

Three Times **“Geronimo!”**

THE EVOLUTION OF A FRONTIER SYMBOL

BY: ØYVIND GILLEBERG STENSLI



A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of Literature, Area Studies,
and European Languages
UNIVERSITY OF OSLO
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
MA degree
May 2013

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2013

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<http://www.duo.uio.no>

Print: Representeren, Universitetet i Oslo

Picture on the Previous Page: Paramount Pictures’ Promotion Poster for *Geronimo* (1940).
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Abstract

This thesis works from the assumption that films reveal certain truths about the culture and society that produces them and examines changing Hollywood representations of the Apache Indian Geronimo and argues that historical developments and cultural paradigm shifts have generated these changes. The primary focus is on three Western biopics of Geronimo; from 1939, 1962 and 1993; all treated in respective chapters to demonstrate how these periods found relevance in the Geronimo story and how directors transformed that story into hypotheses for resolution of real-world political, social and cultural challenges that confronted the eras in which they worked. To fill the historical gaps between the films, this thesis traces the general development of two closely related cultural structures: (a) myth as a framework for understanding national identity, and (b) the Western genre that transmits America's oldest and most characteristic myth, the "Myth of the Frontier" (in which Geronimo is deeply entangled), and how the Western served as a vehicle for revising and modifying that myth. Apart from the cinematic representations of Geronimo, this thesis also accounts for related instances in which his name appeared on pamphlets, t-shirts and military operations during the twentieth century and the new millennium. In particular, the U.S. Special Forces' choice to use Geronimo as code name in their mission to assassinate Osama bin Laden in 2011 is treated in some detail.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A journey to the wilderness – it felt like that

So I put on my boots and my cowboy hat

Literary criticism - no place for the weak

But demons you must face - if truth you seek

Standing now on the other side

Looking back on my toilsome ride

I pay tribute - as goals were reached today

To the people who cleared my trail and led the way

(Øyvind Gilleberg Stensli, Oslo, May 27, 2013)

However silly it might be, I would like to express gratitude to the inventors and developers of the Internet (whoever they are) for handing it over to humanity for free. This allows a Norwegian student to watch lectures given by distinguished scholars at Ivy League universities while drinking his morning coffee in Oslo; read 18th century newspapers during lunch; send a draft across the world and have it back by dinner; and watch incredible Westerns online before going to bed.

I want to thank my advisor, Professor Mark Luccarelli, who allowed me to follow my bliss and work out my ideas however vague, abstract or absurd they might have been at the beginning. Your insightful suggestions and scholarly observations have been most helpful for improving this work.

I am also deeply grateful to Professor Richard Slotkin who inspired my work with his brilliant Western movies lectures at Wesleyan University and who cheerfully took time to advise my work by e-mail. It deserves respect when distinguished scholars like yourself take time to advise the juniors of academia with the respect and understanding that you have shown. I repeat therefore my humble thanks to you Richard.

I am grateful as well to Ceilon Hall Aspensen, Thea L. Gustavsen and Manuel Reta, who spent time proofreading and giving thoughtful comments on my thesis along the way.

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Introduction:

The Evolution of a Frontier Symbol

At the time of Geronimo's death in 1909, *The New York Times* raged, "crafty, bloodthirsty, incredibly cruel and ferocious," the career of Geronimo "gave point to the proverb that a good Indian is a dead Indian."¹ In 2011, when news came out that U.S. Special Forces had used "Geronimo" as code name in their mission to kill Al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden, Native American groups objected to the code name as offensive and received notable support from the general public. "No one would find acceptable calling this arch-terrorist by code name Mandela, Revere or Ben-Gurion," Keith Harper, a member of the Cherokee Nation, said to the *Washington Post*, "an extraordinary Native leader and American hero deserves no less."²

Obviously, much had changed. The Geronimo code name controversy of 2011 provides an insight into the complexity and dynamics of cultural symbolism: a cultural symbol never represents a simple truth but rather a complex conflict of contested meanings. Geronimo has been such a symbol in American culture ever since he "terrorized" the Southwest in the late nineteenth century.

This thesis uses a myth-symbol approach to examine historical changes in the *meaning* of Geronimo (the symbol and the myth), by looking at changing Hollywood representations of Geronimo (the historic person) in theatrical films. The project works from an assumption proposed by Andrew Bergman and others that films reveal certain truths about the society that produces them. Bergman thus urges students to approach films as an anthropologist would approach a cultural artifact: "films are not viewed in a void, neither are they created in a void. Every movie is a cultural artifact" which just like "pottery shards," and "stone utensils" reflect "the values, fears, myths, and assumptions of the culture that produces it."³ This study analyzes how strands of myth, culture, genre and contemporary public discourse play into the construction of three different cinematic "Geronimos," that are all revealing of its contemporary *zeitgeist*. The primary materials are three Geronimo biopics, all titled with his name, from 1939, 1962 and 1993, but significant appearances and characterizations from other films like *Stagecoach* (1939) and *Broken Arrow* (1950) are also treated.

In other words, this thesis demonstrates the applicability of Geronimo and argues that directors have turned to Geronimo's story and the myths that surround him to comment on present concerns. In a way then, the continuum of Geronimo films

becomes a study of cultural evolution that centers on the adaptability and responsiveness of a cultural symbol to present circumstances.

Studying Geronimo as Myth and Symbol: Reflections about Method

Westerns are, according to John Cawelti, like social or cultural “rituals” which seek to establish “a sense of continuity between present and past.”⁴ This thesis works from that assumption and uses Hollywood Westerns as primary documents to demonstrate how three different periods have constructed their own “Geronimo” in order to address present concerns. The methodological foundation for my approach to these films is Richard Slotkin’s method in his monumental trilogy about the “Myth of the Frontier” in American culture. In *Regeneration through Violence, The Fatal Environment* and *Gunfighter Nation* he centers his analysis on the ways in which America has transformed its “historical experience” into the “symbolic terms of myth” and then used “mythological renderings” of the past to organize its “responses to real-world crises and political projects.”⁵ Hence, the myths of a national culture provide symbolic rationales and interpretive models for social and political realities that confront that culture. In *Gunfighter Nation*, he examines the interplay between myth and the Western and argues that the genre is not only a vehicle for transmitting the Frontier Myth, but, as the Western became the “language” of the myth it also became an important site for critiquing and modifying the myth in its own terms.⁶

To inquire the relationship between films, myth and culture, scholars tend to treat films as *texts*. Bill Nichols explains that “*text* conveys a greater sense of methodological exactitude than the terms *movie* or *film*,” and by defining films as *texts* they become “manifestations of certain characteristics found across a range of works that many non-film-specific methods are adept at analyzing.”⁷ Douglas Kellner warns against stopping “at the borders of the text” and urges a “move from text to context.” The interpretation of a cinematic text thus becomes a transdisciplinary endeavor that “involves the use of film theory, textual analysis, social history, political analysis and ideology critique, effects analysis, and other modes of cultural criticism.”⁸ In the presented analysis of the different “Geronimos,” this thesis employs Kellner’s advice and substantiate the readings with contemporary expressions including popular culture phenomena, newspaper articles, movie reviews, political speeches, official and confidential reports on Foreign Policy and public debates about domestic and cultural issues.

“Myths,” writes John Hellman are “the stories containing a people’s image of themselves,” they are necessarily “simplifications” of complex realities but “simplification is their strength” because “only by ignoring the great mass of infinite data can we identify essential order.”⁹ Likewise, the myth and symbol school of American Studies, in its original form, sought to identify an “essential order” that would define a common American character. Although they were not uncritical to American culture, they tended to see America as exceptional and American history as essentially progressive. Social historians of the New Left made polemical attacks on the myth-symbol school for its affiliation with the “consensus school” of American history and for presenting an erroneous image of America that ignored fundamentally different experiences and realities within America by constructing a common American character based on myth-themes.

Bruce Kuklick gave one of the strongest critiques in his 1972 essay about the “myth and symbol school,” in which he accused Henry Nash Smith and other practitioners of the approach of generalizing about American culture with “unsupported” and “simplified” explanations of American behavior.¹⁰ To support his critique, Kuklick summons the negative connotations that our cultural language has ascribed to the word “myth,” which tend to equate myth with falsifications and distortions of the truth. Richard Slotkin also began his work as a revisionist that sought to radically revise the myth and symbol school. Nevertheless, he insisted that it is useful to see within the parameter of myths but rejected the idea of a single American “character” and wanted to bring back into focus the centrality of racial oppression and violence in the tale of American progress. According to Slotkin, the recurring myth-themes in the original myth-symbol school, such as the idea of a “Virgin land” and the “American Adam” were not collective fantasies, as in Smith, but ideological catchwords or a cover-up for Indian removal and conquest. In later works, Smith has admitted his own failure to see the ideological rationale behind the idea of “virgin land” and said he had mistakenly acquired an “important contagion from Turner’s conception of the wilderness...the tendency to assume that this area was in effect devoid of human inhabitants.”¹¹

Their reading of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* illuminates the difference between Smith, Kuklick and Slotkin. Smith argues that Melville drew the material of *Moby-Dick* directly from nineteenth century American society “in the most obvious and direct way.”¹² It is the story of a people’s love of nature that follows the tradition

from Daniel Boone and Lewis and Clark. The madness of Captain Ahab represents Melville's concern with the machinery of the Industrial Revolution destroying nature. Overall, *Moby-Dick* is a work of "collective representation" rather than the work of a "single mind."¹³ Kuklick dismisses Smith's reading and argues that *Moby-Dick* cannot be representative of the culture that produced it because it failed to find an audience in its own time.¹⁴ Slotkin on the other hand explains, "What *Moby-Dick* provides is a prophetic extrapolation of future history from the evidence of motivation and purpose inherent in national myths."¹⁵ It was prophetic because Melville saw within his own society an urge to conquer and control the environment that would continue with the extinction of the Indian, the buffalo and nature itself with nothing but "the piles of wrecked and rusted cars, heaped like Tartar pyramids of death-cracked, weather-browned, rain-rotted skulls, to signify our passage through the land."¹⁶

The Slotkinian approach entertains tools and methods from structuralism and New Americanism. He believes in deep pervasive structures within a culture, like myths and genre, but strongly emphasizes the human element that structuralism tends to undermine. He asserts, "although the materials for a study of myth are necessarily 'fictive,' and in modern culture, 'literary,' the study itself is historical in that it treats mythmaking as a human activity in the material world."¹⁷ To some extent, Slotkin also fits Donald Pease's description of the "New Americanist School" because this school embraced "the New Historicist return of the repressed cultural context" and its most important contribution to American Studies, according to Pease, was "the recovery of the relationship between the cultural and political sphere" that insisted on "literature as an agency within the political world."¹⁸ Nonetheless, New Americanists' preoccupation with post-nationalism and trans-nationality that marks the *American Quarterly* separates Slotkin from that school because he strongly emphasizes the national element that, in his view, dominated the past and remains significant to this day.

To understand the relationship between the Geronimo story and the film that portrays it, Peter Lehman insists that the study requires consciousness of three "time frames" and "locations." In my rendition of the *Geronimo*-films, that includes: (a) the films' "diegetic time and place," which in all three films are located in Southwestern America in the 1880s, (b) the historical time and place of release - 1939, 1962 and 1993 - which affect content and point-of-view; and (c) the time and place of the

scholarly enquiry, which in this case is Norway and the academy in 2013. The latter point is important because it speaks to our ability to look back at historical periods, and the knowledge we possess about the culmination and consequences of historical processes may affect our reading of those periods. The most common criticism against New Historicist methods emphasizes that point and refutes its practitioners' tendency to draw arbitrary connections between text and context. According to such criticism, practitioners of New Historicism, or the American Studies version of New Americanism, are unable to maintain a disinterested enquiry and find whatever they want in the abstracted ideas of literary texts.¹⁹

Nevertheless, I believe that a study of how the people of a certain period shaped its history into myths, or, how they turned to myths to get compelling ideas for the future might be more revealing than any quantifiable data from that period. "The case against the theory that ideas influence behavior is strong enough," writes Slotkin "until we reverse the burden of proof and consider the alternative hypothesis: that ideas have no influence on behavior."²⁰ A historian who emphasizes sources and findings, like Kuklick who defies the study of myth and symbols, is forced to construe his facts and findings into an intelligible story due to the narrative practices of history.²¹ Ultimately, there comes a moment where the historian must choose between "knowledge" and "understanding," whether he wants to tell the story as he has come to understand it in the form of a narrative or just cite the facts that are scientifically proven and absolute.²² Stephen C. Ausband explains, "A myth is not an erroneous picture of the world; it is just a picture" and it is that picture that is examined in this thesis.²³

To study the myths of American culture from the perspective of another culture also has implications that are worth mentioning. The Western has always been an internationally popular genre and the first scholars to treat the genre as a cultural phenomenon worthy of academic attention were actually European.²⁴ At times, it seems like other cultures have held American myths in higher regard than Americans themselves did. For instance, when the (American) Western fell into steep decline and almost disappeared from the American genre map after the Vietnam War, Norwegian author Kjell Hallbing under the pseudonym Louis Masterson kept feeding Norwegian hunger for Western myths with his remarkably popular novel series about the fictional hero Morgan Kane.²⁵ In that same period, Italian directors made successful (spaghetti) Westerns from a formalist perspective that viewed the genre primarily as a setting. In

this thesis however, I approach the Western as an American phenomenon with an exclusive focus on American films and sources. I will therefore treat the period discussed above, 1973-1990, as a significant decline since the genre, in its American form, almost disappeared from American cinema, and examine the causes for that decline by looking at social and cultural undercurrents in the United States.

