

THE RHETORIC OF THE AMERICAN WESTERN MYTH

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*Expanding upon the Social Value Model of Rushing and Frenzt, this essay argues that the fundamental values of the American Western myth exist in the paradoxical form of Individualism vs. Community. Four historical eras are discussed in terms of how the Western film rhetoric of each was patterned in response to threats to the myth. Early Westerns enacted a pattern of "dialectical emphasis" (of Community); classic Westerns, "dialectical reaffirmation"; sixties Westerns, "dialectical emphasis" (of Individualism). It is claimed that reaffirmation of the dialectical tension between the values best strengthens the archetype, and thus America's image of itself. In contrast, the current revival of Western rhetoric, as depicted in the political realm in the elections of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, and in the popular culture realm in *The Electric Horseman*, *Urban Cowboy*, and "Dallas," enacts a pattern of dialectical pseudo-synthesis, and thus is seriously subversive of the fundamental archetype.*

FUTURE historians of American popular culture may well label the 1980's "the era of the urban cowboy." Not only did John Travolta give up his disco duds and dances for fringed clothes and the Texas two-step in *Urban Cowboy*, but so did millions of "drugstore cowboys" in nightclubs from Cheyenne to New York City.¹ College students who once left country music to the "rednecks" not only bought Nashville and Texas-produced records, but they joined businessmen and women in wearing \$250 kangaroo and eelskin boots while learning "country swing" at neighborhood recreation centers.² Western clothing stores had record years in sales.³ *Vogue Magazine* put out the *Cowboy Catalogue* to counsel readers on Western chic. And America elected a "cowboy President" by a landslide.

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¹See, for instance, Beth Goeddert, "Denver Area Nightspots Go 'Country,'" *Rocky Mountain News*, 8 Sep. 1980, p. 6.

²The country music business has been estimated at \$3-4 billion annually, as reported on ABC, "Nightline," 12 Oct. 1981. See also Goeddert: Cathie Foster, "Country Dancing Takes the Floor Once Again," *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 Jan. 1982, p. 18.

³Personal interview with owners of Teepee Western Store, Boulder, Colorado, August, 1980.

Anything "Texas" was suddenly "in." Willie Nelson became a millionaire and sang most of the national anthem at the Democratic National Convention prior to the 1980 Presidential election. A prime-time soap opera named "Dallas" repeatedly topped the Nielsens, inspiring spin-offs and imitations.⁴ Mattel presented Ken and Barbie with a horse named "Dallas." Magazine readers could "own a piece of Texas"—one square-inch for each \$9.98 paid to the Texas Inch Co. of Lufkin, Texas—and accompanied by a 14-Karat gold plated charm of Texas. Doctors reported a health affliction called "Urban Cowboy Syndrome," a malady that featured broken ribs, thumbs, arms, legs, and at least in one case, a broken neck leading to permanent paralysis. The cause was attributed to would-be rodeo riders falling off mechanical bulls modeled on the original at Gilley's Club in Pasadena, Texas, and popularized in the film *Urban Cowboy*.⁵

Even the casual observer could see that the perennial American Western

⁴See Harry F. Waters with Janet Huck, "Rich Man, Pitch Man," *Newsweek*, 9 Feb. 1981, pp. 94-95.

⁵"Mechanical-bull Rider Will Not Walk Again," *Boulder Daily Camera*, 17 Mar. 1981.

myth had re-emerged with great intensity.⁶ Expressions of the myth were not concentrated in one or two media but were pervasive in film, television, radio, recordings, paperback books, and toys—as well as in such “real-life” arenas as fashion, dance, and politics. The primary context for the modern-day Western heroes and villains centered ironically in the city rather than the country, a fact of significance in the later analysis.

Reactions from journalistic critics to the current Western rage included mild amusement, cynical parody, and attempts to explain the popularity of Willie Nelson, one of the myth's most charismatic heroes.⁷ For the critic interested in explaining the rhetorical significance of the re-emergence of the Western myth, however, two questions need to be examined. First, what are the values that constitute it? Second, how have the values that comprise the myth survived threats to their existence and vitality in American life?⁸ I will answer the first

⁶Definitions of “myth” are diverse. Rhetorically, the term refers to “a society's collectivity of persistent values, handed down from generation to generation, that help to make the world understandable, support the social order, and educate the society's young. Myths change slowly and are widely taught and believed. They are expressed in the dominant symbols and rituals of the culture” in story form; see Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas S. Frentz, “The Rhetoric of ‘Rocky’: A Social Value Model of Criticism,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 42 (1978), 67.

⁷Erma Bombeck, “At Wit's End: Cowboy Chic,” *Boulder Daily Camera*, 8 Oct. 1980, p. 24; John Ela, “Urban Cowboys Assume Fragile Identities,” *Rocky Mountain News*, 18 Sep. 1980, p. 90; Robert Palmer, “Nation Needs Its Cowboys: Why is Willie Nelson America's Favorite Balladeer?” *New York Times*, reprinted in *Boulder Daily Camera*, 11 Sep. 1981, p. 17; Jerry H. Gill, “Guilt, Grace, and Willie Nelson,” *The Christian Century*, 9 Sep. 1981, pp. 877-79.

⁸A perspective on the rhetorical relationship between film and societal values, as embodied in myth, was articulated in Rushing and Frentz, pp. 64-66. Expanded to include other media in addition to film, this position claims that media and societal values reciprocally influence one another; by projecting collective images of a culture, by serving as symptoms of cultural needs, and by symbolizing trends, dramatic media both reflect and create societal events. For a further explanation

question with an argument: that the Western myth is most usefully conceptualized in terms of a dialectical tension between “Individualism” and “Community.” To answer the second question, I will demonstrate that societal threats to the myth have in the past functioned rhetorically either to subvert it by emphasizing one of its values over the other or to reaffirm it in its original archetypal form. I will conclude that the current expression of the myth constitutes its most extreme subversion, and the result is a challenge to that part of our cultural identity which emanates from it.

VALUES OF THE CLASSIC WESTERN MYTH

The story of America's westward movement and settlement, in its various manifestations, is the most enduring and characteristic American myth. As Maynard puts it: “No figure has dominated American romantic folklore like the legendary cowboy. Daring, noble, ethical, romantic, he permeates our popular media to this very day. He personifies our national self-image—the conqueror of wilderness, savagery, and villainy.”⁹ Frederick Jackson Turner's famous “frontier thesis”—that American life and character were determined by an empty continent luring people westward—shaped the thinking of many well-known intellectuals and politicians.¹⁰ Indeed, according to Smith, this

tion of this rhetorical approach, see Bernard L. Brock and Robert L. Smith, “The Social Reality Approach,” in *Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth-Century Perspective* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980), pp. 142-44.

⁹Richard A. Maynard, *The American West on Film: Myth and Reality* (Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden Book Company, Inc., 1974), p. vi.

