ways in which this thesis has analyzed the ways in which contemporary American society is permeated by frontier narratives. David Nye’s historiographical analysis of second creation stories and counter-narratives provides a valuable insight into the ways in which the concept of the frontier has been able to permeate American society well after the fragmentation of the national myth. Nye’s critique of the consensus space of the national myth is especially interesting regarding his wish to abandon second creation stories. In suggesting ways for Americans to escape the cyclical ways in which frontier narratives are employed to account for the American past, present and future, Nye concludes *America as Second Creation* by critiquing the prevalence of frontier narratives in the American mind:

A multi-cultural America could move beyond stories of entitlement to stories of partnership. A people that recognizes environmental limits and co-dependency could imagine narratives based on stewardship. ... Such changes will only become acceptable choices, however, to the extent that Americans embrace new stories that move beyond second creation.²

Indeed, according to Nye, by discarding the constant reassertion of frontier narratives in the perception of the American past and present, American society will gain the possibility of understanding political, environmental and social issues in new and more profound ways.

Nye is but one of many scholars who recognize the problems emanating from the power of the national myth over American history. Many prominent historians agree that the national myth must be dismissed, and its power over the American mind must be revealed. For instance, Richard Slotkin’s *Regeneration Through Violence* is introduced by the

following statement; “A people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them, through the world around that people may change and demand changes in their psychology, their world view, their ethics, and their institutions.”³ By abandoning the prospect of the frontier myth rather than continuously choosing to live by it, the discourse in American society might release itself from the asphyxiating trope of the frontier. New research should highlight how the 19th century notion that “Jeffersonian democracy was feasible only in a society possessing a boundless extent of fertile and occupied land”⁴ could be transcended by avoiding the political tropes of an open-frontier mentality versus a recognition of limits.

According to political geographer John A. Agnew, “even as doubt about the old ethos spreads the rhetoric of techno-capitalism is now combining with that of American exceptionalism to suggest new frontiers that lie in cyberspace rather than in geographical space.”⁵ As this chapter has exemplified through Nye and Tyson’s work, the “next frontiers” of the American mind are still fundamentally based on technological progress. As illuminated by Nye, stories of second creation were continuously discarded and replaced by innovations in agrarian technology. Similarly, access to the frontiers of outer space depends on an immense development in the scientific areas necessary to propel man to the edges of the universe. The new virtual spaces and imaginary frontiers of Hollywood too seem most successful when animated by the latest technological advances in 3D rendering. Finance and economy, often heralded as “new frontiers” in America, are also bound on technological innovation. Today, companies in America produce fibre-optic cables in America “specifically engineered for the financial sector,”⁶ claiming a dedicated internet-link between stock exchanges can slice milliseconds off online transactions, increasing the profitability of trading stocks for those willing to make the investment.

Because the imaginary frontiers in contemporary American today are at the mercy of technological progress, they seem to contradict one of the most basic premises of the “American character.” The sense of American individualism, as explained in the previous chapters of this thesis, is one the most fundamental aspects of traditional American life. The frontier myth and the many imaginary frontiers in contemporary American society are founded on the idea of the individualistic frontiersman overcoming adversity by his own means. This speaks to the sense of “limitlessness” that has permeated the American mind through its experience with the American West. However, this most basic element of the American character seems to be contradicted by the way new American frontiers require an increased reliance on technology. The first second creation story described in Nye’s text is

concerned with the American Axe and its use by early frontiersmen. The simplicity of the tool coincided with the “democratic” process of accessing the American West as explained by Turner. The simplicity and sturdiness of the axe reflected the simplicity and sturdiness of life on the American frontier. However, accessing the outer rims of Jupiter or Alpha Centauri, which is, according to Tyson, the next American frontier, will require technology, once ready, that probably will outmatch the average middle class income.

Nye describes how the sense of American individualism dwindled between each technological innovation in the American West:

Starting with the clearing made by an axe and ending with the irrigated fields in the arid West, the centrality of the individual was eroding as the power and complexity of technological systems increased. ... Yet, in curious defiance of logic, the American sense of individualism seemed to expand as its possibility diminished.⁷

This is why the sense of individualism in the American mind cannot rest on imaginary frontiers bound to technological progress. This would be, according to Nye, “an illusion of self-reliance.”⁸ If the imaginary frontiers of the Right are based on invalidating contradictions, and the counter-frontiers of the Left are exclusive to left-wing benevolence, then the American nation cannot access new frontiers as a united people. Alternatively, if the concept of the imaginary frontier is to be discarded altogether, the American mind is yet again without justification for its limitlessness. This is how the frontiers of the American mind today function.

Notes, Chapter 6

¹ Gabler, 5.

² Nye, 302.

³ Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 4-5.

⁴ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 208.

⁵ John A. Agnew and Joanne P. Sharp, "America, frontier nation: From abstract space to worldly place," in *American Space / American Place*, ed. John A. Agnew and Jonathan M. Smith (Edinburg, Edinburgh University P, 2002), 103.

⁶ "Solutions for stock markets" <<http://www.metroptic.com/produits-et-services-2/solutions-for-stock-markets.html>> (12 April 2012)

⁷ Nye, 267.

⁸ Nye, 267.

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Avatar (2009). Directed by James Cameron.

Bonnie and Clyde (1967). Directed by Arthur Penn.

Chinatown (1974). Directed by Roman Polanski.

Cool Hand Luke (1967). Directed by Stuart Rosenberg.

Dances With Wolves (1990). Directed by Kevin Costner.

Dirty Harry (1971). Directed by Don Siegel.

Easy Rider (1969). Directed by Dennis Hopper.

Frankenstein (1931). Directed by James Whale.

Full Metal Jacket (1987). Directed by Stanley Kubrick.

Golden Boy (1939). Directed by Rouben Mamoulian.

King Kong (1933). Directed by James Ashmore Creelman.

King Kong (1976). Directed by John Guillermin.

King Kong (2005). Directed by Peter Jackson.

Little Big Man (1970). Directed by Arthur Penn.

On The Waterfront (1954). Directed by Elia Kazan.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975). Directed by Milos Forman.

Pocahontas (1995). Directed by Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg.

Reagan (2011). Directed by Eugene Jarecki.

Stagecoach (1939). Directed by John Ford.

The New World (2005). Directed by Terrence Malick.

The Treasure of Sierra Madre (1948). Directed by John Huston.

Silent Running (1972). Directed by Douglas Trumbull.

Walking Tall (1973). Directed by Phil Karlson.