To sum up, this thesis takes a Slotkinian approach in its enquiry and analysis of how three different time periods have found something in the “Geronimo story,” and the myths that surround it, that were regarded as relevant for their contemporary reality and thus explain the production. “We apprehend and try to understand the world around us by projecting primitive hypotheses about the reality we encounter,” writes Slotkin, and by applying “symbolic models,” like the Geronimo story, we strive to resolve what James A. Henretta calls “inherent contradictions between present circumstances and received wisdom.”²⁶ In 1939, Geronimo became a fictional transfiguration of Hitler and the film articulated the necessity for intervention. In the 1962 film, two strands of contemporary cultural issues play into the story: first, the film centers much on the Apaches’ problem of assimilating into white culture and escape the reservation because of bad treatment and white hypocrisy; an apt allegory for sixties Civil Rights issues. Second, with its focus on the cavalry’s pursuit of Geronimo that leads American troops into Mexico, the film becomes a complex meditation on America’s grand strategy to contain communism, which had now shifted focus to the third world, resulting in the U.S. becoming entangled in deeply complex regional conflicts. In the 1993 film, the end of the Cold War influenced the perspective of the film. In this film, Geronimo’s defeat is the end of the “history of the west” which summons the argument in Francis Fukuyama’s famous argument that the collapse of the Soviet Empire was “the end of history.”²⁷ The film is also a part of a larger Hollywood cycle of “redemption films” that redeemed white audiences from the burden of history and “shame of conquest.” Additionally I argue that the film is a reflection of a nineties crisis in masculinity in which Geronimo embodies a new model of masculinity that confronts inherited masculine models from earlier Westerns.

Issues of Representation, Authenticity and Perspective

On the evening of March 27, 1973, Native American Sacheen Littlefeather entered the stage of the 45th Academy Awards ceremony on behalf of Marlon Brando to reject the

award for his role in *The Godfather*. She cited his reasons to be “the treatment of American Indians today by the film industry...and on television in movie re-runs, and also the recent happenings at Wounded Knee.”²⁸ Since then, academic attention to Hollywood’s representation and misrepresentation of Native Americans on Screen has proliferated. In one of these works, Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor’s collected essays about *Hollywood’s Indian*, Wilcomb E. Washburn claims, “the image of the American Indian, more than that of any other ethnic group, has been shaped by films.”²⁹ This is especially true for foreign audiences, who have never seen Native Americans outside the screen, and this media thus has the power to shape their perception of Native American life, culture and history.

In another work, Armando Joseph Prats writes, “The Hollywood Indian has long suffered from representational deficiency that makes him other to whites and Native Americans alike.”³⁰ Yet, he argues that we must abandon our “pious insistence” that “Hollywood misrepresents Native Americans” and rather take it as an axiom that when “movies belong to and emerge from the conquering power” the representations will inevitably be what Robert Berkhofer has termed the “white man’s Indian”³¹ and the “cultural inheritance of those who ‘won the West.’”³²

Although Hollywood has been tremendously influential in shaping popular images of Native Americans, it did not invent “the Indian.”* According to Jack Nachbar and Michael T. Marsden, the construction of two traditional versions of generalized Indians began long before the invention of Hollywood and movies: “The innocent, Indian maiden and the noble, doomed man of nature as well as the violent, bestial savage were already common images in Europe even before America was permanently colonized.”³³ These two Indian types, the noble vanishing red man and the bloodthirsty savage have influenced the construction of two contradictory versions of “Geronimos.” The two Geronimos, the wicked and the good, have existed side by side almost from the beginning but one version always represents the hegemonic view

* Terminology is an issue when discussing the cultural successors of those who already lived on the American continent when Columbus “discovered” it. In this thesis, “Indians” and “Native Americans” are used simultaneously and the distinction between them is best explained by Ralph and Natasha Friar in *The Only Good Indian*, where they attribute the term “Native American” to “people whose ancestors were indigenous to America” and “Indian” to “illustrate the white man’s creation” and cinematic representations. “Indian” is especially apt because before Columbus there were no “Indians.” Yet, further complicating the issue, a 1995 US Department of Labor Survey discovered that nearly half of American Indians preferred “Indians” rather than “Native Americans.” Edward Buscombe, *Injuns!': Native Americans in the Movies* (London:Reaktion Books, 2006), 16-19; Ralph E. Friar and Natasha A. Friar, *The Only Good Indian: The Hollywood Gospel* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1972), 3.

and takes precedence over the other. While the early films portray Geronimo as a wicked barbarian, the later films definitely reflect the view of a “noble, doomed man of nature.”

Mistakenly, many modern critics assume that sympathetic Indian-Westerns are synonymous with “fair” and “authentic” representations. Among the *Geronimo*-films, they accuse the films in which Geronimo is murderous and cruel as distorted representations and claim sympathetic films like Walter Hill’s 1993-film to be “authentic” and “accurate.” Yet, if “authenticity” is the main concern, then the bloodthirsty and savage Geronimo is most “accurate” for how his contemporaries perceived him. Thus, cinematic representations of Geronimo can never be accurate on anything but the paradigmatic context of its release.

Another problem with cinematic “Indians” is that they have been traditionally interpreted, at least from the critics’ point of view, as “empty signifiers” and “stand-ins” to address contemporary issues other than those of Native Americans.³⁴ One example is fifties and sixties Westerns which portray conflicts between Indians and whites, a tension which critics almost exclusively see as allegories for contemporary Black-white relations.³⁵ Hence, filmmakers, writers and artists have rarely represented Native Americans on their own premises. Native American directors Chris Eyre and Sherman Alexie eloquently addressed the consequences of the issues discussed above in *Smoke Signals* (1998), where two young Native Americans must learn how to “be Indian” from the movies in order to be perceived as Indians by others.

Chapter 1:

“Thrilling Anecdotes”

The Great Depression, Fascism, Hitler and the Reincarnation of Geronimo

In 1939 when America stood between two cataclysms, the Great Depression and World War II, Geronimo got a revival and appeared in his first two sound films: in John Ford’s *Stagecoach* and Paul Sloane’s *Geronimo*. Although some directors addressed their concerns with this tense sociopolitical reality with stark social realism in a contemporary guise, Ford and Sloane understood that the mythic space of the Western was most effective for articulating solutions and ideologically grounded rationales. By evoking the memory of Geronimo, America’s former archenemy, Ford and Sloane made powerful statements about the urgency of the situation.

Apart from an analysis of the two films, this chapter also accounts for two aspects that are critical for the thesis: (a) the “canonization of Geronimo,” from his lifetime and into the two Westerns of 1939 which helps to explain why he became a potent symbol that would support political agendas of directors John Ford and Paul Sloane; and (b) the conventions of the Western genre as it develops into a “language” and when this language becomes clarified, codified and hardened it becomes available for all kinds of revisions and modifications generated by changes in the underlying mythology.¹

Although the figuration of Geronimo in both *Stagecoach* and *Geronimo* are somewhat similar they have a very different effect. Hence, the pair of films demonstrate the necessity to analyze characters for their function within a plot. My analysis of different Geronimos is therefore not primarily concerned with an isolated character analysis but an analysis of the films in which he is the dominant figure. In *Stagecoach*, Geronimo is one of several archetypal characters that Ford uses to make a highly critical comment on American society as it is recovering from the Depression. Paul Sloane’s film on the other hand is rather laudatory of America and what Franklin D. Roosevelt called its “righteous might.”² In that film, Sloane urges America to intervene with all its strength when facing enemies like Geronimo. In early 1940, this was an apt allegory for the evils that terrorized civilization in Europe that required similar American commitment.

The Canonization of Geronimo

In 1906 when Geronimo was still alive, Norman Wood claimed he was “the best advertised Indian on earth.”³ By that time, Geronimo had been a prisoner of war for twenty years and

received enormous public attention as a popular attraction in *Pawnee Bill's Wild West Show* performing self-parodies as “The Worst Indian That Ever Lived.”⁴ In 1905, Geronimo even paraded in Teddy Roosevelt’s inaugural parade in order to, in the president’s words, “give the people a good show.”⁵ He was a real and living icon who condensed a period of America’s frontier past, a past that had become increasingly popular through dime novels and fiction, and thus the real-life persona merged fiction with reality.

As a site of remembering the nation’s frontier past, the new medium of motion pictures overlapped and eventually replaced the Wild West shows through its Western genre.⁶ The Hollywood Western quickly embraced the Apaches as its favorite tribe and Geronimo became its most iconized Indian.⁷ Geronimo draws his symbolic significance from an entanglement in two larger national meta-myths, the “Myth of the Frontier” and America’s “War Myth.”

The urtext of the “Frontier Myth” is Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 essay upon the closing of the frontier called “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in which he argued that the frontier was the material condition that made possible American democracy and progress. The idea that American soil generated exceptional features that distinguished America from Europe was not new, Crèvecoeur had voiced similar ideas more than a century earlier, but Turner’s thesis became a powerful expression since he simultaneously proclaimed that the frontier was now closed and thus turned over to the realm of myths. Turner’s view suggested that the vast area of “free land” eliminated the need for one class to oppress another in America.⁸ Nonetheless, he did not pay much attention to the fact that this land was taken from Native American tribes and that the “forces of civilization”⁹ he describes were in fact, at least in the Southern states, driven by slave-based agriculture.

Another view, proposed by Buffalo Bill Cody, is arguably more accurate for a reality in which Geronimo fits better. “The bullet is the pioneer of civilization,” he proclaimed, and “deadly as has been its mission in one sense, it has been merciful in another; for without the rifle ball we of America would not be to-day in possession of a free and united country; and mighty in our strength.”¹⁰ Cody’s take on the frontier brings us to the other myth, that of America’s “War Story.” The Indian wars lay at the core of that story, which Joel P. Rhodes describes as the “success story of an embattled, outnumbered people fighting against long odds, but ultimately triumphing because of their use of violence, thus proving the righteousness of their cause and the undeniable march forward of a chosen people.”¹¹ Geronimo stood in the way, however, of that march of righteousness. During the Apache wars of the 1880s, Southwestern newspapers portrayed him and the Chiricahuas as

“murderous red devils,” “cruel, treacherous, filthy, and hopelessly savage beasts.” The *Tucson Weekly Star* reported, “All human consideration for this ferocious fiend and his diabolical band has been exhausted and nothing short of total extermination will be tolerated by the people of Arizona.”¹²

The period in which Geronimo made his raids belongs to what John Cawelti calls “the epic moment,” a period roughly between 1865 and 1900, “when the values and disciplines of American society” stood balanced “against the savage wilderness.”¹³ The Western genre is unique in its appearance because of its almost inherent reference to that epic moment and Geronimo thus becomes the very embodiment of a fundamental dichotomy within the genre between civilization and savagery.¹⁴ Because of the Western genre’s indissoluble association with delimited time (1865-1900) and geographical space (west of Mississippi), all films in which Geronimo appears will inevitably fall into the category of the Western.

Geronimo’s presence in the epic moment also causes a conjunction between him and America’s “creation story.” Michael Coyne finds Cawelti’s “epic moment” to be the core of that story and writes, “the *Republic* was conceived in Philadelphia in 1776; the *United States* was finally born of the Civil War; but *America*, creature of mythic heritage, came of age amid flying lead on countless dusty Main Streets” of the American West.¹⁵

Despite the Western’s fixation on an actual geographical and historical space, this space functions most effectively as an “imaginative” or “mythic” space that in Slotkin’s terms becomes a “metaphor for history.”¹⁶ From its revival in the late nineteen-thirties to its decline in the early seventies, the Western was a popular site for presenting “models of heroic action” or “critical positions” on contemporary America.¹⁷ Because of its rootedness in American history and myth, a “critical position” in the Western might be more effective than in any other genre because it touches the fundamentals of America.