¹⁰Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *The Turner Thesis* (Boston: D. C. Heath and Co., 1956), pp. 1-18. See also Ronald H. Carpenter, “Frederick Jackson Turner and the Rhetorical Impact of the Frontier Thesis,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 63 (1977), 117-29.

thesis defines "the image of themselves which many—perhaps most—Americans of the present day cherish, an image that defines what Americans think of their past, and therefore what they propose to make of themselves in the future."¹¹

My purpose in this section is to interpret the Western myth in light of a rhetorical model of values designed for rhetorical criticism of popular mass media artifacts. The model assumes that the "collective consciousness" of a society is composed of basic values that exist in "a fragile pattern of dialectical opposition—a state of tension, real or potential conflict or change."¹² Whereas the model was originally used to analyze the dialectical opposition *between* two myths basic to the American Dream, moralism and materialism,¹³ it can be extended to incorporate the dialectical opposition of two values *within* a single myth, in this case, individualism and community.¹⁴

These values are in essence the points of opposition in the old frontier, "the meeting point between savagery and civilization."¹⁵ This "meeting point" of contradictions is symbolized in screen and novel Westerns most potently in the challenge faced by the archetypal hero. To cope with the harshness and savagery of the frontier environment, he must

above all be a rugged individualist. However, in order to settle and civilize the frontier, he must continually face the demands of the community for cooperation and conformity. The cattleman, one of the myth's most enduring heroes, was both a pioneer and a man of property.¹⁶ In almost all expressions of the myth, the Western hero must somehow deal with the paradox of being alone and in a community. If he does not manifest rugged individualism in all of his crucial actions, he cannot be a hero. Yet if he does not respond to the needs of a community, typically to be saved from outside or inside evil forces, he cannot meet the "goodness" requirements of a hero. It is this enduring situation that provides much of the poignancy, mystery, and perennial appeal of the Western myth.

This basic paradox is not only expressed through the heroic challenge in the Western, but in scenic images and supporting character types. Homans notes that although the typical Western takes place in a desolate, stark desert, "This desert effect is contradicted by the presence of a town."¹⁷ Within this town, observes Calder, "The readiest image of the Western paradox is the brothel next to the schoolhouse. While the brothel means the bawdy, rough-and-ready West of men who are never likely to settle down, the schoolhouse is the epitome of taming in action."¹⁸

The contradiction facing the hero is mirrored by splitting women into two personae—one for each aspect of the value opposition. The brothel or dance hall is inhabited by the "bad girl"; her counter-

¹¹Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 3-4.

¹²Rushing and Frenz, p. 67.

¹³Rushing and Frenz; Thomas S. Frenz and Janice Hocker Rushing, "The Rhetoric of 'Rocky': Part Two," *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 42 (1978), 231-40.

¹⁴It is probable that paradox is inherent in many, if not most myths and mythic heroes and heroines. To cite only a few examples: Carl Jung's model of the psyche, which gives rise to mythological figures, is based on the paired opposites of persona and shadow, anima and animus, etc. The Greed goddess Athena was fierce and warlike but also protector of civilized life and agriculture. In the Christ story, as in most religions, one must die to be reborn. And the yin and yang permeate Oriental philosophy and religion.

¹⁵Turner, p. 2.

¹⁶Jenni Calder, *There Must Be a Lone Ranger* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974), p. 75.

¹⁷Prier Homans, "Puritanism Revisited: An Analysis of the Contemporary Screen-Image Western," *Studies in Public Communication*, No. 3 (Chicago: Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, Summer 1961); reprinted in William Hammel, *The Popular Arts in America: A Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), pp. 99-100.

¹⁸Calder, p. 206.

part, the "good girl," is stereotypically the schoolmarm or the rancher's daughter. Homans points out that the "bad girl" is alone, unattached, and independent, whereas the "good girl," usually from the East (home of civilization, the height of community), is dependent on a male relative or fiancé for protection; she represents societal values associated with family and community.¹⁹ Rarely are those opposing qualities present in any one woman.

Interestingly, two other male character types represent the failure of the societally bred Easterner to succeed in the rugged West. The "derelict-professional," trained in Law, Medicine, Letters, or Ministry, succumbs to drink, gambling, sex, or violence when transplanted to the West. The "non-violent Easterner," often a businessman or Harvard graduate, simply cannot or will not defend himself against violence, and is usually humiliated or killed. Thus, the point is made, claims Homans, that "the traditional resources of society (healer, teacher, shepherd, counselor) cannot exist in an uncorrupted state under the pressures of western life."²⁰ These supporting characters function to emphasize the difficulties facing the hero in reconciling society life and independence.

Throughout the history of the Western myth, the tension between the demands of individualism and of community remains strong. Calder best summarizes this "basic paradox of the West":

On the one hand there is the instinct to preserve a heroic tradition that is aggressive, violent, and potentially anarchic. On the other there is the deliberate building up of solid community values, the relating of the developing territories of the West to the United States as a whole and the emphasis of those warm, homely qualities that

have for so long flourished side by side with the cult of the violent loner.²¹

This potent myth is able to express, then, the universal tendency of humans to both divide from and identify with one another, and to do so in a uniquely American manner.²²

RHETORIC OF PAST WESTERNS

Whenever two values within a myth exist in opposition to one another, as implied above, they manifest a state of tension, and thus the nature of their opposition is particularly vulnerable to change, given changing societal exigencies.²³ Exigencies can be societal conditions or institutions that threaten one or more aspects of the myth, or immediately preceding representations of the myth that invite further expression. Such change, as is posited in the Social Value Model, takes the form of a symbolic conflict, typically in politics or a dramatic medium such as film or television. The working out of this conflict constitutes a rhetorical statement which both reflects the current societal conditions and projects prescribed change for the future. A brief look at the history of the Western myth since the advent of the modern mass media reveals that, indeed, the fragile balance between the values of individualism and community has undergone change in several distinct patterns.²⁴ This section of the paper divides

¹⁹Calder, pp. 205-06. Calder also sees this dualism present in many other typically American works, such as Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel!* and Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street*; see p. 20.

²⁰Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 19-23.

²¹Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 1 (1968), 1-14. Although Bitzer uses the term "exigence" to indicate that which brings forth a rhetorical response, the response itself may then bring forth or reinforce an exigence. The use of the term "exigence" in this paper indicates a choice of focus for the present study and not a linear view of the relationship between rhetoric and the situation.

²²A "pattern" is generally noticed when many instances of symbolic conflict performing the same rhe-

¹⁹Homans, p. 102.

²⁰Homans, pp. 101-102.

the screen Western into three general historical eras, viewing each in terms of the patterns of symbolic conflict they represent in response to societal exigencies. Only in relation to its history can the current rhetoric of the Western myth be understood.

Early Westerns

Although the earliest screen Westerns often presented the basic elements of a lonely and rugged hero struggling to survive in a stark and desolate environment, in the 1920's Tom Mix and Buck Jones began to assimilate the hero into society. By the 1930's, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, the Lone Ranger, and Hopalong Cassidy had made him thoroughly acceptable to mainstream America. "Glossy and glorified," the cowboy hero through much of the 1940's fought almost totally on the side of Society, assisting its advance and improvement.²⁵ Calder describes the typical situation, repeated in countless "B" Western movies, comic books, and, later, television series:

Here was the range bum with the dirt and sweat well and truly rubbed off and in clothes that would not have survived many hours riding in desert or bush country. He has a loyal horse, and very often a loyal sidekick, in the case of the Lone Ranger a tame Indian. He rides into a tricky situation, strums his guitar with one leg hooked over the saddle horn (often involving parted lovers or small boys), and suitably brings to justice the mean villain, whose meanness is possibly indicated by the fact that he is cruel to his horse and doesn't shave.²⁶

These Westerns were consumed eagerly by American youth, and without

torical function occur within the same time period although one intensely popular and effective event could effect and reflect social change. There are, of course, isolated enigmatic occurrences that do not fit in with the dominant pattern of the times.

²⁵Calder, p. 179; Thomas H. Pauly, "What's Happened to the Western Movie?" *Western Humanities Review*, 28 (1974), 260-69; reprinted in Hammel, p. 119.

