

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.