The Revival of the Western and Geronimo’s Attack on the Stagecoach

In a 1938 article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Howard Mumford Jones argued that while fascist and communist regimes in Europe energized national patriotism by manipulating patriotic myths, America found itself in an ideological crisis. The cause of American democracy was losing out in the ideological contest precisely because these “dictator countries” had succeeded in making “patriotism glamorous.”¹⁸ Jones called for a “patriotic renaissance” that would deliberately focus on the positive elements in American history through “thrilling anecdotes” and “glorious episodes” from the past.¹⁹

Jones's call for "glamorous episodes" and "thrilling anecdotes" became the very formula for the renaissance of the Western which had been in relative decline during the depression.²⁰ Because Westerns were "ideologically seductive" and "quintessentially American" they became a popular site to express positive elements of American society and at the same time incorporate an implicit critique of fundamental contradictions and negative aspects.²¹ *Stagecoach* (1939) is a brilliant example of this and soon became a model "against which other 'A' Westerns would be measured."²² Although John Ford had not made a Western since the silent era, *Stagecoach* demonstrates Ford's extremely high consciousness of genre and form. To Andre Bazin, it is nothing less than "the ideal example of the maturity of a style brought to classic perfection...like a wheel, so perfectly made that it remains in equilibrium on its axis in any position."²³ Barry Keith Grant likewise argues that the film's strength lies in its simplicity of form, which brings out a maximum complexity of meaning in order to address its concerns.²⁴ The story line is simple and conventional: eight completely different people travel from Tonto to Lordsburg in a stagecoach. Geronimo who is on the warpath in the area complicates this journey. Scriptwriter Dudley Nichols wanted Geronimo to have an even stronger presence in the film and envisioned *Stagecoach* to be an epic Apache War drama.²⁵ Nichols's vision of an epic relates to the nature of Hollywood filmmaking at the time, which in the late thirties was a corporate process in which everything had to be discussed, and the major studios operated through highly centralized and rationalized principles of production.²⁶ Nichols quite possibly thought of the film in epic terms because, as J.E. Smyth explains, the Hollywood studios only invested in Westerns "when the scripts were connected to prestigious historical topics such as the lives of Annie Oakley, Buffalo Bill, and Wild Bill Hickok; the settlement of California; and the development of stage transport."²⁷ Film production was, as Ismael Xavier has pointed out, "like the crystal palaces of the nineteenth century...a forum for the exhibition of national values and technical achievements in the international arena."²⁸ Nichols, in his vision of a Western epic, followed the genre's convention of a historical foreword in grand rhetoric that placed a heavy weight of signification on Geronimo:

Until the Iron Horse came, the Stagecoach was the only means of travel on the American frontier. Braving all dangers, these Concord coaches – the "streamliners" of their day – spanned on schedule wild, desolate stretches of desert and mountainland in the Southwest, where in 1885 the savage struggle of the Indians to oust the white invader was drawing to a close. At the time no name struck more terror into the hearts of travelers than that of Geronimo – leader of those Apaches who preferred death rather than submit to the white man's will.²⁹

This impressive foreword never appeared in the film and Smyth sees this "partial defeat" of

the scriptwriter as a “turning point” in Hollywood history from a time where the scriptwriter had more power than the director to a more “auteurist,” and liberated role for the director.³⁰ By removing historical references and the textbook history formula, John Ford immediately gets down to the core issue, which in this film is to reflect on the contemporary conflicts of American society.

To bring out his ideas, Ford deliberately uses archetypal characters, “many already familiar enough to have become cliché,” but as Grant notes, “they are imbued with extraordinary depth and admirable artistry throughout.”³¹ Among them are a sheriff; a Southern gentleman; a cowardly but lovable stagecoach driver; an alcoholic doctor; a fat cat banker; a Virginia lady and a whore with a heart of gold. As pointed out by Slotkin, each character represents a culture or a class and the stagecoach thus becomes “America in microcosm.”³²

John Ford takes a “critical position” on the “self-congratulatory formulas of the epic Western” by using the genre conventions and criticizing the genre in its own language.³³ This position is effective because of what Michael Bakhtin calls “genre memory”: “a genre lives in the present, but always *remembers* its pasts, its beginning.”³⁴ Edward Buscombe notes, “Genre may be seen as a means of organizing artistic production so as to minimize unpredictability.”³⁵ *Stagecoach*, however, shows how one can work within a genre, make use of the rich semantic field of reference that the genre has developed and still be critical to the culture and mythology that has invented that genre. Every symbol, character and rhetorical expression in *Stagecoach* can evoke patterns of memory and a “framework of association with earlier stories” that might bring out a complexity that otherwise would take films minutes and hours of exposition to develop.³⁶

Although Ford employed archetypes and conventions, *Stagecoach* is also an innovative film that establishes three frontier icons which gained strong power of association for Ford and others to build upon in later Westerns. Geronimo is the first of these. His popularity, like the Western genre, had declined during the Great Depression. *Stagecoach* re-establishes Geronimo as a frontier icon and due to the film’s monumental popularity; the characterization of him becomes paradigmatic for the next two decades. Geronimo only has a shadowy presence in the film, but shadow is ever-present throughout the plot. The actual character does not appear until late in the film, but when he does Ford devotes a close-up shot in which Geronimo stares directly into the camera, one of only two such shots in the film (the other is the first shot of Ringo). Smyth describes his look as one of “concentrated menace.”³⁷

Many critics have complained about Ford’s Indian figurations. Such criticism

certainly has a point but only if taken out of context and plot. Geronimo and the Apaches must be understood in relation to the overarching themes and issues addressed by Ford. Buscombe points out that Indians are images “produced for the purposes of white people.”³⁸ Similarly, Tag Gallagher affirms that Indians are communicative symbols and stir Americans because they are icons constructed out of the nation’s own mythology. Thus, we must understand that a Western like Ford’s later film *The Searchers* (1956), which portrays Indians as primitive, bloodthirsty savages but at the same time uses a main character, Ethan Edwards, who is unmistakably driven by racial prejudice, is not “racist,” but “confessional.”³⁹

Second, *Stagecoach* is the film that “made” John Wayne. During his career, Wayne became the ultimate western hero: the embodiment of cultural values such as individualism, patriotism, toughness and hegemonic masculinity.⁴⁰ The power of his persona became evident when psychologists started talking of the “John Wayne syndrome” in the Vietnam era. Soldiers went to war with unrealistic hopes of “being John Waynes,” which meant a display of superhuman bravery and skills accompanied with a complete invulnerability to fear and trauma.⁴¹

Third, John Ford was the first to use Monument Valley on the Arizona-Utah state line in a popular film, a special landscape that later came to represent the West although there is no other place in the Western region that looks anything like it. During his career, John Ford made a total of nine films in Monument Valley making it his most “recognizable authorial marker.”⁴² Hence, as pointed out by Grant, “Ford’s use of Monument Valley is so distinctive that subsequent films containing scenes shot there cannot avoid invoking his name in most viewers’ imaginations.”⁴³ Walter Hill’s choice of setting *Geronimo: an American Legend* (1993) in Monument Valley is therefore significant, a point which is elaborated in chapter 3.

In *Stagecoach*, Geronimo becomes part of the landscape in Monument Valley as a force of nature. Jack Nachbar and Michael T. Marsden’s critique of Ford’s Indian figuration is a good starting point for a discussion of that aspect. About the famous attack scene they write:

...As the Stagecoach moves its white passengers across the Monument Valley toward regeneration, Geronimo and his cohorts suddenly seem to arise out of the rock formations. It is as if they are as primal, ambiguous and deadly as the desert landscape itself. They will attack the stagecoach for no other reason than it is their nature to do so.⁴⁴

There are several key points and misunderstandings here. First, they do *right* by drawing attention to the link between Geronimo and the landscape from which he appears. What they fail to recognize, however, is the function of that landscape and thereby Geronimo.

Additionally, he is like the other characters, a conventional archetype, and the persuasiveness of that character comes from the intuitive associations connoted to his name as “the worst Indian who ever lived.” The threat he poses to the community within the stagecoach brings out counter-intuitive “truths” about its passengers which brings me to the second point, that of “regeneration.” At the beginning, three characters represent “respectable society”: the Virginian lady, Lucy Mallory; the Southern gentleman Hatfield; and the banker Gatewood. The “non-respectable” are Dallas, “Doc” Boone and Ringo Kid. Dallas is, as a contemporary reviewer gently put it, a lady of “such transparently dubious virtue that she was leaving Tonto by popular request,”⁴⁵ which of course means that she is a prostitute kicked out of town by the Law and Order League.† “Doc” Boone is also forced to leave town because of alcoholism and for not having paid house rents. When the stagecoach encounters John Wayne’s character, Ringo Kid, we already know that he is dangerous to society since he has escaped prison to take revenge on the Plumber boys who killed his father and brother.

Everything the audience initially “knows” about the characters are reversed as the story progresses. Dallas has a heart-of-gold, forced into prostitution when her parents were massacred. When Doc Boone sobers up, he proves himself a good doctor with a strong sense of duty. Ringo Kid is a humble young man who treats people gently for *whom* they are. On the other hand, the representatives of “respectable society” treat people exclusively for *what* they are in terms of social status. Thus, they treat Dallas rudely. At one point Hatfield offers Mrs. Mallory a drink from his silver cup, but when Ringo reminds him “what about the other lady,” referring to Dallas, Hatfield demonstratively repockets the silver cup as “an obvious social snub to her.”⁴⁶ In another sequence, where the passengers are having dinner during a pit stop at the Dry Fork Station, Lucy Mallory ends up across Dallas at the dinner table. Hatfield immediately comes to Lucy’s rescue and proposes, “May I find you another place, Mrs. Mallory? It’s cooler by the window,” obviously to move her away from the impure Dallas.⁴⁷ The best-kept secret of the film is the pregnancy of virtuous Lucy Mallory. The Production Code forbade showing pregnancy on screen and the baby thus comes as an unexpected surprise to both audience and characters. Audience surprise is mitigated when the stagecoach driver Buck proclaims, “Why didn’t somebody tell *me!*”⁴⁸

Mrs. Mallory and Hatfield are both Southerners and their prejudiced behavior might be understood as Ford’s critique of other Westerns at the time. The Western has traditionally been linked to the South and the genre has continuously expressed Confederate sympathies,

† The Production Code naturally forbid explicit prostitution, so Ford had to make her a prostitute implicitly with small but unmistakable hints of her profession.

even though the primary dichotomy of the Western is the East-West rather than North-South polarity.⁴⁹ Pro-Southern Westerns emphasize Southern values of tradition, gentility and a strong code of honor. Many Western heroes have also been victims of the Civil War and Reconstruction.[‡] Through his southern characters however, Ford reminds his audience that the Confederacy was primarily about prejudice and racism.

When Geronimo attacks the stagecoach, Lucy Mallory forgets about her baby and Dallas is the one who steps up to protect it. In the same scene, Hatfield's code of Southern honor tells him to shoot Lucy Mallory to save her from Indian cruelty, although, as the audience has come to understand, *she* is the one that has acted cruelly the whole time. The true villain of the story, nonetheless, is Gatewood. He is on the stagecoach because he has run off with the customers' assets. According to Coyne, he is the perfect New Deal villain that "epitomizes the corruption, selfishness and hypocrisy which had wrought havoc on America over the last decade."⁵⁰ He is the weakness of the stagecoach community and when the Apaches attack, he cowardly tries to escape. Robert Sickels writes "the thousands of small farms foreclosed on during the dust bowl years of the 1930s were done so by nameless 'banks,'" but in Henry Gatewood "Ford has given the nameless, faceless institutional machine a face, which must have been particularly resonant for an audience still not fully recovered from the Depression."⁵¹

The challenges that the passengers had to endure during their trip acquired a new code of respect based on utility rather than social status. Ford uses Geronimo and the landscape of Monument Valley to emphasize that point. In Tonto, the rigid organization of the urban landscape together with the long shadow of the church symbolizes the code of civilized society. In Lordsburg, darkness hangs over a messy unorganized urban landscape full of noise and violence. Nature and Monument Valley is the only landscape that seems natural and this is where Ford brings out the natural laws or ways of treating each other. It is how people behave when Geronimo attacks that matters. Nonetheless, when they arrive in Lordsburg, society and civilization will not allow the passengers to live by their new code and forces them to ignore everything they have learned. Lucy expresses this best when she, in gratitude to Dallas, tells her "If there is anything I can do..." A change of expression in Lucy's face reveals a sudden realization that there is nothing she *can* do for Dallas. The eyes

[‡] Owen Wister's, *The Virginian* (1902) is considered by many as the first real Western novel. In the popular film about *Jesse James* (1939), which premiered about one month before *Stagecoach*, Jesse and his brother Frank are both Confederate veterans who had experienced unspeakable cruelty during the Civil War. After the war they want to live peacefully on their farm in Kansas but Eastern progressivism and aggressive capitalism, however, embodied in this film by the railroad and its agents, forces Kansas families off their land. The hero's quest is therefore to fight the modern forces of the East.

of “civilized society” despise Dallas and are incapable of seeing a person beyond her circumstances. There is no “regeneration” in Lordsburg - rather a reversal that places both characters and audience back where they started. As Slotkin puts it, “there are worse things than Apaches,” and it is “the cruelty of civilization” that Ford addresses in *Stagecoach*.⁵² Hence, Monument Valley and Geronimo become metaphors for history in which the stagecoach’s passage through Monument Valley symbolizes America’s journey through history. Like the lessons that the stagecoach passengers learned and forgot from their Geronimo-experience, Ford reminds his audience not to forget what they learned during the Depression and the New Deal era. As Slotkin notes, “Democracy, equality, responsibility, and solidarity are achieved – are visible – only in transit, only in pursuit of the goal. When the goal is reached they dissolve, and society lapses into habitual injustice, inequality, alienation, and hierarchy.”⁵³