²⁶Calder, p. 179.

doubt helped to shape their visions of heroism.²⁷ Gene Autry's famous "Ten Commandments of the Cowboy," enthusiastically endorsed in the 1940's by the film industry, boys' clubs, parents' groups, and churches, demonstrated that the "Code of the West" had become a conformist credo:

1. A cowboy never takes unfair advantage--even of an enemy.
2. A cowboy never betrays a trust.
3. A cowboy always tells the truth.
4. A cowboy is kind to small children, to old folks and to animals.
5. A cowboy is free from racial and religious prejudices.
6. A cowboy is helpful and when anyone is in trouble he lends a hand.
7. A cowboy is a good worker.
8. A cowboy is clean about his person and in thought, word and deed.
9. A cowboy respects womanhood, his parents and the laws of his country.
10. A cowboy is a patriot.²⁸

Obviously, the rugged individualist "went thataway" and was replaced by the Eagle Scout as cowboy.

Some have explained the rise of the "B" Western as the result of Hollywood's need, following the invention of sound, for fast formulaic production and increasing slickness.²⁹ Doubtlessly, the development of the media played a part. It is telling, however, to consider the socio-political climate in America at this time. Certainly, this was not a particularly stable era politically. The Great Depression of 1929 undermined faith in the American government to handle the economics of an increasingly complex society. World War II sent millions of

²⁷Maynard, p. 62. Evidently, the emphasis upon society in these movies was picked up by later television series Westerns. See Richard M. Merliman, "Power and Community in Television," *The Journal of Popular Culture*, II (1968), 63-80.

²⁸F. Maurice Speed, ed., *Western Film Annual*, 1955, pp. 25-26.

²⁹George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, *The Western: From Silents to the Seventies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973), p. 198.

men away from home to fight, and political corruption in the highest offices made the headlines. Uprooted and destitute, many Americans needed the security of hanging on to communal values. And these values must have seemed more clearly defined in an age before cities introduced the problems attending complex communalism.

Along with FDR's "New Deal," then, the screen Western emphasized the virtues of helping the less fortunate of society. This pattern of change can be termed *dialectical emphasis* for it favors one element of the mythic paradox over the other. Individualism became indistinguishable from acting as society's helper, and thus, in terms of the myth, was suppressed as a heroic quality. In the traditional Western story, being individualistic means being detached and independent from society, even if one is helping it. With no truly difficult challenge to face in environment or enemy, the potentially anarchic hero is tamed, and the tension that results from the inherent contradiction between individualism and communalism is rendered dormant.

Rhetorically, emphasizing one of the opposites in a mythic paradox to the virtual exclusion of the other is subversive of the underlying archetype.³⁰ Although dialectical emphasis does not necessarily destroy the myth's popularity, as it certainly did not in this case, it undermines the myth's explanatory potential, not only by underplaying the importance of one of the elements, but also by obscuring the tension between opposites that is basic to its archetypal appeal. Thus, to the extent that cultural identity is dependent on the myth, this, too, is distorted. A hero is not of truly

mythic proportions unless his struggle is difficult and his success is wrought from sacrifice.³¹

Classic Westerns—Dialectical Reaffirmation

"The forties attempt to make the cowboy over in its own image," claims Calder, "could have been disastrous for the Western myth."³² However, the fifties saw a gradual growth in complexity in the Western, such that today they are known by most critics as the era of the "classic Western." A balance between individualism and community was restored by such directors as John Ford, Howard Hawks, Anthony Mann, Fritz Lang, and Arthur Penn, and such "serious" films as *The Left-Handed Gun* (1948), *Red River* (1948), and *Rio Bravo* (1959).³³ In particular, Westerns such as *The Gunfighter* (1950), *High Noon* (1952), and *Shane* (1953), widened the heroic theme by requiring the hero, more mysterious this time (owing to his detachment from the community), to make a sacrifice in saving the town or community of homesteaders from an equally mysterious villain.

As is generally true of archetypal heroes, the hero of the classic Western originated from beyond the town. Even if he was the town marshal, he was not thoroughly identified with the townspeople. He practiced an ascetic lifestyle, refused to give in to temptations associated with community (drinking, gambling, sex, avarice), and jolted himself out of his normal state of "contrived indolence" only when the villain threat-

³¹See Northrup Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 186.

³²Calder, p. 179.

³³Calder thinks that John Ford, in particular, was successful in preserving the paradox: "Ford is one of the few directors who has been able to preserve this paradox and make it work. His films tend to balance the essential actions of the independent hero and the solid drive of the community." pp. 188-89.

³⁰The view of rhetorical functions used in this analysis is taken from Walter R. Fisher, "A Motive View of Communication," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 56 (1970), 131-39. The motive of "subversion" undermines the life of an image.

ened the town.³⁴ Avoiding violence for as long as possible, he eventually deduced that "a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do," and rid the town of its evil, demonstrating masculine courage, consummate gunmanship, and gentlemanly grace in the act.

Having saved the society (thus indicating its inherent worth), the hero then rode on, or if he stayed, refused the laurel wreaths offered to him by the citizens.³⁵ Shane did not stick around to share in the victory. Tom Dumson (John Wayne) in *Red River* gave up women and community for cows.³⁶ In particular, the hero could not maintain his heroic qualities if he settled down with a woman. Because the woman was so often depicted as the symbol of civilization, her stabilizing influence was destructive to his image. Homans observes: "To get the good girl . . . our hero would have to become like those despicable easterners; to get the bad girl, he would have to emulate the evil one. In such a dilemma a ride into the sunset is not such a bad solution after all."³⁷

This classic era has been attributed to several causes, including artistic growth in the film industry. Fenin and Everson, for example, argue that the success of vast quantities of "B" Westerns, subsequently dumped on television, led to a gradual depiction of the West in more "realistic" terms on television.³⁸ Homans sees the classic Western as a "puritan morality tale" corresponding to the resurgence of the religious revivalism

³⁴Homans, pp. 103-06.

³⁵Homans, p. 106.

³⁶Calder, p. 2. Pauly sees John Wayne as particularly adept at balancing the paradox in all his roles: "Whether he happened to be a marshal or a belligerent citizen, he was always a loner who operated beyond all established standards of legal justice and genteel propriety, and, as such, he, more than anyone in the movie, realized the inherent limitations of society. Yet, for all this dramatic insistence on individualism, he always proved in the end to be unselfish, a crusader, a man of mission." p. 119.

³⁷Homans, p. 109.

³⁸Fenin and Everson, p. 13.

championed by Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale in the 1950's.³⁹ Hankins correlates the classic Western with Eisenhower's Presidential image: "It was an era when personal sacrifice to a cause was applauded, and a mortal could still rise to individual greatness, even hero status, through determination and hard work. Although society was portrayed as weak, strong stewardship was at hand to lead the flock."⁴⁰

These explanations are indeed plausible. The classic era, however, can also be related to the state of rugged individualism and community in America during the 1950's. "The Organization Man" reached his zenith in this decade.⁴¹ America's burgeoning image of itself as a corporate society threatened the western archetype severely. In reality, the "rugged" individual wore a grey flannel suit rather than buckskins, toted a briefcase rather than six-guns, and achieved success by driving himself to a heart attack rather than his cattle to the market. This was not a particularly romantic or appealing image for the would-be hero. The "community," traditional symbol of warm and homely civilized values, was transformed from a dusty frontier town into the corporation situated in the desert of the city. Even worse, the *tension* between the two perennial elements was fading. One could become an individual (a "success") by totally integrating oneself into the corporation. The "rags-to-riches" path was still available, according to the American Dream, but there were few who could actually accomplish that without sacrificing their identities to the organization.

This time, the rhetorical response

³⁹Homans, pp. 110-11.

⁴⁰Sara Russell Hankins, "Archetypal Alloy: Reagan's Rhetorical Image," book on the contemporary hero, as yet untitled. (Bowling Green, Ohio: The Popular Press, 1983)

⁴¹William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (Gardner City, New York: Doubleday, 1956)

occurred in a pattern of *dialectical reaffirmation*; that is, both aspects of the paradox were clarified and strengthened, and the tension between the two was restated. A man could truly be a romantic hero, the classical Western implied, if he knew what he was and what he had to do independent of others. And the community was once again a small town, misguided, selfish, or incompetent, perhaps, but at least comprehensible. Most important, the classic Western did not easily *resolve* the strain between the hero and his culture; his task remained deadly and his rewards only self-realization. As Calder puts it, "The myth absorbs the inevitable contradictions without reconciling them."⁴² Rhetorically, then, a pattern of dialectical reaffirmation strengthens the mythic archetype by revitalizing both aspects of the paradox, as well as the inevitable tension between them.⁴³ And to the extent that the underlying archetype is strengthened, so is America's image of itself as regards its Western heritage.

Sixties Westerns—Dialectical Emphasis (Individualism)

Reflecting on recent Westerns, Paul Newman told *Newsweek* in 1970, "The old heroes used to protect society from its enemies. Now it's society that's the enemy."⁴⁴ Indeed, in the decade of the sixties such movies as *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1967), *The Wild Bunch*

(1969), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Two Mules for Sister Sara* (1970), and many others not only located their protagonists away from civilization, but also painted them as hostile towards it. In fact, the Wild Bunch, Butch Cassidy, and the Sundance Kid could commit outrageous crimes against society and get away with their audiences' hearts as well as the banks' money because the society was portrayed as faceless, bureaucratic, and oppressive, something "more worth fighting than fighting for."⁴⁵ Significantly, along with the outlaw-as-hero phenomenon, a long list of Indian-as-hero movies were produced—*A Man Called Horse* (1970), *Little Big Man* (1970), *Valdez is Coming* (1971), *Billy Jack* (1971)—reversing the Indians' long relegation to enemy status.

Cultural exigencies of this anti-social period of the Western's history are relatively obvious. The late sixties, as everyone knows, was one of the most politically volatile eras in American history. Pauly points out that the old story of the West evoked unfavorable associations with the violence of Vietnam and the Chicago Democratic National Convention. The new Western geared itself to a young audience—people suspicious of the law-and-order position, and much more willing to sympathize with an outlaw than a sheriff.⁴⁶ The Westerner conformed to the creed of the Counter-Culture to "do your own thing." Perhaps the greater film exposure to the Indian lifestyle during this period, as well as the tendency to act it out in real life, owed partially to the fact that no one knew of any dope-smoking cowboys.

The predominant rhetorical function of sixties Westerns was evidently once

⁴²Calder, p. 20. Robert Warshaw also sees in the classic Western an unresolved paradox of a slightly different, but related type. Although the Westerner is almost always in the business of saving society, he argues, "at his best he exhibits a moral ambiguity which darkens his image and saves him from absurdity; this ambiguity arises from the fact that, whatever his justification, he is a killer of men." See Robert Warshaw, "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner," in *The Immediate Experience* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 142.

⁴³According to Fisher, the motive of reaffirmation "revitalizes the life of an image," p. 132.

⁴⁴"The New Movies," *Newsweek*, 12 July 1970, as quoted in Calder, p. 215.

⁴⁵Pauly, p. 120. See also Calder, pp. 86, 111, 140, 166-87, 192. *Bonnie and Clyde* (1968), although literally in the gangster genre, follows a similar pattern, and thus performs the same rhetorical function.

⁴⁶Pauly, pp. 117-20.

again *dialectical emphasis*; this time, however, individualistic values were heavily favored over communal ones. In fact, society had to be escaped or fought against in order for a person to maintain any sense of individuality. (If this period had directly succeeded the "B" Westerns, it would have enacted a pattern of *dialectical transformation*—an inversion from one prevailing set of values to another.) The best of the sixties Westerns are generally more admired critically than the early "B" Westerns. Rhetorically, however, they were just as subversive of the mythic archetype. Spatially and axiologically, these Westerns located the hero so far from civilized society that the tension between them, so evident in the classic Western, was stretched to the breaking point. The implied solution to the dilemma of individual vs. society was to reject society. But the myth is not whole when the audience is induced to identify with only one of its opposing values. Indeed, American society was denigrated in general during this period in favor of "dropping out." "Counter-Culture" rhetoric did wonders for individualism but at the expense of any profound guidance concerning its inherent relationship to communalism.

The tendency of many Westerns in the late sixties and early seventies toward humor and farce implies a rhetoric even more subversive than dialectical emphasis. John Wayne only tended toward self-parody in *True Grit* (1970), but in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, contends Pauly, the protagonists "were impelled into foolhardy crimes with no apparent motive beyond that of demonstrating their dauntless sense of humor. What pleasure and satisfaction these various adventurers managed to gain in the course of their compulsive wanderings was [sic] soon shattered by the violence they had made their element."⁴⁷ If

one sees in this the implied destruction of the individual as well as the society they were fighting against, then perhaps the rhetorical function should be interpreted as nihilistic.⁴⁸ Kael noted the tendency toward "spoofing" in her review of *Cat Ballou* (1965):

Unlike satire, spoofing has no serious objectives: it doesn't attack anything that anyone could take seriously; it has no cleansing power. It's just a technique of ingratiation: the spoof apologizes for its existence, assures us that it's harmless, that it isn't aiming for beauty or expressiveness or meaning or even relevance.⁴⁹

To the contrary, the relevance of spoofing during this period is that it gradually gathered steam, culminating in 1974 in the full-fledged satire of *Blazing Saddles*, recognized for awhile as the final statement of the meaninglessness of the Western myth.⁵⁰

RHETORIC OF CONTEMPORARY WESTERNS

To explore the rhetorical functions of today's Western revival in terms of symbolic conflict, it is necessary to understand the complex of cultural exigencies surrounding the myth. These exigencies combine to pose a serious threat to the Western archetype.

"The power of a myth that has its origins in the past increases as the possibilities for recreating the myth diminish," claims Calder.⁵¹ The most obvious fact confronting those curious about today's Western phenomenon is that America has no more frontier. We re-echo a myth of infinite resources even as we realize that our resources are finite. We immerse ourselves in a myth of

⁴⁷Fisher discusses this as a possible fifth motive (personal conversation).

⁴⁸Pauline Kael, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), p. 28.

⁴⁹Pauly, p. 122.

⁵⁰Calder, p. 98. She also claims that, because the West was believed to be crowded by the Oklahoma land rush of 1889, it became vital psychologically to preserve the myth.

⁴⁷ Pauly, p. 117.

expansion just as most of our large cities are choosing to revitalize their inner cores, cognizant of the monster that unchecked suburban expansion has become. Americans are finally aware now that the West can no longer serve as a "safety valve" for the overpopulation, poverty, and unemployment of the East.⁵²

Furthermore, the women's liberation movement of the 1960's and 1970's has dealt a considerable blow to the Western myth. The movement usurps the "place" of men and women, so unambiguously defined in the Western. Both the "good girl" and the "bad girl" have had relatively unchanging roles in relationship to the hero and few true Western heroines exist.⁵³ The frontier hero protects women but does not become too intimately involved with them, lest he lose his individuality. With their constant questioning and redefining of sex roles, then, and their attempts to rewrite American history to include unsung heroines, women in the movement can hardly embrace the traditional Western myth.