“Wait around until they scalp us”: *Geronimo* and the Necessity of Intervention

Neville Chamberlain’s promise of “Peace in Our Time” in 1938 took on a “cruelly ironic ring the following year” when Nazi troops stormed Czechoslovakia and Poland.⁵⁴ Interventionists and isolationists divided America and Franklin D. Roosevelt promised the nation it would “remain neutral,” yet, with an oblique reference to Woodrow Wilson he added, “but I cannot ask that every American remain neutral in thought as well...Even a neutral cannot be asked to close his mind or his conscience.”⁵⁵ Clayton R. Koppes notes, “The war was an irresistible subject” and Hollywood gradually became interventionist.⁵⁶ Hollywood had started to organize in the cause against Nazism as early as 1936, when Hitler invaded demilitarized Rhineland in direct contravention of the Versailles Treaty. A group of activist artists and celebrities organized in a popular front against Fascism called the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League.⁵⁷ Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana, a staunch isolationist, claimed in December 1940 that the industry’s “propaganda for war” had become so explicit that legislation might be needed to ensure “a more impartial attitude.”⁵⁸

Paul Sloane’s *Geronimo* definitely serves the interventionist cause and the fascist subtext become apparent already in Paramount’s promotion of the film, which evoked associations with Hitler’s totalitarian aggression. Paramount promised to represent a “war-mad demon,”⁵⁹ “the fiercest of all the white man’s foes” with power and authority to control “ten-thousand war maddened savages” to terrorize the West.⁶⁰ In addition to the war-obsessed language of its promotion campaign, *Geronimo*’s significant distortion of historical facts supports an alleged Hitler allegory. First, as William Clements points out, the film

suggests that Geronimo “who after all was not even a chief among his own people” was heading a force of ten thousand warriors from “various Southwestern groups.”⁶¹ In reality, Geronimo never led more than a small band of renegades and “never became more than a minor guerilla chieftain.”⁶² The emphasis on large numbers and vast armies is likely to be more than just a dramatic device; it speaks directly to subconscious images of Hitler’s mass demonstrations of military might during the Berlin Olympics (1936) and militaristic party rallies in Nurnberg in subsequent years.

Second, as MacKinley Kantor complained in the *New York Times*, the film was set in late summer 1877, hence the role of President Ulysses Grant is inaccurate as his term ended in March that year. Kantor sarcastically noted, “Paramount had done just what certain New Dealers would like very much to do this year. They had elected their man for a third term as President.”⁶³ As a historical novelist, Kantor is probably more concerned with accuracy than the general audience. John Mack Faragher famously insisted, audiences don’t want history’s “messy facts”; they want its “meaning.”⁶⁴ Paul Sloane’s picture, as so many other Westerns, is more concerned with what Alexandra Keller has called “discursive accuracy,” that conveys the overall *meaning* and *significance* of historical events. Keller argued, “historical personages may be combined to create a single character, events may be likewise conflated or compressed, but the spectator’s sense of the episteme *may* in fact be stronger for doing so.”⁶⁵ The choice of Ulysses Grant, who is a prominent figure in American history remembered for his heroic participation in consolidating the Union during the Civil War, instead of the historically correct Rutherford B. Hayes who had a “let them go” attitude towards the seceding states⁶⁶ had obvious rhetorical and allegorical signification in a film that articulated American responsibility to intervene. The call for commitment becomes a key word in Paul Sloane’s conventional history-textbook prologue to the film:

It is after the Civil War. A restless United States strives to thrust its borders westward... but in its path stands one man alone, an Apache Chief, who defies the nation... outfights its armies... massacres its pioneers. Forty million dollars are sent to conquer him... but he remains unconquered! His name grips the country in terror...he is...GERONIMO⁶⁷

A number of dramatic scenes follow the prologue in which Geronimo wipes out villages and wagon trains. These images are juxtaposed with newspaper headlines that demand government action. The film then moves to a scene in Washington where President Ulysses Grant discusses the Geronimo problem with his advisors:

Grant: I am assigning General Steele the job to, once and for all, make peace with the Apaches.
Advisor: That is impossible Mr. President!

Grant: Why?

Advisor: ...Geronimo!

Grant: Geronimo? How can one man keep us from peace?

Advisor: In 1857, foreign troops killed Geronimo's mother, his two children and his young wife, and he swore never to stop fighting until a thousand white men had paid for each one of them.

Politician: One Indian against our whole nation?

Grant: We'll change all that...[turning to Steele]..That's your assignment...most important of all: we want to make peace with Geronimo; and through him the whole Apache nation.

Advisor: And if Geronimo refuses peace?

Grant: We'll give him war...Mister Lincoln said: "the frontiers of this country must be made safe"...I can only repeat his words...Good luck General!⁶⁸

The most notable statement in this scene is Grant's doctrine to "make the frontiers safe." Although he does not specify what the frontier must be made safe *for*, it is clear from the previous images that he refers to settlers, farmers and American business. Although Paramount had Abraham Lincoln make a similar statement in *The Plainsman* (1937), it seems more likely in its 1939-setting that this line was intended to echo President Woodrow Wilson's rationale for intervention in World War I on the basis that the "world must be made safe for democracy."

Grant ignores the advice that a liberal peace with Geronimo is impossible and he is convinced that a fair treaty and subsidies to the Indian will settle the dispute. That his most trusted General Steele is to carry out the negotiations with Geronimo makes his faith even more unshakable. The news that the Apaches will receive free supplies in an attempt at lasting peace outrage a group of businessmen who profits on selling weapons and supplies to the Indians.

Mr. Hoar: Grant must be out of his mind. He's acting like a dictator!

Gillespie: Imagine the government: furnishing food, land, blankets, houses, farming implements, horses, cattle - all free to the Indian.

Businessman 2: That's interfering with private business...they have no right to do that.

Gillespie: He amounts to putting thousands of Indians on government charity.

Businessman 3: Our children will carry the burden for generations.

Businessman 2: He'll drive this country into bankruptcy!

Mr. Hoar: We're trembling on the brink of an...

Gillespie: [hushes the other] Gentlemen...gentlemen.... restrain your patriotism until election time... We must be practical now...what can we do to save our business with these good Indians?

Mr. Hoar: The only good Indian is a dead one! And there are no profits in dead Indians...We want them alive... and Bad!

Gillespie: bravo mister Hoar...Very well put!⁶⁹

Like many other Westerns in the late thirties, the most recognizable villain is the businessman who profits on immoral enterprises. Grant and his government have decided to act and in the scene with Gillespie and the other businessmen, Sloane implies the truth to be

opposite of their crooked opinion: it is not government's interference with private business, but rather private business's interference with government policy that disturbs the equilibrium of the frontier.

Similar conflicts between Roosevelt's internationalism and private business had occurred in the previous years before the release of *Geronimo*. In 1937, Japanese cruelty against Chinese peasants during the Siege of Shanghai and the Rape of Nanking were graphically displayed on American newsreels.⁷⁰ With the subsequent sinking of the USS Panay, an American gunboat engaged in evacuating civilians, FDR and other officials were portrayed as "furious" as they contemplated a punitive response.⁷¹ Still, the official response was slow and somewhat ambivalent, probably because Japan provided the third largest market for the American surplus (surpassed only by Great Britain and Canada) and profitable trade was more important than the safety of Chinese peasants.⁷²

Another example is the New Jersey arms trader Robert Cuse who, during the Spanish Civil War, ignored Roosevelt's "moral embargo" and insisted on his right to export airplanes and engines to Franco's Republican Spain.⁷³ Roosevelt denounced Cuse's defiance of government policy as "a perfectly legal but thoroughly unpatriotic act."⁷⁴ In *Geronimo*, Gillespie embodies these unpatriotic businessmen and a critic of the *New York Times* describes him as the "frontier rat who supplies repeating rifles to the redskins."⁷⁵

At the fort in Arizona, General Steele reminds his soldiers: "Our job is to make peace with the Apaches...not to fight them." Frustrated with the policy of appeasement, Captain Bill Starrett privately tells the army scout Sneezer: "seems like we don't fight Indians anymore...we just wait around until they come and scalp us." Starrett embodies one of the most articulated heroic qualities in the Western. As "a man who knows Indians," he has access to the consciousness of the Indian, knows how to think like them and is therefore "civilization's most effective instrument against savagery."⁷⁶ The man who knows Indians sometimes make friends among them, like Hawkeye in Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* who has a Mohican sidekick, Chingachgook. The hero's considerable knowledge also makes him able to distinguish between "good" and "bad" Indians. "Bad Indians" writes Buscombe, "are those who are savage and hostile and will not recognize the inevitability of white conquest."⁷⁷ Starrett has realized that Geronimo falls into that category and his conviction strengthens when a pioneer who barely survived one of his attacks explains, "he didn't seem human...like a ghost...a shadow... he'd strike and then he disappeared."⁷⁸ Within a 1939 context Starrett's recognition appeals to a necessity of distinguishing between

enemies and that Hitler was unlike any enemy America and civilization had faced since Geronimo.

In a heroic effort to save the General's son, John Steele, Starrett sacrifices his own life so that John can escape. Geronimo, now truly unstoppable, puts on Starrett's uniform and clandestinely infiltrates the cavalry to kill the General. To hide his identity among the cavalry he even shoots and kills one of his own Apache braves making his immorality unmistakable. John Steele discovers Geronimo's attempted assassination of his father in the very last minute. The cavalry then captures Geronimo, which is another distortion of historical facts that speaks to a contemporary subtext. Angela Aleiss argues, "the fact that Geronimo surrendered seemed unattractive during an era in which the government wished to glorify military strength."⁷⁹ Sloane also reminds his audience that when facing an enemy capable of unspeakable violence they must not forget their own values. When Geronimo and the Apaches capture Starrett and John Steele, they torture them for information. When the cavalry captures Geronimo, they treat him in obvious accordance with the Hague and Geneva conventions.

At the film's end, we are back in Washington where President Grant posthumously gives the Congressional Medal of Honor to Starrett. The President proclaims, "So long as there are such men as you, the frontiers of this country will always be safe." The use of plural speaks to an idea of new frontiers in 1939 that once again need the courage of brave American men to "be made safe." *Geronimo* thus provided a historical and mythological warrant to bring America back to the world of nations. It is altogether fitting that when the U.S. entered the war, paratroopers shouted "Geronimo" as they were airborne. Paramount naturally ascribed this to Sloane's *Geronimo* and gave wide circulation to the story that paratroopers at Fort Benning had started to use the battle cry after having watched the film.⁸⁰ In an article about the 501st Parachute Battalion, the *New York Times* reported that shouting "Geronimo" gave the paratroopers something to say and think about before making the jump: "Geronimo was a tough and wily Indian chief who gave the Army a lot of trouble in the old days...[he] epitomize[d] the desired qualities of a parachutist –toughness and wiliness."⁸¹ The spokesmen for the Obama administration cited this military tradition of yelling "Geronimo" when Native American groups complained about the use of code for assassinating bin Laden, and insisted "Geronimo" was the signal that the mission had succeeded and that "Jackpot" was the code name for Geronimo. That the administration in 2011 had to explain and apologize for the unfortunate association between Geronimo and an American enemy reveal that much had changed since the 1940s when the Apaches could

allegorize Nazi evil. A reviewer in the *Chicago Tribune* said that Chief Thundercloud played Geronimo so “savagely” and “convincingly” as a war-mad demon, that the director must have “double checked on his weapons” since Thundercloud might lose himself too completely to the role.⁸²

Myth, symbols and their meaning change over time and Slotkin argues that the viability of a myth “depends on the applicability of its particular terms and metaphors to the peculiar conditions of history” and the strength of a myth thus lies in its flexibility.⁸³ The next chapter examines how Geronimo became “good” in 1962 and argues that developments within the Western genre, American domestic race issues, and foreign policy involvements in the third world play into the construction of a very different Geronimo.

Chapter 2:

“Surrender at Sundown” Constructive Dissent through “Counterculture Geronimo”

President John F. Kennedy “tapped a vein of latent ideological power” in 1960 when he called for heroism on America’s “New Frontier.”¹ The power of the Kennedy rhetoric was its call for commitment and for getting involved: to be pioneers on that “New Frontier.”² The frontier imagery evokes a metaphorical space with prospects for the future with diametrically opposed outcomes: a future of unlimited progress and freedom, or, with lack of sufficient commitment, ultimate disaster.

Kennedy also spoke of unfinished business. The revolutionary beliefs of America’s Founding Fathers were still at issue and fought over around the world. Domestically, he saw himself as an extension of his democratic predecessors Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose promises of New Freedom and New Deal were yet to be fulfilled. In the sixties, the first and most obvious of America’s unfulfilled promises was that of equality and Civil Rights for America’s people of color, an issue that Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge referred to as America’s “Achilles’ heel before the World.”³

The previous chapter demonstrated that within an ideologically tense world where fascism and communism threatened democracy, the Western became a safe haven for American directors to comment on both positive and negative aspects of their own society without benefiting America’s ideological competitors. The reason is, according to Slotkin, that the genre is safely set “in the past” and associates itself with “the heroic fable of American progress” and patriotism.⁴ This tradition of the Western continued into America’s Cold War era, when the domestic Red Scare severely affected Hollywood and the content of its films. In this atmosphere, the infamous *House Un-American Activities Committee* (HUAC) conducted a witch-hunt on Hollywood that blacklisted directors and screenwriters. The result was an “age of conformity” where makers of film became less brave and more careful in their message.⁵ “Hollywood was suffused with fear,” Robert Sklar writes, and “creative work at its best could indeed not be carried on in an atmosphere of fear.”⁶ Sklar’s argument does not apply for the Western however, which experienced a “golden age” in the fifties and sixties both quantitatively and qualitatively.