Another crucial threat to the myth is that neither element of the paradox is currently perceived as healthy by the American people. The ideal of community has in this century changed so radically that "main street America" is hardly recognizable in the freeways of

the city. When community is strong in the Western, neighbors help each other out when they are in trouble, the rudiments of government are respected, and a feeling of united purpose—that of nation-building—is fostered. The predominant political feeling in the country now is that the federal government has taken over the good-neighbor role that small townspeople once played and that Big Brother has become a mutant.⁵⁴ By electing Ronald Reagan president, Americans indicated their frustration with "The New Deal," "The New Frontier," and "The Great Society"—all programs based on assumptions of unlimited resources and ideals of communalism.

Rugged individualism currently fares no better. Inflation, high interest rates, and high unemployment make it increasingly hard to believe in the self-made man; the road from rags to riches is interminable when the pace is two steps forward, three steps backward. When man does succeed, his arena is even more likely than in the fifties to be the corporation rather than the range. And women, somewhat ironically, are urged to express their "individuality" by wearing grey flannel suits for their trek up the corporate ladder.

As we have seen, the myth of the West has withstood onslaughts against both community and individualism before. Past rhetorical responses, regardless of their pattern, have always returned to the hero of the open range, even if only to show that his time had passed, as in *Lonely Are the Brave* (1962), *Ride the High Country* (1962), and *Hud* (1962). The unique problem today seems to be that the convergence of many threats to the Western myth makes it increasingly difficult to return to the hero as he was.

⁵²For an analysis of the West as a "safety valve" to reduce overcrowding in the East, see Smith, pp. 201-10.

⁵³There have been notable exceptions, of course, to the restricted role assigned to women in Western literature. The Beadle dime novels, for example, boasted rough-and-tumble heroines in men's clothing, such as Hurricane Nell, Wild Edna, and Calamity Jane (see Smith, pp. 112-20). Willa Cather's novels portrayed more realistic, typically embittered pioneer heroines. Etta Place in *Butch Cassidy* was at least potentially heroic. But, as Calder observes, true heroines are rare, and "where they do occur they are usually caricatured" (p. 160). She concludes that women in the West were "above all a commodity" (p. 166), and that there are "very, very few Western makers who have made convincing use of women's life in the West, either in terms of conveying something like the reality of their existence or of dramatising their mythic potential" (p. 165).

⁵⁴It is interesting in this regard that on January 26, 1982, Reagan announced in his first State of the Union address his Federalist policy—a plan to turn responsibility for federal welfare programs over to the states.

Probably our incredibly heightened "media consciousness" adds to the difficulty; increasingly, filmmakers and television producers hesitate to risk a "pure" presentation of timeworn "unrealistic" stories without a touch of self-parody or recognition of the modern environment, for fear of appearing naive. (Though *Superman* and *Superman II* were in large part bigger and better revivals of the old myth, for example, one of the most appealing scenes occurred in the first movie when Clark Kent had to forego using the newfangled telephone stand as a dressing room.) Simply put, the problem facing today's Western revivalist is: How can the old myth be adapted to the new environment when the old environment, now extinct, is the crux of the myth?

This section will examine the contemporary response to societal exigencies in terms of two rhetorical contexts: Presidential politics and popular culture. The temptation is to attribute the Western revival to Ronald Reagan and *Urban Cowboy*. Certainly, these are the primary rhetorical expressions of the revival, but each had forerunners, and some of these will also be discussed. I will then argue that the two rhetorical contexts of Presidential politics and popular culture interact with and reinforce one another by enacting the same dialectical pattern.

The West in Politics

An important turning point in America's consciousness was the almost simultaneous occurrence of Watergate and the Bicentennial. America was founded on the futuristic premise of "the promised land." Deeply embodied in the American Dream is the promise that the future will be better than the present. The westward movement away from the settled states was merely a continuation of the original impulse to flee the over-cultured stagnation of the Old World.⁵⁵ But Watergate,

⁵⁵See Smith; Homans.

following closely on the heels of the unpopular Vietnam War, dealt probably the most severe blow ever inflicted on the Dream; it halted the perennial American optimism for here was internal decay at the core of the democracy. It symbolized a sort of spiritual death for America, perhaps a sign that the country had come of age and could no longer naively look forward to unbounded growth and unlimited resources encompassed within the future.

Rituals of death are generally followed by rituals of rebirth, however, and America resurrected its pride only two years later by preparing for the Bicentennial. A birthday celebration naturally focuses attention simultaneously on the past and the future, and this one was no exception. Along with the unblushed retelling of American history in such media events as Shell's "Bicentennial Minutes," and the reaffirmation of the American Dream in such films as *Rocky*, the country underwent a resurgence of patriotism. Uncovering "Roots" became a national pastime. And since America's roots are the West, the time was ripe for a hero that would recapture the past Western glory as a vision for the future.⁵⁶

Carter—the yeoman farmer. In the chronology of the Western myth, the yeoman farmer preceded the cowboy by two or three decades.⁵⁷ He became a hero to Americans when he came to own and work his own land, rather than another

⁵⁶It may seem mistaken to claim that America's roots are the West, since the country began on the Eastern seaboard. But in addition to the fact that both the original American colonial settlements and the Westward movement were bound together by the same themes, it is also true that the Western myth was primarily perpetrated by Easterners. See Smith; Homans.

⁵⁷In his *Frontier Thesis*, Turner implies that Western ranches often were subsequently populated by farmers. However, the cowboy did not become a celebrated hero until the 1870's when the range industry spread from Texas northward over the great plains, according to Smith, p. 109. See also pp. 133-44 for a description of the "yeoman farmer" myth.

man's. In fact, the Western yeoman was the hero of *the* myth of the mid-nineteenth century, patriotically symbolizing "the Garden of the World." Smith explains the mythic appeal of the agricultural West.

The master symbol of the garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase and blissful labor in the earth, all centering about the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred plow.⁵⁸

Although Jimmy Carter was from the South rather than the Northwest, the region of the yeoman farmer, he played upon the "sturdy plowman" theme, not that of the aristocratic landowner. Many, including himself at times, laughed at his peanut farm heritage, but he knew that it was rhetorically right. The advertising film "Jimmy Who?" showed him in farm clothes walking on his own land, sifting the soil through his fingers while the voice-over proclaimed him a man "in touch with his roots."

Reagan—the town marshal. But just as the yeoman farmer was eventually replaced by the more exciting symbol of the cowboy, Carter's lackluster performance in the Presidency amidst a worsening economy eventually piqued America's appetite for a more appealing hero. This time the country reached as far West as possible, and found a "cowboy" with a ranch near the metropolis of Los Angeles.⁵⁹ Noting that voters perceived Reagan in "manly" terms and Carter in softer, more "feminine" terms, Fisher captures his image:

He aroused a consciousness not of the stevedore, the athlete, or the truck driver, but the quintessential hero of the West—the town marshal. Accenting this image were his origins, the West (Califor-

nia—the last frontier); his penchant for western garb, his ranch, his pastime of riding horses, and several of his film and television roles, and his physical appearance: tall, lank, and rugged. Like the savior of the West, he exuded honesty and sincerity, innocence, optimism, and certainty.⁶⁰

The obvious fact about Reagan is just this: his *appearance* as a Westerner. His experience as an actor aids in assembling the image, and the fact that we elected him expresses our need not for a *real* Western hero, but merely for the appearance of one. His image is a masterful conglomerate of the frontiersman's qualities. Carpenter, documenting the rhetorical impact of Turner's "frontier thesis," argues that most readers responded positively to these attributes of the pioneer character delineated by Turner: cooperativeness, optimism, individualism, self-reliance, resiliency, calmness of purpose, virility, steadfastness, neighborliness, confidence, wholesomeness, enthusiasm, spirit of adventure, and initiative. It is as if Reagan read Turner and built his image out of these qualities. Five of these values reflect the communal tug of the Western hero: Rather than demonstrating *cooperativeness* in his own character, Reagan seems to demand it of Congress; soon after assuming office, he implied that Congress should forego its normal "politics" and pass his bills immediately because the country was in trouble, and the rest of America was cooperating with him. He is infectiously *optimistic* and *enthusiastic* about America's chances for economic recovery. His entire demeanor, even with the Press whom he is coming to resent, is *neighborly*, as if anxious to do good deeds. And he shares with his predecessor an earnest *wholesomeness*, an image reaffirmed by the moral Majority's supportiveness.

The other nine qualities are *individu-*

⁵⁸Smith, p. 123.

⁵⁹It is also probable that in any hard economic times, America looks for a frontier hero capable of solving the problems. Ronald H. Carpenter notes that Frederick Jackson Turner's ideal of the frontiersman became popular during the economic depression of 1893-97; see Carpenter, pp. 117-29.

⁶⁰Walter R. Fisher, "Romantic Democracy, Ronald Reagan, and Presidential Heroes," *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 46 (1982), 302.

alism and its aspects, all of which Reagan's image exudes. He is maddeningly *self-reliant*, *calm in purpose*, and *stealthy* in pursuing his economic program. He is heroically *resilient*, as he demonstrated with his John Wayne performance after being shot. His *virility* is proven not only by his quick recovery, but also by the fact that his wife, unlike Rosalynn Carter, knows her place. It does not hurt that he looks 10-15 years younger than his age and is contemplating running for a second term when no one in 1980 thought that possible. He has supreme *confidence* in his own economic theories although they remain for the most part untested. He put on an impressive show of *initiative* by giving his first major televised speech within thirty days of assuming office and unveiling programs for economic recovery immediately. And, he demonstrates continually his *spirit of adventure*, perhaps most notably by outlining his "New Federalism" program during his first State of the Union address.

Although it would seem that Reagan has synthesized the two poles of pioneer heroism, his is actually a *pseudo-synthesis*, for this actor-President evidences little sense of the challenge of reconciling two inherent opposites. Carpenter observes that Turner's readers eventually reconciled "massive corporate organizations" with the "individual entrepreneur" in the frontiersman image, probably as a result of a realization that many prominent corporate moguls were self-made men with frontier origins. One of Turner's students at Harvard, impressed by the individualism of the Westerner, proclaimed that Daniel Boone, if living during the twentieth century, would have been a "great captain of industry."⁶¹ Thus, Reagan as cowboy (symbol of individualism) blends easily with Rea-

gan as deregulator and protector of Big Business (symbol of communalism). His style, too, reflects an effortless blend. On their California ranch, he and Nancy dress in Western garb, and he does not eschew the cowboy image the Press likes to promote. Yet they do not, as did their predecessors, invite Willie Nelson to entertain at the White House. Rather, a hot "issue" is the Reagans' bringing "class" back to Washington, and their style is compared to that of the Eastern establishment Kennedys. Individualism for the Reagans does not mean independence from the community, but rather, freedom from government controls.

Pseudo-synthesis of individualism and community is also implicit in a vertical sense in Reagan's "trickle-down" theory of economics. When the rich are given the freedom from controls to get richer, they not only achieve a kind of individualism within the larger community, but they also "hand down" individualism directly to the poor. That is, they save the less fortunate by giving them independence from Big Government and the welfare state (community gone wild). Again, the blend is deceptively simple; the common man *receives* individualism rather than *achieving* it, and thereby is expected to be a fully integrated and more productive member of the community.

The pattern of social change described here can be called *dialectical pseudo-synthesis*, for the two disparate paradoxical elements are brought together effortlessly, glossing over their inherently contradictory nature. Rhetorically, this pattern gives the appearance of reaffirming the potency of the Western myth, whereas in reality, it is subversive of the original archetype. When two elements *within* a myth exist in dialectical opposition, any genuine synthesis would most likely cause the myth to disappear, for were a real synthesis to occur, the inherent of the paradoxical relationship

⁶¹Carpenter, pp. 125-26.

between the parts would be called into question.

The West in Popular Culture

The clash of the cowboy with the city has been a common theme in popular culture for quite some time. Films such as *Giant* (1956), *Hud* (1962), and recently *Tom Horn* (1980) foretold the end of the frontier and the curtailment of freedoms that encroaching civilization impressed on the cowboy. Country songs such as "Rhinstone Cowboy," "This is the Last Cowboy Song," and "Luchenback, Texas" lyricize the virtues of the country and the downfall of the city cowboy or girl. As Willie Nelson self-discloses in "Bloody Mary Morning," he's "Just a country boy who's learnin' / that the pitfalls of the city are extremely real." McMurtry, the author of the novel *Hud*, predicted today's treatment of the cowboy:

There will be a very poignant story to be told about the cowboy, should Hollywood care to tell it: the story of his gradual metamorphosis into a suburbanite. The story contains an element of paradox, for the bloated urbanism that makes the wild free cowboy so very attractive to those already urbanized will eventually result in his being absorbed by his audience.⁶²

The Electric Horseman. One of the most interesting treatments of the urbanization of the cowboy was *The Electric Horseman* (1980), for the film depicted the ultimate phoniness of a citified cowboy. The film contains only a glimpse of a modern treatment; however, it is still influenced by counter-culture values, possibly because its stars are Jane Fonda and Robert Redford. Its significance lies in its transitional status as a link between sixties Westerns and the later urban cowboy phenomenon. A rodeo star and a horse are bought off by a cereal advertis-

ing company, and both are drugged and seemingly ruined by commercialism. The cowboy awakens from his stupor, however, steals the million-dollar horse, and eludes the law, the businessmen, and the media until he sets the horse free in an idyllic wilderness populated only by wild mustangs. As he watches his alter-ego revel in its escape, the audience is led once more to celebrate the virtues of individualism and to decry the vices of the community. Thus, a pattern of dialectical emphasis is once again suggested. The cowboy eventually falls for the newswoman who chases him for a story, however, and their momentary unity foreshadows the ultimate destiny of the frontiersman as a pseudo-event.⁶³

Urban Cowboy. Whereas the cowboy rides from the city into the country on a horse in *The Electric Horseman*, he rides from the country into the city in a truck in *Urban Cowboy*. Therein lies the distinction that turns the latter film into the best rhetorical exemplar of the Western myth in this area. Just as he did in *Saturday Night Fever* with disco, John Travolta both capitalized on an existing trend and spurred it on in *Urban Cowboy*. The makers of *Urban Cowboy* had discovered the solution to the dilemma of the automatized city worker's need for identity: bring the country to the city. The title perfectly and simply names the contemporary rhetorical stance.

The film is simultaneously a reaction against two current threats to the Western myth described above: too little and too much freedom. The closing of the frontier has left the individual too little room to roam. The corresponding urban and suburbanization has ruined both the

⁶²Larry McMurtry, "Cowboys, Movies, Myths, and Cadillacs: Realism in the Western," in Maynard, p. 99.