One of the best examples of a strong but subtle critique of American society in a Western is Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952) about Marshall Will Kane who must face a group of outlaws alone as his fellow townspeople cowardly refuses to help him. *High Noon*'s blacklisted screenwriter Carl Foreman said it was a "Western about Hollywood," where he used "the Western background to tell a story of a community corrupted by fear" with implications "obvious to everyone who saw the film."⁷ Hence, the release of *High Noon* makes the ending of *Stagecoach* almost prophetic and Zinnemann is conscious of its legacy when he makes an almost identical ending in *High Noon*. Like Ringo Kid who faced the Plummer boys in Lordsburg, Will Kane faces the three criminals by himself. Then, as in *Stagecoach*, the Marshall and his wife enter a wagon and ride out of town. When Ringo Kid and Dallas rode out of Lordsburg, Doc Boone remarked, "That saved them from the blessings of civilization." In *High Noon* such remark is redundant because as Bakhtin proclaimed; "a genre remembers its past."⁸

Although *High Noon* "became a cinematic and ideological touchstone against which other directors sought to define their visions of the proper role of the individual in American society,"⁹ the most common criticism incorporated in the nineteen-fifties Western was that of racism and Civil Rights. Western directors found Indian-white relations on the frontier to be an apt allegory for commenting on these issues. Two influential Westerns that did this are Delmer Daves's *Broken Arrow* and Anthony Mann's *Devil's Doorway* (both 1950). The latter contains the most radical critique: A Shoshone Indian, Lance Poole, served dutifully for the Union Army in the Civil War, but when he returns home to his farm in Wyoming his reception is far from a hero's welcome. He faces prejudice and racism and white land-grabbers are trying to dispossess his family from the land. In the post-war era, this was a powerful allegory for African-American World War veterans who had returned from fighting oppression elsewhere in the World, to find that fundamental freedoms were not yet attained in their own country.

Broken Arrow was more optimistic and set the tone for a wave of sympathetic Indian Westerns in the 1950s. The hero of *Broken Arrow* is white prospector Tom Jeffords, who shows empathy for both sides in the Apache war, and is able to establish a liberal peace with the peace-minded Apache Chief Cochise. Jeffords and Cochise establish their peace upon a set of "liberal principles" and common "economic understanding."¹⁰ For its message of liberal peace, *Broken Arrow* received

a Golden Globe Award for “Best Film Promoting International Understanding.” Geronimo, however, is a snake in the garden that rejects this peace and bluntly states, “It is not the Apache way to be grandmothers to cattle” rejecting Cochise’s choice of “the white way.” *Broken Arrow* thus represent a continuity in the figuration of Geronimo from *Stagecoach* and 1939-*Geronimo* as the “intractable, rejectionist Indian.”¹¹ *Broken Arrow*’s sequels, *The Battle of Apache Pass* (1951), *The Conquest of Cochise* (1953) and *Taza, Son of Cochise* (1954), upheld the distinctive characterization between the two Apaches; Cochise is the good Indian that can cooperate with the whites while Geronimo is “consistently portrayed as implacably hostile, one who refuses to see the logic of assimilation.”¹² Deliberate casting sharpens this contrast. A white actor, Jeff Chandler, plays Cochise while Native American Jay Silverheels plays Geronimo. Cochise was “handsome and charming” while Geronimo was “thickset, with coarse, fleshy features and a guttural voice.” Hence, as Buscombe recognizes “it’s not hard to guess whom the white audience is supposed to identify with.”¹³ The choice of a white actor familiar from numerous TV-Westerns, Chuck Connors, to play the title character in *Geronimo* (1962) is therefore a significant choice and “a clear signal that a more sympathetic treatment is being considered.”¹⁴

**“Meeting Freedom’s Challenge on the Firing Line”:
Geronimo Fighting the Negroes’ Cause for Civil Rights and Equality**

“They don’t make Injun pictures the way they used to” a critic wrote about Arnold Laven’s *Geronimo* (1962), in which Laven develops a perspective that departs significantly from the 1939 *Geronimo* of Paul Sloane and tells the story of Geronimo’s resistance from an Apache perspective with a clear Indian-sympathetic bias.¹⁵ Thus, *Geronimo* like *Broken Arrow* relates to what Slotkin calls “the cult of the Indian,” a “pro-Indian” type of Western which addresses contemporary race issues. Slotkin notes that the “Cult of the Indian” and the number of “pro-Indian” Westerns increased during periods of “intensified civil-rights activism, in 1950-55 and 1960-64,” of which the two films fit suitably in their respective period.¹⁶

Steve Neale, however, objects the idea that Indian Westerns have to be about black-white issues and argues that Indian-white issues have been “significant enough” to provide a contemporary social and political subtext for these films. He points out that in the early sixties for instance, Indians were encouraged to leave reservations

and relocate to cities as part of an assimilation policy but also with the intention of making the reservation lands available for commercial exploitation.¹⁷ Neale's argument is, however, probably more valid for the Westerns of the late sixties and early seventies because of the achievements and publicity of the Red Power movement and the American Indian Movement, but for audiences in the fifties and sixties, as John Lenihan insists, "the racial question chiefly involved black America."¹⁸ For instance, when Kennedy said that America wished to see itself as a land of the free, without class or ghettos, he remarked that this was true for everyone except one minority – "the Negroes."¹⁹

Racism is a central issue in Arnold Laven's *Geronimo* (1962), which bases its plot on the historical events surrounding Geronimo's surrender in 1883. The opening scene shows a band of war weary Apaches ready to surrender to the U.S. Cavalry. They agree to live on the San Carlos Reservation for a promise of food and shelter. This agreement brings to an end the long struggle familiar to the contemporary audience from numerous Apache-war Westerns from the fifties. Geronimo is not at the site of surrender, because, as a fellow Apache explains to the puzzled Cavalry officials, he had agreed to "surrender at sundown." When Cavalry Captain William Maynard asks "where is he now?" the Apache replies, "He is keeping a promise," quite contrary to what the whites are doing. The film then moves to a scene in which Geronimo heroically captures the wild horse he has promised a young boy. When Geronimo finally appears at the negotiations, he questions the treaty: "where does it say that we are Apaches?" "That is understood," Captain Maynard replies, "you'll be treated accordingly." Maynard gives his answer with a hint of disdain, a feature of his character already revealed in the opening scene where he told Lieutenant John Delahay: the Apaches are "nothing but a pack of dirty wild animals."²⁰

When Geronimo arrives at the San Carlos reservation, he is not impressed with the way the Apaches are treated. They are cowed into food lines and branded like cattle. Reverend Jeremiah Burns who runs the reservation, refers to the Apaches as "his children," and forces them to abandon all "savage ways." The reverend is a hypocrite and willing to ease his "moral obligations" for the right price and sells of the land reserved for the Apaches when a wealthy speculator offers a good price. Furious with this betrayal, Geronimo and a group of followers escape the reservation and flee into Mexico.

In Mexico, Geronimo tries to establish a new and peaceful life for his tribe. Shortage of food, however, leads to desperation and the Apaches ride out to steal food from frontier farms. This raid differs significantly from those in *Stagecoach* and 1939-*Geronimo*, where Indians attacked and raided for no other reason than their “primitive nature.”²¹ Silently in the night, Geronimo leads his Indians to eat whatever they can find at a farm without disturbing its owner. The farmer, who appears to be a lonely widow, discovers their theft. Outnumbered, she feels forced to invite the Apaches to dine inside her house. When the dinner party turns into a disagreement about manners, Geronimo looks firmly at her and she screams, “You’ll have to kill me first, I swear it, you’ll have to kill me first.”²² This desperate statement, which clearly hints at her fear of rape, touches racist stereotypes at their core.

A premise of a nineteenth-century cavalryman fighting Indians was to “save the last bullet for yourself,” to escape the worse-than-death scenario of being captured by Indians. This premise was even stronger for women since a rape by Indians stripped you of all dignity, even humanity, and you deserved to die if that happened to you.[§] Arnold Laven’s *Geronimo* does not rape the widow however. Instead, he compliments her for having a “fine-looking” son and asserts, “through him your husband lives.” Geronimo then leaves the farm without causing any more trouble. It is unlikely that Laven wanted to imply that Indian cruelty in the nineteenth century was a hoax and thus we can assume he intended the scene as a critique of racist African-American stereotypes in the sixties’ segregated South. The most radical defenders of segregation, those who are apologists for lynching and speak of white supremacy, claim their rationale for supremacist vigilantism to be deterrence of the most characteristic crime of black men: raping white women.²³ Since Geronimo’s actions disprove racist stereotypes, the film offers a profound commentary on the psychology of racism and the very notion of race.

Similar to the firm and violent response by Maynard and the cavalry to the just and relatively passive resistance of Geronimo, the early sixties had witnessed several violent responses to nonviolent protests against inequality in the American South. When the passive sit-in movement gathered momentum, the already violent resistance

[§] Paul A. Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 144. In 1872, General Philip Sheridan refused to authorize the payment of five ponies to ransom a white woman held captive by the Indians, “I cannot give my approval to any reward for the delivery of this white woman,” declared Sheridan. “After having her husband and friends murdered, and her own person subjected to the fearful brutality of perhaps the whole tribe, it is mock humanity to secure what is left of her for the consideration of five ponies.”

of white segregationists intensified. The newly formed National Knights of the KKK (Ku Klux Klan) demonstrated its strength by burning more than a thousand crosses in the Deep South in 1960.²⁴ The national media enlisted in the struggle against racism and showed graphic footage of horrific events such as the attack on Freedom Riders in Alabama that resulted in a public outcry and condemnation of Southern racism. “I pay tribute to those citizens North and South” said Kennedy, “who are meeting freedom’s challenge on the firing line.”²⁵ Arguably, no other symbol could transmit that proverb into a mythological narrative better than Geronimo could.

Although *Geronimo* is preoccupied with racism and most critics read this kind of racism within the Westerns as allegory for black/white relations, the film seems to be equally concerned with the implications of racial ideologies when projected on foreign enemies. The film’s partial setting in Mexico where the U.S. Cavalry chases Geronimo in a foreign country, imply a foreign policy subtext. If Indian-white relations on the frontier proved apt as allegory for contemporary black/white relations it was arguably even more effective as a comment on American foreign policy that by 1962 had shifted focus to treacherous landscapes in the third world that came to be imagined as “Indian country.”

***Geronimo* (1962) and the moral ambiguities of “bearing any burden”**

In his inaugural address, President Kennedy declared America would “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”²⁶ This speech was the culmination of an increasing concern in American foreign policy with the third world and especially Latin America. Kennedy and his advisors saw Latin America as the “most dangerous area in the world” and the stability of that area was critical to safeguard America and American interests against “communist infiltration.”²⁷

In their call for increased American attention to the Western hemisphere, political scientists wrote in a language that echoed the paternal language of the nineteenth-century “white man’s burden.” In the influential magazine *Foreign Affairs*, Louis Halle under the pseudonym “y” called for a “noblesse oblige” in America’s relation to its neighbor republics: the Latin American republics were like children, “younger and less mature than the United States” and their “achievement of greater maturity” was “the responsibility of adult nations.”²⁸ This “noblesse oblige” finds an

expression in *Geronimo*, through the reverend who refers to the Apaches as his “children” and his remark about Geronimo that “it takes more than a child of the devil to beat the lord.”²⁹

The Cold War’s increasing focus on the third world dramatically changed the rules of the game. In a highly alarmist tone, James H. Doolittle warned that America was now “facing an implacable enemy whose avowed objective is world domination by whatever means and at whatever cost.” In fact, The Doolittle Report suggested, “there are no rules in such a game” and “acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply.” Doolittle recommended Americans to abandon their principles of “fair play” and “learn to subvert, sabotage and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated and more effective methods than those used against us” in order to survive.³⁰ In what became a “fight for the Third World,” the United States supported anticommunist regimes and movements as part of its grand strategy to contain communism. Through counterinsurgency, covert action and military intervention, the U.S. found itself entangled in deeply complex regional affairs in the Philippines (1953), Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Colombia (1957), Indonesia (1958) and Tibet (1959).