⁶³See Daniel Boorstin, "From News-Gathering to News-Making: A Flood of Pseudo-Events," in *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*; reprinted in *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication*, rev. ed., ed. Wilbur Schramm and Donald F. Roberts (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), pp. 116-50.

concepts of small community and individualism. The Women's Movement, the Human Potential Movement, and the Sexual Revolution have stressed freedom and "space" in male-female relationships, resorting to "inner space" as the new last frontier.⁶⁴ *Urban Cowboy* solves these problems by a pseudo-synthesis of individualism and community in scene, props, characters, and plot that implies an overall preference for appearance over reality.

As in traditional Westerns, the saloon in this movie is the most important building because this is the only place where all the characters can be seen together repeatedly. It is the social center and locus for the climax of the story—the showdown between hero and villain.⁶⁵ Here the saloon is Gilley's, three acres of bar and dance floor in Houston, Texas, where urban cowboys and cowgirls come to show off their stuff. As an indoor "frontier," this place is impressively huge. It is ridiculously minute, however, when compared to the long-gone real frontier. The appropriate dress is designer jeans, western shirts or tank tops, cowboy boots, and hats. The dance is the Two-step, Cotton-eyed Joe, or country swing. As one journalist describes the scene at Gilley's: "There seems to be a widely held belief that one can grow into an identity from the outside-in rather than developing from the inside-out. The external trappings get mistaken for the thing itself. Thus are city cowboys hatched."⁶⁶

Inside this symbol of community, the center of attention is an indoor rodeo ring with a twelve-speed bucking mechanical bull, designed to test the arête of any city cowboy who wants to set himself apart from the mob of "individu-

alists" who watch with fascination. This bull is not only the rodeo brought indoors (there is no more space outside for such things, the movie says), but it is also the latest in an evolutionary line of modes of transportation for the cowboy—from the horse to the horseless carriage to the sports car to the semi-truck. Cowboy and horse were virtually inseparable in older Westerns, the majesty of the animal contributing to the stature of the man. "The movement of horse and rider over a land that man must conquer suggests that the horseman has already won a private victory," observes Calder.⁶⁷ But she recognizes the difference between man conquering a horse and man conquering a machine: "A machine can't fight back. A machine has no intelligence. And a machine is powerless without a man to turn it on. A fast car may have a certain grace, but is is nothing like the animal grace of a loping horse."⁶⁸ Whereas there is certainly excitement, there is also a sad poignancy in the would-be individualists' attempts to conquer Gilley's bull. For the "horse to conquer" now is technology, and it has no spirit to be understood. Whereas the cowboy used to be at one with nature, he is now at one with a machine. In fact, with its mechanized bucks and throws, the bull undermines the cowboy's humanity. It *moves*, but does not move forward, thus expressing the inertia of the city worker-cowboy.

Inside Gilley's, the sexy Sissy is looking for a "real cowboy." Her eyes light on Bud (Travolta), who says he is real, and she asks him to prove it by doing the Two-step. They dance, fall in love, get married at Gilley's, and move into a mobile home, which Sissy fails to keep clean, much to Bud's disillusionment. He works at an oil refinery, she drives a tow-truck, and they spend their evenings at Gilley's. Inevitably, Bud is drawn to

⁶⁴See Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), pp. 258-75.

⁶⁵Homans, p. 100.

⁶⁶Ela, p. 90.

⁶⁷Calder, p. 104.

⁶⁸Calder, p. 97.

the mechanical bull, and rides it successfully to Sissy's great pride. Unfortunately, however, she wants to ride it, too. Bud won't let her, so she goes to Gilley's in the afternoon and gets Wes, the charismatic bull operator and real rodeo rider, to teach her. She then surprises Bud and the rest of the Gilley's crowd by riding it better than he did. This does not set well with Bud, especially because earlier, Wes intentionally hit Bud with the bull after he fell off, breaking Bud's arm and hurting his pride. Bud also senses Sissy's attraction for this mesmerizing mysterious stranger. Sissy and Bud fight, Bud goes home with Pam, whom he picks up on the dance floor, and Sissy takes up with Wes to get even.

Life with Pam is boring, but at least she is a "real lady." Life with Wes is dangerous, but at least he is a "real cowboy." Although Bud and Sissy make overtures toward each other, they miss signals, refusing to swallow their pride. Meanwhile, Bud prepares to challenge Wes in the upcoming Gilley's rodeo by practicing on his uncle's mechanical bull. In the climactic contest, Bud edges out the real cowboy, and Wes retaliates by holding up Gilley's and stealing the prize money. While Wes does his dirty work, Bud apologizes to Sissy. Discovering her bruised face, he chases Wes, beats him to a pulp, and the stolen loot flies all over the floor. Bud takes Sissy to their mobile home, supposedly to live happily ever after.

Bud and Sissy have learned some important lessons, and so has, by implication, the audience. Obviously, both learn that blind jealousy and pride are destructive. But Sissy also learns to accept her "place"; though Bud promises her that she can ride the bull any time she wants to, she enthusiastically replies, "I don't want to." Western women do not compete with their men for heroism. And Bud learns that the glamorous "lady" he had been using to make Sissy

jealous was also a liar. Both repent.⁶⁹ The movie seems to be saying that too much freedom in a relationship is a bad thing; it is better to return to frontier times when physical space had no limits, but relationships did.

Probably the most significant lesson learned by both Bud and Sissy is that appearance is better than reality in the choice of a mate. Although Pam does not offer a clear-cut alternative for Bud, as Wes does for Sissy, Sissy is not quite the ideal synthesis of good wife (community values) and modern liberated woman (individualistic values) that she appears to be at the end of the film. Sissy *looks* liberated (she wears tight jeans, revealing leotards, and carefree permanented hair); she *talks* liberated (*she asks* Bud to dance); she *acts* liberated (she worked at a man's job and rides the bull). But in her symbolically defiant act, riding the bull, she does not really show herself to be Bud's match. She rides it at slow speed, for one thing. For another, she attracts a crowd for her skill not in rodeo-riding, but in sexual display. Thus in this scene, she resorts to what the "bad girl" does well.⁷⁰

Sissy does get a clear choice. Living with Wes, she learns that he is an ex-convict, a real outlaw as well as a real cowboy. He is mean, abusive, lazy, and unfaithful. The character of Wes (short for "West?") seems to be telling Sissy,

⁶⁹This resolution reflects a trend present in other movies in the same time period, such as *Honeysuckle Rose* (1980), *10* (1980), and *Middle-Age Crazy* (1980). In each, the hero learns that fooling around is not all it's cracked up to be, and the sanctity of marriage is restored. The couple in *10* is not married, but has a long-term, previously stable relationship. The other two take place in Texas, and have Western themes. Another film, *It's My Turn* (1981) features an unmarried couple who give lip service to "space" in relationships; they live in an apartment that looks as if it is the top floor of a warehouse. It is spacious, non-intimate, and unfulfilling, just like their relationship.

⁷⁰The only women who typically achieved individualistic success in the Western, according to Calder, were those who risked their reputations, or who had no reputations to risk, p. 161.

"Real cowboys were not at all like John Wayne or Shane. They were violent, uncompromising, self-centered, and, most important, anti-social. You don't really want a *real* cowboy, do you, Sis-sy?" The pseudo-cowboy is much safer. Even though Bud won the contest by practicing on a fake bull rather than a live one, he could still be a hero in the eyes of the community and his women. Because its sympathies are entirely with Bud over Wes, the audience too can rest assured that the appearance is preferable to the reality.