The Western quickly found a way to address American entanglements in the third world. In Mexico, the Western found an apt mythic space to address issues of counterinsurgency and American behavior abroad. Richard Slotkin calls this subtype of the Western “counterinsurgency Westerns,” which usually involved “a group of American gunfighters [who] crosses the border into Mexico during a time of social disruption or revolutionary crisis to help the peasants defeat an oppressive ruler, warlord, or bandit.”³¹ Robert Aldrich’s *Vera Cruz* (1954), which arguably invented this formula, tells the story of ex-confederate Ben Trane who travels to Mexico to profit as a mercenary during the Franco-Mexican War. In Mexico, he meets Joe Erin and other cynical American mercenaries who offer their gun-fighting expertise to the belligerents without consulting any principle or cause. Hence, the mercenaries in *Vera Cruz* become parallels of the dilemma expressed in the Doolittle Report: “Just how dirty, how like the enemy an American hero can become and still remain an American hero?”³²

In *Geronimo*, issues of American third world conduct are expressed through the Indian-war metaphor which reflects a tendency in the rhetoric of counterinsurgency that increasingly used related tropes after 1961, “in part because of

the parallels between these kinds of fighting – both which took place in a ‘wilderness’ setting against a racially and culturally alien enemy.”³³ While the traditional counterinsurgency Westerns were concerned with reflections about the American hero abroad, *Geronimo* nuances the image of the American enemy. In the sequence below, Geronimo explains his motivation for fighting to his friend Mangas in a dialogue that implies a revisionist take on the enemy:

Geronimo: We’re gonna fight them Mangas

Mangas: Yes, I see

Geronimo: No, you don’t see. You don’t see at all. This time we don’t fight just to stay alive like before. This time we declare war!

Mangas: Fifty men declare war against the whole United States. What kind of a war is *that*?

Geronimo: Don’t laugh at me!

Mangas: I’m not laughing; I’m crying...because you are crazy, you know...Geronimo, we have no chance. We can’t win...and we’ll probably all die...even I know that.

Geronimo: No Mangas. We *can* win. We can win because we have no chance. We will fight long enough...long enough so the people of the United States begin to wonder why such a small handful of men go on fighting a war against a big country as theirs. Long enough until they ask themselves: Why do the Apaches starve and die instead of surrender. That’s when they’ll begin to understand. And when they do, maybe their leader, Mister Washington himself, will come right here and we’ll have a new treaty. A treaty that says how important it is for all men to be proud and strong and believe in what they are.³⁴

Captain Maynard, however, is unable to see any logic or principle behind the Apache resistance and continues what becomes a personal vendetta against Geronimo. Here the nineteen-sixties *Geronimo* departs dramatically from the nineteen thirty-nine version. In Paul Sloane’s *Geronimo*, the hero is the cavalry captain who ignores the General’s order of appeasement and takes the conflict in his own hands. In Arnold Laven’s *Geronimo*, the same actions make Captain Maynard a villain blinded by prejudice and ignorance.

Through negotiations with the Mexican army, Captain Maynard is allowed to enter Mexico with the cavalry. Maynard’s crossing of the Mexican border is a distinct signifier of a third world counterinsurgency subtext. In the “cavalry Westerns,” especially John Ford’s *Fort Apache* (1948) *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949) and *Rio Grande* (1950), the Mexican border and Rio Grande is “a fixed perilous border” that cannot be crossed by the Americans. In the “counterinsurgency Westerns,” *Vera Cruz* (1954) and *Magnificent Seven* (1960), American merchants can cross the border as independent professional gunfighters because they are unattached to official authorities.³⁵ In *Geronimo*, the U.S. cavalry negotiate with the Mexican army and gets

permission to enter Mexico as uniformed soldiers. In Mexico, Maynard's obsessive urge to kill Indians intensifies. At one point, he starts shooting randomly into the bushes around him and accidentally kills Mangas, who is hiding there. Maynard, who does not know he has killed an Indian, explains his bullet frenzy as an "Old Indian trick," a statement that echoes Doolittle's proposal to adopt enemy tactics.

To Maynard, the conflict with the Apaches is racial, and racial conflicts have biological stakes.³⁶ Marine Colonel Lewis "Chesty" Puller voiced ideas similar to those of Maynard in a speech he gave to his troops in Korea:

...there's no secret weapon for our country but to get hard, to get in there and fight...Our country won't go on forever, if we stay soft as we are now. There won't be an America – because some foreign soldiers will invade us and take our women and breed a hardier race.³⁷

In *Rio Grande* (1950), John Ford elaborated the implications of Puller's rationale when he showed a Mexican village taken over by Apaches. "The fate of the Mexican village" writes Slotkin, "suggests that a nation that is weak, lacking the political will to take up arms on its own behalf, will be extinguished as a nation, its land occupied by aliens, its posterity defiled by the rape or terminated by the slaughter of its women and children."³⁸ Slotkin notes that there can be no "direct link" between Puller's quote and *Rio Grande* since he made the statement five days before the premiere. Nevertheless, they both "resounded to the same crisis in terms provided by the culture's mythology." Hence, the relation between the quote and the film is a valuable illustration of how military colonels in Korea and film directors share the same understanding of the world and how a nation's culture is put together in "steams of thinking" and artistic works.³⁹

By 1962, the rationale of *Rio Grande* and Puller was the crisis. In the best-selling novel *The Ugly American* (1958), Eugene Burdick and William Lederer presented, in a fictional disguise, an explanation for why America was failing in its quest to win the "hearts and minds" of the third world. *The Ugly American* suggested that America's failed diplomacy was due to cultural arrogance: refusing to engage in other cultures and learn foreign languages. American diplomats alienated themselves from the local communities and became isolated in "golden ghettos within the capital cities."⁴⁰ Hal Brand characterizes the competition for mastery in the global south as a set of "naïve and simple-minded policies" whose "superficiality" and "illusions" were repeatedly punctured by "the stubborn realities of hemispheric affairs."⁴¹ In

Geronimo, Laven incorporates a critique of American diplomacy similar to the one offered in *The Ugly American* that also fits Brand's description.

What generated this critique in the case of *Geronimo* is likely the failed invasion of Cuba in 1961, which historians and political scientists have rendered as American foreign policy's "single most humiliating event."⁴² The CIA and the government dispatched a brigade of 1,500 Cuban exiles to invade Cuba, ignite a revolution and overthrow Fidel Castro. The invasion was a complete failure; the Cubans won a swift victory, imprisoned the exiles and U.S. government's involvement in the operation was discovered and exposed to the world. A contemporary journalist, Theodore Draper, called the operation "a perfect failure," and Harris Wofford termed it "a case study in how not to govern and how not to deal with world affairs."⁴³ Internationally, the operation was understood as, to use Schlesinger's terms, a return to "big-stick, gunboat-diplomacy." The failure enhanced Castro's popularity, and his supporters viewed him as "the defender of the colored races against imperialism."⁴⁴ At home and abroad, liberals attacked John F. Kennedy for "intervening in the internal affairs of a sovereign state and jeopardizing the goodwill of other Latin American nations."⁴⁵ In the following sequence, U.S. Senator Conrad, has arrived with a committee to investigate the sixth cavalry's failure to conclude the Geronimo campaign. The dialogue echoes some of the criticism Kennedy received after the Bay of Pigs.

Senator Conrad: Maybe if you read some of these General - you would understand our position better. Letters, newspaper articles, pressure from all sides. Some of them angry, some of them simply asking for an explanation. Like this one, a New York editorial: "Are we overlooking some important *behind* Geronimo's fight?" or this one: "Are we fighting a war without honor?"

General Crook: It's hardly a war, Senator!

Senator Conrad: No matter what you call it; it's still the same question. And we're asking it of you because it's being asked of us. By the people.

General Crook: With the past three months, ever since that encounter in San Carlos, Geronimo's attacks have been diminishing...they're obviously facing starvation; his supplies are cut off they can't have much ammunition...it's a hopeless position.

Senator Conrad: Then why doesn't he surrender?

General Crook: You've got to understand senator: the man is occupying an area that...it's like a maze in there...five-hundred square miles of some of the wildest country in Mexico, we're patrolling it the best way we can.

Senator Conrad: You still haven't answered my question!

General Crook: Why does any man hold out in the face of impossible odds? I don't know the answer to that one senator - I am a soldier not a philosopher...⁴⁶

There are three key points in this dialogue. First, it addresses the questions of counterinsurgency and covert action. "It's hardly a war," says General Crook drawing

attention to the issue of semantics in foreign policy. Second, General Crook's explanation that they are unable to catch Geronimo because of the maze-like and wild country speaks to the problem of fighting away from familiar territory. At one point, Geronimo jumps over a canyon to escape Mexican soldiers in a demonstration of his superior mastery of the landscape.

Unlike Sloane's 1939 version of *Geronimo* where the title character was an almost unmistakable allegory for Hitler, Laven seems to have a strong inclination to avoid direct allegorical readings. By using the mythic space of the Western, which in Slotkin's view serves as a metaphor for history, directors can play with cultural undercurrents, merge historical events and personas to create an elucidating narrative. Making comments that are more explicit on current events leaves directors susceptible to strong criticism for manipulating facts and for propaganda. To make a film about the Bay of Pigs was unthinkable in 1962 and if Laven had done such a thing, the House Un-American Activities Committee would have called him in to answer for his actions. It is "safer" to shape the past into a compelling narrative that addresses the present. That might have been what Steven Spielberg thought when he made last year's *Lincoln* (2012), a film set in the past but apparently inspired by contemporary political ferments and increasing polarization in American politics. Parallels have been made before between America's 16th and 44th, but film critics and historians were more preoccupied with commenting on the film's material accuracy: whether Lincoln actually said or meant this and that and whether the White House has the correct interior decorations than to comment on the clearly identifiable contemporary subtext.⁴⁷ Spielberg, who has openly supported Obama on several occasions, might have thought that the best way to support the President's reelection campaign on screen, or generate support for his policies when reelected, was to make a film about a mythic figure from America's history that faced comparable challenges. Spielberg said about *Lincoln*, "So he [Lincoln] knew he had to get things done, but he didn't have the votes. That's at the heart of our movie, this fight to get the votes, to do the right thing."⁴⁸

From a structuralist point of view, especially that of Levi Strauss, these cultural undercurrents or "structures" may find their way unconsciously into the narrative and does not necessarily have to be part of the director's agenda in the construction of a cinematic text. With an allegorical approach to film, one might be misled to make assumptions about critical positions when directors, especially in the

Western's golden era, frequently used the genre to take such positions. Hence, a film that focuses on Indian-white relations might evoke a memory stream from films that used this as an unmistakable comment on black-white relations while this particular film does not, but we are led to assume it is from these associations. Nonetheless, when studying three different films that work from the same basic facts about Geronimo; the way in which these facts are organized, presented, emphasized or de-emphasized and interpreted; will reveal certain patterns of difference between the films that can be historicized and ascribed to historical currents of the different periods. In addition, we cannot leave out the possibility that the text works both consciously and unconsciously at the same time. We may then, treat the text as quasi-conscious and seek to historicize both the conscious and the unconscious, in which the latter is certainly the most challenging of the two.

The possibility of a "political unconscious" as Fredric Jameson perceives it, is evident in my third point about the dialogue between Conrad and Crook. Both the Senator and the General are somewhat fascinated and respectful towards Geronimo and the film exhibits a positive representation of higher authority. "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable,"⁴⁹ said Kennedy in 1962 and in *Geronimo*, these unnamed villains are not a Latin American guerilla leaders but an U.S. Cavalry Captain who has been granted too much liberty of action. *Geronimo* then, becomes a form of constructive dissent that objects to America's direction in foreign policy and demand more openness and apparently the film believes in the President's ability to solve the crisis. Geronimo asserts this logic when he proclaims he will continue his resistance until he obtains an audience with "Mister Washington."