Whereas Reagan's Presidency enacts a *vertical* pattern of dialectical pseudo-synthesis, then, *Urban Cowboy* enacts a *horizontal* one. Bud's actions represent what Everyman does while waiting for individualism to trickle down his way. Again, this version of the myth rhetorically subverts the archetype. "What we have here," notes Ela, "is individualism that happens only within a mob and identity that depends on a support system of peers."⁷¹ The protagonist may have sacrificed a broken arm and broken pride to get what he wanted, but he achieves "individualism" within the crowd and ends up settling down with a woman, probably to return to the crowd night after night. This new variation on the Western myth dissolves the eternal paradox in a sort of behavior modification strategy. No matter that the frontier is gone as a proving ground, it seems to say, just buy a new pair of cowboy boots and dance.

The pattern of dialectical pseudo-synthesis is more seriously subversive of the original myth than dialectical emphasis, in fact, for in the latter pattern, at least one of the contradictory elements is strengthened. By giving the appearance of the strengthening and integration of the opposite qualities, however, pseudo-synthesis obscures the

⁷¹Ela, p. 90.

fact that the qualities are indeed contradictory. When the tension between individualism and community is erased, each quality is weakened.

"*Dallas*." A picture of the urban cowboy rhetoric is not complete without a brief consideration of this phenomenal television serial. The opening promo for "Dallas" visually announces that its theme is rhetorically similar to that of *Urban Cowboy*: shots of "Big D" are juxtaposed between scenes of South Fork Ranch as each episode is introduced. The millionaire oil magnate family, the Ewings, live on a ranch and work in the city. J.R. Ewing wears a cowboy hat to work in his skyscraper office. J.R. has earned his reputation as "the man America most loves to hate" for some good reasons. Aside from the fact that the protagonist of this show is almost thoroughly rotten, he is an intriguing aberration of the frontier hero.⁷² There is no question of his rugged individualist qualifications. He is one of those "frontiersmen" of whom Carpenter speaks whose image is a blend of massive corporate captain of industry and individual entrepreneur. (His father was the self-made man.) He is an absolutely ruthless game-player in his attempt to make Ewing Oil the biggest oil company in the world. However, his quest for individualism is motivated by a burning desire to make Daddy proud. In fact, he is above all else a Ewing, proud of his family name, and determined to keep his clan, or small community, together.

But the city (or something) has corrupted J.R., and he is as manipulative and deceitful with his family and friends as he is with his business associates. He is, in fact, a *caricature* of despicableness,

⁷²Noting modern changes in the frontier myth, Calder warns: "To remain independent amidst the multiple turmoil of modern urban society is bound to differ crucially from frontier independence. Frontier loneliness is a necessity. Urban independence almost has to mean selfishness and brutality." p. 192.

destroying practically everyone with such a wickedly amused nonchalance that the audience gets hooked on watching him operate. He mesmerizes because he has become a mirror of our current Western rhetoric. This is what it is like, his character implies, when you bring the cowboy to the city. Thus "Dallas," almost universally debunked by serious critics, is probably the one honest depiction of the results of the rhetorical pattern of dialectical pseudo-synthesis.

IMPLICATIONS

I have argued that the fundamental values of the Western myth exist in the dialectical tension between individualism and community, and that reaffirmation of the dialectical tension between these values best strengthens the archetype, and thus America's image of itself. I have also discussed four historical eras in terms of how the Western rhetoric of each responded to threats to the myth and argued that the current revival of Western rhetoric is the most seriously subversive of the fundamental archetype. Some extensions of the Social Value Model are indicated by this analysis, as well as some theoretical implications concerning the current Western rhetoric.

The original Social Value Model posited two rhetorical patterns of social change that can occur when two myths are dialectically opposed to each other: transformation and synthesis. If the present interpretations are plausible, it appears that there are at least three additional ways to resolve a mythic contradiction rhetorically: dialectical emphasis, reaffirmation, and pseudo-synthesis. It also appears that the model may be applied heuristically to the analysis of rhetoric affecting the opposition of two elements *within* a myth. Formerly, the Social Value Model was used to analyze one film within its socio-political con-

text. This examination of contemporary Western rhetoric implies that patterns of social change are often more generally expressed in many rhetorical examples during the period. It also provides additional support for the usefulness of concurrently examining political rhetoric, particularly the rhetoric of the image, and popular culture artifacts.

Two concerns about the rhetoric of the Western myth emanate from the argument that its current political and popular culture expressions are pseudo-synthetic, and that they subvert the underlying archetype. What is the larger meaning of this urban cowboy phenomenon? What will become of America's favorite myth, and thus, by implication, of America's self-image?

The urban cowboy rhetoric is positive in at least two senses. First, it is *fun*. It is a *participatory* rhetoric—the "audience" is not really separable from source or message in this phenomenon. Children have long known how to dissolve these elements of the communication process into one another by playing out the Western story; adults now seem to have caught on that *playing* this most perennial American story is an excellent way to have a good time.⁷³ Second, playing "urban cowboy" enables the powerless city worker to achieve a sense of dignity, and electing an urban cowboy is a good way for the country to feel optimistic about its future once again. America *can* still produce a hero who promises to redeem the country.

As entertaining and uplifting as the urban cowboy rhetoric is, however, it is ultimately a cause for nervousness. It is as if the old "safety valve" notion is being re-enacted. But because America has no more viable frontier, the escape this time

⁷³In the Social Value Model, it was argued that the audience role is more participatory or "creative" when the social change pattern is synthetic. It seems consistent, then, that a *pseudo-synthetic* pattern would evoke participatory *play*.

is into role-playing a childlike fantasy that suggests individualism is achieved through conformity, and that the country's resources are not really scarce.⁴ The choice of appearance over the reality is, of course, quite consistent with this age of media pseudo-events, where the illusion often becomes more persuasive than reality itself. Boorstin claims that with the proliferation of pseudo-events, the classic mimetic maxim inverts itself into "nature imitates art."⁷⁵ Such seems to be the case with Ronald Reagan. But with *Urban Cowboy*, the process is more accurately stated as "art imitates nature, which imitates art," for the film mimics America's current tendency to model its play after the predominant form of the media—that of the pseudo-event.

The central argument of this paper has been that the current revival of Western rhetoric is subversive of the archetype. Here, too, is a cause for anxiety. It is unclear at this point whether America's own creation story will survive. An analogy between the urban cowboy and the fate of the American Indian is suggestive: the placement of the Indian in the confined space of the reservation is currently culminating in a tragic denouement, for space to wander was an indigenous element of the native American culture. And, indeed, *space* is a constitutional element of the myth of the West. It is possible that the current

escape into role-playing is a comic interlude before the final tragic act of realization that we are out of space. Certainly the seedily claustrophobic Los Angeles of the year 2019 in the recent *Bladerunner* (1982) prophesies a possible future with no space left on earth. On the other hand, if we can turn our insatiable appetite for wandering into the conquering of space, as technological achievements in the last two decades suggest, perhaps the myth will evolve in a constantly regenerating form that will define us for the next few centuries. Indeed, the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* series, by transforming our identity from "out of space" to "out in space," promise to capture America's mythic imagination for another generation at least.

It is hard to predict whether the Western myth will return to older forms, stagnate and die, re-work itself into an appropriate philosophy for an urbanized society, or translate itself into a more cosmological form. Whatever lies ahead, America needs myths and heroes.⁷⁶ Perhaps the time is ripe for a hero who will transcend the dialectic altogether. In order to guide and revitalize America, the defining myth must provide fitting challenges for its heroes. Heroes are not made from the simple solution to simple tasks. Rather, they must willingly sacrifice something precious to the fulfillment of a Dream

⁴Enter James Watt.

⁷⁵Boorstin, p. 150.

⁷⁶Walter K. Fisher, "Reaffirmation and Subversion of the American Dream," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 59 (1973), 167.