The film then, seems to have registered a present pattern of optimism towards strong leadership that was emerging by the time of *Geronimo*'s release. Several writers have drawn similar attention to a 1960 musical, *Camelot*, which premiered one month after the election of John F. Kennedy. *Camelot* articulated a positive take on strong leadership and represented King Arthur as a noble king who saw his role to be in the service of his people and channel his "might" into the "cause of right."⁵⁰ The "Kennedy Myth," especially after his death, was empowered by continuous references and parallels to the Camelot imagery.⁵¹

One aspect of the film speaks to a more conscious invocation of the Kennedy "current": the casting of Adam West, who has a striking resemblance to America's

35th President to play *Geronimo*'s most sympathetic and righteous character, Lt. John Delahay. John Delahay is willing to face a court martial for his continuous questioning of Maynard's conduct and he advocates for peaceful negotiations with the Apaches, and like Kennedy in his addresses on Civil Rights, points out a people's entitlement to human dignity. At the end of *Geronimo*, Senator Conrad arrives on the battlefield in crucial time before Maynard, who has now brought in heavy artillery to bombard their hideout in Mexico, massacres the Apaches. The Senator shouts up to Geronimo:

The President has asked me to come here and talk with you. He thinks there might be a way for us to settle our differences with a greater understanding on both sides. He feels that if we ask you to live under our laws, then these laws should give you the respect and dignity that is your rightful heritage.⁵²

These words make Geronimo surrender. Together with his tribe, he walks down the hill to meet the Senator and become a citizen of the United States. The conclusion of *Geronimo* echoes Richard Hofstadter's famous formulation that "It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one,"⁵³ and America can win the hearts and minds of all peoples as long as it lives up to its own principles. As in *Broken Arrow*, liberal peace is established upon common interests and understandings. Ultimately, Geronimo understands that his vision for a better future for the Apaches is best provided under the protection of the American flag. Geronimo has thus become more like Cochise than the original Geronimo character from the thirties and early fifties. All his rejectionist impulses are gone and there is no sense of loss when Geronimo finally surrenders, rather relief that the fighting is over and he can live a peaceful family life with his wife Teela and their newborn son. In the course of resistance, Geronimo has even changed his mind about his son's future: he initially wanted him to be a warrior but now thinks "maybe he should read." The son was born just as the battle's crescendo took place, right before Senator Conrad came to the rescue, and we might therefore interpret the conception as a powerful signifier of new beginnings. A contemporary critic wrote that the film's "uplifting ending" may "fool youngsters into concluding that the Indians got a decent shake – a false note of resolution contradicted to this day."⁵⁴

This euphemistic ending would be impossible ten years later due to a growing "cognitive dissonance" with the events in Vietnam.⁵⁵ John Hellman notes, that "Americans entered Vietnam with certain expectations that...a distinctly American story, would unfold."⁵⁶ *Geronimo* (1962) certainly reflects such a story with its

consistent belief in the “American war story,” in which the American enemy, Geronimo, finally understands his own good and surrendered to America, the provider of “good.” But, as Hellman notes, “When the story of America in Vietnam turned into something unexpected, the true nature of the larger story of America itself became the subject of intense cultural dispute” and the legacy of Vietnam thus represent “the disruption” of the American story.⁵⁷ In Engelhardt terms, it was “the end of victory culture.”⁵⁸

Gulliver’s troubles in “Indian Country”: The Vietnam-Indians and Geronimo as the “Better” American

The Vietnam conflict was understood in “Western terms” from the beginning: American troops described Vietnam as “Indian country” search-and-destroy missions as a game of “Cowboys and Indians” and officials justified the “massive military escalation” by “citing the necessity of moving the ‘Indians’ away from the ‘fort’ so that the ‘settlers’ could plant ‘corn.’”⁵⁹ When the “credibility gap” between the reality described by the officials and that “perceived by the soldiers and journalist at ground level” became wider, a new “cult of the Indian” emerged that criticized the myth in its own terms.⁶⁰

Robert B. Ray views the countercultures “preoccupation with received frontier emblems” as “self-contradictory” since the resistance wanted to criticize the myth they thought had led America into war.⁶¹ But the powerful identification between the anti-war movement and the cultural symbolism of Native Americans is a manifestation of the multifocality of the frontier as a mythic space that might be one of the major causes for its persistence. Protestors did not have to carry a Viet Cong flag to express their state of mind but could symbolically express sympathy for the enemy by identifying with the traditional “others” from America’s “oldest and most characteristic” myth: the Native Americans of the frontier.⁶² Nothing gave this “counter-myth” more impetus than the horrid pictures published in *Time*, *Life* and *Newsweek* magazines in late autumn 1969. These pictures showed unspeakable atrocities committed by American troops on civilians, women and children in the My Lai village the year before.

Until Vietnam, violence in the Western was always clean: the hero redeemed the town from the outlaws by killing them. In *Stagecoach*, Ringo confronts his foes with only three bullets, one for each of the Plummer brothers. During Captain

Maynard's bombardment in *Geronimo*, Geronimo recommends Teela to surrender and asserts, "They won't harm you." After My Lai, such confrontations ended almost exclusively in collateral damage. *Little Big Man* and *Soldier Blue* (both 1970), for instance, draw explicit parallels between the atrocities committed by Americans in Vietnam and the Indian massacres at Sand Creek (1864) and Washita (1868). In her description of a "vivid scene" in *Little Big Man*, Aleiss writes, "a young Cheyenne girl runs from a burning tipi, her clothes ablaze in red flames. She screams and tumbles naked to the ground. The image recalls a popular news photo from My Lai, when a terrified and nude Vietnamese girl flees a napalm explosion"⁶³

These films were overly sympathetic towards Indians and although critics proclaimed Hollywood was finally able to represent Native Americans in an authentic way, they were no less "white man's Indians." The counterculture's "cult of the Indian" involved a high degree of "cherry-picking" from Native American culture that embraced liberating elements and ignored negative aspects, making Indians "function as surrogate hippies, tolerant of homosexuality, kind to children, engaging in free love and conversations about the meaning of life."⁶⁴ Dan Georgakas wrote, "the dignified Indian...who is invariably peace minded" is an improvement from "the grunts and howls of an earlier period but only at the lowest level: the new films tell us very little about the Native Americans and even less about ourselves and our own history."⁶⁵

Although Geronimo did not appear in any films in the period, he was a frequently used symbol. At Berkeley, he appeared on a protesters' pamphlet when hippies, students and street people fought the University over an open space called the People's Park. The pamphlet with Geronimo was directed towards authority and said, "Your land title is covered with blood. Your people ripped off the land from the Indians. If you want it back now, you will have to fight for it."⁶⁶ Charles Sonnichsen points out that "there were no Indians among them" and therefore Geronimo had become a symbol that belonged to everybody.⁶⁷ A 1971 biographer even made Geronimo the personification of the American ethos: "The spirit of the Apaches lives wherever men and women are struggling against overwhelming odds for freedom and justice. We, as Americans, should be proud that the Apaches' story is part of our country's heritage."⁶⁸

Robert Aldrich's notable film *Ulzana's Raid* (1972) refused to sentimentalize Indian behavior. Aldrich's film opens with identical premises to *Geronimo* (1962): Tired of mistreatment by agency authorities at the San Carlos Reservation, Apache

chief Ulzana escapes with a small band of followers. Unlike the peaceful Apaches in *Geronimo*, who counter all culturally inherited notions of savage cruelty, the Apaches in *Ulzana's Raid* are “capable of horrific violence: white men are tortured and their bodies mutilated, white women are raped.”⁶⁹ At the same time, the film is careful to show that “whites are also capable of vindictive violence when some soldiers mutilate the body of a dead Apache” and as the veteran scout MacIntosh wryly remarks, “kind of confuses the issue, don't it.”⁷⁰ Aldrich thus upheld the figuration of a demonized Indian and we can only speculate why he chose to use Ulzana instead of Geronimo, but the frequent representation of Geronimo as good was probably too dominant and nobody would go and see a film where he was bad. In other words, there seems to be an interplay going forward between the “good Indian” and the “bad Indian” imagery previously associated with Geronimo, and as Geronimo becomes good the “bad Indian” stereotype migrates to other fictional or less famous historical Apaches.

Jeanine Basinger argues that the Vietnam War “killed off” the Western as a popular genre. Yet, several themes, plots and characters continued to live in other genres that usurped the Western. The *Star Trek* TV series for instance, makes this usurpation almost literal in the opening voice-over that proclaims space to be our “last frontier” in which the series thus become like a “wagon train to the stars.”⁷¹ The Geronimo imagery, in its original form, inspires *Star Trek's* image of evil, the Klingons, who are a composite of movie bad-guys including Apaches and Mongol warlords. The Klingons threaten the equilibrium of the galaxy in a way that requires firm and vigilant resistance by the *Enterprise*. It is noteworthy that this implicitly racist imagery informs a show that is marked by its strong overt anti-racist polemics. As the *Star Trek* story progresses, the former enemies of the *Enterprise*, like the Klingons, are eventually incorporated in the “platoon” or “crew” as the Apaches are in Cavalry Westerns. In *Geronimo: An American Legend*, numerous Apaches are fighting for the U.S. Cavalry against Geronimo's last resistance.

Chapter 3:

“Geronimo the Beautiful”
***Geronimo* as Redemption Story**

“A handsome and respectful Western,” a reviewer said about *Geronimo: An American Legend* (1993), “that wants to simultaneously echo and modernize the myths of the past.”¹ Clements observes that nineties-*Geronimo* is by far the most “celebrated realization of Geronimo as a character in theatrical film” and several critics assumed it was an “authentic retelling” of Geronimo’s story.² But, as argued in the introduction, this authenticity only asserts that the myth and the symbol, and the generic text that transmits them, conform to a paradigmatic context. Like the previous chapters, the analysis and synthesis involved in this chapter centers on the historic, mythic and generic forces at work in creating a *Geronimo* different from earlier versions.

Since Vietnam, the Western was no longer “the storyline of first resort” for directors who wanted to tell a popular story and the release of a Western was “exceptional” rather than conventional.³ The genre’s only life-support in the late-seventies and throughout the eighties had been the Westerns of Clint Eastwood. Yet, a school of thought claimed the Western was impossible to revive and critics kept reminding Eastwood the genre was “dead.”⁴ In the nineties, however, critics proclaimed that the Western was “back.”⁵ The Western’s nineties revival was swift but significant and some of its releases, such as Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven* (1992), were huge box-office and critical successes.

The broken continuity of the Western made the production of a Western in the nineties a completely different endeavor than it was in the genre’s golden age (1950-1968). Directors and audiences no longer shared the “memory stream” and “mental vocabulary” that the genre had developed and directors had to assume that many members of the audience had never seen a Western.⁶ A natural consequence of the Western’s decline is therefore that larger Hollywood cycles inspire modern Westerns as much as trends within the genre itself. Walter Hill’s *Geronimo* (1993) for instance fits into a cycle of “redemption films” that dealt with sensitive historical issues, especially that of race. Apart from *Geronimo* and *Dances with Wolves*; *Mississippi*

Burning (1988), *Glory* (1989), *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996) and *Amistad* (1997) are notable redemption films.

About *Geronimo*, one reviewer wrote, “within a few days of each other, I saw *Schindler’s List* and *Geronimo*, and it occurred to me that both films are about Holocausts, about entire populations murdered because of their race.”⁷ *Geronimo* goes far to draw parallels between the two “holocausts,” especially in its final scene where Geronimo and the Chiricahuas are herded on to enclosed train wagons and shipped off to Florida, alluding to the trains that delivered Jews to Nazi death camps. The way this shameful story becomes one of redemption is through “identification” with an exceptional white character who distances himself from the oppressive situation.⁸ In *Geronimo*, this character is the historical Britton Davis whose first-hand account of the Geronimo campaign, *The Truth about Geronimo*, was published in 1929.

The film begins with Davis’s arrival in Arizona territory where he, surprisingly, is assigned to the two-man mission to bring in Geronimo who has promised to surrender. When Davis questions whether Geronimo will keep his promise, the other participant, Charles Gatewood, reassures him “a Chiricahua doesn’t give his word much, but when he does, he doesn’t break it.”⁹ In a powerful scene intensified by deeply evocative music, Geronimo appears out of the desert landscape to the awe and fascination of Davis who proclaims “they *really* are something.” Wes Studi, a Cherokee actor, plays Geronimo. The choice of Studi has a pretextual effect because he had become a recognizable Indian face through his roles as fierce Indian warriors, as Magua in *Last of the Mohicans* (1992) and as a tough Pawnee in *Dances with Wolves* (1990). Prats observes that a common formula of a pro-Indian Western is to “first establish the character of the Indian as Savage Reactionary; then transform that character by ways of insights that recognize both the traditional misrepresentation of the Indian and the Indian’s ideal humanity.”¹⁰ In *Geronimo*, the “savage reactionary” is already established, pre-textually, through Studi’s earlier performances.

Geronimo also suitably appears on a white horse, which is ironically revealing of his contemporary paradigmatic figuration. A few years before *Geronimo*, PBS had tackled his story in their history series *The American Experience*, with an episode that, in the words of David McCullough who made the introduction, offered a “beautiful” and “privileged view” to a “powerful American story.”¹¹ McCullough’s statement echoes the view of Geronimo’s 1971 biographer Alexander Adams, the

latter of which viewed him as the embodiment of the American ethos. The historical pendulum had swung completely and the construction of a cruel, bloodthirsty Geronimo was almost unthinkable in 1993 when Geronimo the “good” was “having things pretty much his own way.”¹² About his figuration of Geronimo, Walter Hill admitted, “to make a commercially successful product required reshuffling events and smoothing some of Geronimo’s edges.” The white horse is commonly associated with the archetype hero and Hill said himself that the film would present a “heroic version” of Geronimo and the Chiricahuas as “wonderful freedom fighters.”¹³

A number of white characters that admire and respect Geronimo reinforce the glorification of him. When Geronimo arrives at the San Carlos Reservation, for instance, General Crook greets him “it does my heart good to see you, Geronimo” and invites him in for coffee and cigars.¹⁴ The most notable white person is Cavalry Captain Charles Gatewood. He is a man of unfailing rectitude and his respect for Apache culture and way of life ensured him Geronimo’s mutual respect. Gatewood is a composite of traditional Western hero traits: he is “a man who knows Indians” and a Southerner, the first of his family to be north of the Mason Dixon line and thus knows “what it’s like to hate the blue coat.” He also fits Cawelti’s definition of the “reluctant hero”: reluctant to use his skills in violence, but when he does his skills are almost superhuman and justified as appropriate punishment for the villain.¹⁵ One scene stands out: a young Chiricahua brave challenges Gatewood to a duel to the death. Respecting the Chiricahua’s code of honor, he accepts the challenge and understands he is likely to die. He then pulls off an impressive Indian trick together with his horse and manages to kill the aggressive brave. Then, as a demonstration of his moral superiority and respect he asks one of his Indian scouts to perform the correct death ceremony for the man he just killed. Few figures in the history of the Western fits Slotkin’s definition of “a man who knows Indian” better than Gatewood. The power to resolve a crisis in a Western rests on this type of hero whose internal dynamics mirror the crisis.¹⁶ Gatewood has turned partially Indian and he feels a sense of ambiguity about his involvement in the conflict. Nevertheless, he does his duty for the side on which he has chosen to participate, partially because he knows that with his knowledge the crisis will be solved more peacefully than without him.

Geronimo is also a compound character who initially evokes Studi’s previous fierce Indian performances, as discussed above, but as the story progresses he transforms into an earthbound, spiritual and peace-minded archetype that evokes

associations with cinematic Indian chiefs like Kicking Bird (Graham Greene) in *Dances* or Old Lodge Skins (Chief Dan George) in *Little Big Man* (1970). Notably, the sympathetic figurations of Hollywood Indians are no less generalizing than the negative representations. Studi's character draws his strength from representations of Great Plains Indians, the most popular subjects for revisionist works, and Geronimo thus becomes a composite of numerous Native Americans celebrities like Black Elk, Sitting Bull, Red Cloud and Crazy Horse.

Although Geronimo admits, "I am not a good farmer" he is relatively content at staying on the reservation. What sparks off Geronimo's escape is an unfortunate event involving a trigger-happy officer who kills a medicine man preaching against the whites. While the 1962-*Geronimo* depicted his escape as somewhat ideological, the 1993-version suggests the escape was the result of random events and misunderstandings. The rest of the film focuses on the army's hunt for Geronimo, about which Davis explains, "At times, it seemed we were chasing a spirit more than a man."¹⁷ Gatewood is the only man capable of tracking down Geronimo and he finally locates him on a mountain. Gatewood's final appeal for Geronimo to surrender is one between gods:

Geronimo: Who are you, Gatewood?

Gatewood: Just a man like you. And I want to go home. I want to see my family... My God...My God is a God of peace. A God of life, not death. What does your God say?

Geronimo: Yosin is not here with us on the mountain. Tell me, what is in your heart?

Gatewood: The war is over. I offer this...[Gatewood gives Geronimo the Christian cross]...because it has power for me. Our fight must end here.

Geronimo: When I was young, I took a wife. We lived in these mountains. We have our family. The Mexican soldiers came and they killed her. They killed her and my two little girls. They killed them because we are Apache. I remember when I found their bodies. I stood until much time had passed, not knowing what to do. I had no weapon...but I did not want to fight. I did not pray. I did not do anything. I had no purpose left. After a year had passed... my power showed me how to get revenge. And always, since then, I get revenge. But no matter how many I kill...I could not bring back my family. Yosin.....the Apache God, is a God of peace. I gave you the blue stone. You give me this. It will be peace.

Geronimo then agrees to surrender. Signifying Geronimo's submission to Gatewood's "God of peace," we hear the hymn "Deal Gently with Thy Servants, Lord." The hymn reads, "let thy goodness never fail us/lead us in thy perfect way." What comes next is a scene of terrible betrayal: All the Chiricahua scouts that had served for the army are disarmed and shipped off to imprisonment in Florida together with Geronimo.

Gatewood, who had almost single-handedly negotiated peace with Geronimo, is transferred to a “remote garrison in Northern Wyoming.” Davis explains:

His continued presence would have been an embarrassing reminder that the United States had failed to defeat a band of Apache. Instead of being rewarded with a medal for his heroic efforts, Lieutenant Charles Gatewood was sentenced to obscurity.¹⁸

Ashamed of the disgraceful end of the Geronimo campaign Davis hands in his resignation and declares, “Gatewood would not have been a part of this.” As a representative of the audience, he declares that neither our hero nor we want any part of this. In his article “History Died for Our Sins,” Mark Golub quotes Ralph Ellison who in 1954 observed that “films dealing with racial themes are driven by white guilt.” “This is equally true in the 1990s,” Golub explains and a common feature for the decade’s historical dramas is a “ritualization” of redemption and forgiveness that white audiences “long to hear.”¹⁹ *Geronimo*’s audience receives redemption through its identification with Davis who, although a member of the group that inflicted rather than suffered the injustice, distances himself from that injustice and proclaims, “I’m quite content to go to my grave knowing that I’ve never killed an Apache.”²⁰ Hence, Davis dissociates himself “from the shame of conquest”²¹ and becomes himself a victim.

The aspect of “white victimization” that surfaces the narrative of *Geronimo* is a post-Vietnam phenomenon that according to Engelhardt began with the Supreme Court’s 1978 decision *Bakke v. University of California* where Alan Bakke was rejected a place at Davis Medical School because of reserved places for “qualified minorities.”²² This victimization later found its way into popular culture and gave its most powerful expression in nineties film through the dispatchment of Forest Gump to Vietnam. We might ascribe the impetus of white victimization as a response to the radical attacks on white “culture” and hegemony that came during and after Vietnam. One of the most monumental works was Vine Deloria’s Indian Manifesto *Custer Died for Your Sins*, in which he argued that Custer was the Adolf Eichmann of the Great Plains and that all white Americans inherit a collective guilt for the crimes that were committed, on their behalf, against Native Americans in the nineteenth century. Golub alludes to Deloria’s argument with his title “History died for Our Sins” and argues that films dealing with white “guilt” grant audiences its redemption too easily, “as if ending racism were as easy as refusing its monstrous incarnations,” like General

Custer.²³ In *Geronimo*, we (the audience) are repelled by the racist, authoritative and ignorant General Miles and identify ourselves with the sympathetic Davis, Crook and Gatewood. Hence, if Westerns are, as Cawelti asserts, “rituals” that seek to resolve tension and create sense of the past, *Geronimo* help white audiences make the Apache-wars part of an intelligible past and the perspective that our heroes offer gives an opportunity to think: “That is me! I would be like them if I was part of the Apache war.”

“Setting the Record Straight”: *Geronimo*’s Authoritative Take on History

To consolidate the redemption in *Geronimo* it is important for the film to establish an aegis of authenticity and present the story as it “really happened.” Walter Hill does this cleverly through three devices of “paracinematic verification” which means referents outside of the text that serve as formal assertions of the text’s validity.²⁴ The first of these is Davis’s voice-over which is a way of “textualizing the narrative,” a device successfully used in *Dances with Wolves* which *Geronimo* takes to a higher level.²⁵ While John Dunbar’s diary in *Dances* is purely fictional, *Geronimo* bases its voice over on the historical first-hand account of Britton Davis. At the film’s beginning Davis proclaims a wish to “to throw light” upon “the extraordinary events” that he witnessed.²⁶ Davis’s urge to “throw light” upon events and “set the record straight” was a common feature of nineties historical dramas apart from the Western. “Authenticity as a moral imperative is a recent obsession”²⁷ Tag Gallagher said in 1993, and *Geronimo* establishes almost every fact known about the Chiricahua leader through dialogue and Davis’s voice-over.

The second device of verification is more innovative and elegant. When *Geronimo* agrees to negotiate with General Crook, a photographer from Tombstone requests permission to accompany the Cavalry and record the negotiations. Davis’s remarks:

To everyone’s surprise, Crook agreed...even more surprising, Geronimo and the other Chiricahuas also agreed. In some mysterious way, they seemed to understand these pictures...would make them immortal. They are the only known photos ever taken of the American Indian as an enemy in the field.²⁸

Hill bases this scene on the famous historic photographs of Geronimo and the Apaches taken by Camillus S. Fly in 1886. The film recreates these pictures, with striking similarity, and thereby merges fact with legend ultimately making the film’s claim to authenticity almost unshakable.

The third device is setting. Walter Hill uses the Utah desert, close to Monument Valley with similar rock formations, which apart from its obvious decorative function has a number of important implications. First, it has a mythic aura that inevitably summons the Westerns of John Ford. Jean-Louis Leurat and Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues argue, “it is Ford who has progressively constructed this space as a topos, in the sense of a stock of stereotypes.” This setting, this “theatre of memory,” may, through a moment of Proustian memory, evoke ideas and associations with a particular kind of story.²⁹ Ford’s use of Monument Valley merits a separate study (of multiple volumes) and a short summary cannot possibly do justice to the depth of Ford’s merging of mental and physical landscape in his Westerns. The paramount issue that Ford tackled in Monument Valley was that of race and prejudice. Leurat and Guigues explain that Ford used the landscape as a signifying marker of the forces that divide people among themselves like “like light through a prism.” The buttes’ iconographic sharpness, their fixed organization and immobility may serve as metaphors for similar rigid divides among people. Ford set his cavalry trilogy in Monument Valley, which portrayed a “clash of civilizations” between the U.S. Cavalry and the Apaches. In *The Searchers* (1956) he had a racist hero, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne), chase Apache Chief Scar (Henry Brandon) through the area. Naturally, Hill could not expect that more than a minority of his audience had seen Ford’s Westerns but as I argued in my first chapter, these films established Monument Valley as the most recognizable and iconographic landscape of the West and the Western. Its most important function is therefore to provide a mythic environment in which Hill could historicize the myth. What Hill wants to revise is not Geronimo who was now commonly portrayed as good but the cavalry who Hill saw as misunderstood:

[The film is] as much about the Army as it is Geronimo. That came out of my reading of historical accounts, and realizing that so much of what we think we know about the Indian campaigns is wrong. The Army is generally depicted as the enemy of the Apache, but in many cases, the people who were most sympathetic to their plight were those soldiers.³⁰

The insight to the Geronimo-story that Walter Hill gives us is certainly a valuable one since he, unlike most directors, acknowledges history to be too complex to be reducible to a single interpretation. Rick Worland and Edward Countryman attribute the film’s relative failure at the box-office to this complexity, too much for an audience trained to “expect an invincible hero violently opposing forces of a powerful

villain in ideologically stark and simple terms.”³¹ In effect, *Geronimo* takes an Hegelian position on history and proposes that certain forces of history “escape human control and human cognizance.”³²

Nevertheless, Hill’s representation of Geronimo becomes problematic because he takes an authoritative position on how that story “really happened”. Naturally, all Westerns in which Geronimo has appeared have emphasized their rootedness in history through periodic mimesis, setting and the historical title character. What makes *Geronimo: An American Legend* different is that while the other films do nothing to cover their fictionalizations of the past, Hill’s *Geronimo* claims absolute authority over the truth based on its thorough research, textualization of narrative and extensive use of historical pictures and personas. But Hill, like every historian, cannot resist the temptation of being “selective” in his representation of history. Hill characterizes Geronimo as a promise keeper who will keep whatever promise he gives, although the historical Britton Davis, whose account sanctions the film’s authenticity, in reality said that Geronimo could not be trusted: “This Indian was a thoroughly vicious, intractable and treacherous man. His only redeeming traits were courage and determination. His word, no matter how earnestly pledged, was worthless.”³³ This quote is obviously not included in the film and its omission must be considered as one of Hill’s attempts to “smooth” Geronimo’s, and arguably Britton Davis’s, “rough edges.” Robert Rosenstone writes, “In the movie theater we are, for a time, prisoners of history.”³⁴ In *Geronimo*, history is a “zero-sum game” and if Walter Hill “got it right,” it is because everyone else who tackled the Geronimo-story before got it wrong.³⁵ With *Geronimo*, we are not only prisoners of history but history is the prisoner of *Geronimo*. Walter Hill’s urge to conclude on how history really happened might be due to a realization that history, as some scholars suggested, was “gone” by 1993.

“See the Frontier Before it’s gone”: Endism in the Nineties Western

Under the command of Brigadier General George Crook, the Army broke the resistance of the Chiricahuas and “brought to a conclusion the conflict that had raged through the Southwest for nearly two decades.” So opens Davis’s narrative in *Geronimo*. Similarly, the collapse of the Soviet Empire, best symbolized with the fall

of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, brought to a conclusion a conflict that had lasted for more than four decades.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union left America in a position of unprecedented power and in the words of *The Economist*, the U.S. did “bestride the world like a colossus.”³⁶ The French foreign minister, Hubert Vedrine, called the U.S. a *hyperpower*, with its supremacy extending “the economy, currency, military areas, lifestyle, language and the products of mass culture that inundate the world, forming thought and fascinating even the enemies of the United States.”³⁷ With a Hegelian understanding of history, Francis Fukuyama called the moment “the End of History,” in which all “the really big questions had been settled” with no “serious ideological competitors” left to challenge the American Model of “liberal democracy.”³⁸

The *New York Times* invited its readers to name the era in which they lived, on the premise that it needed another name than the “post-Cold War era,” which was “tentative” and “vague,” suggesting “self-doubt” and a historical moment “overshadowed by the more significant era that preceded it.” The responses were many and “extremely pessimistic.” Popular labels included “Age of anxiety,” “Age of Uncertainty,” “Age of Fragmentation,” “Age of (Great and Failed) Expectation,” “Age of Disillusion (and Dissolution).”³⁹ Even though the *New York Times* had promised the era would be “savage,” full of “ethnic conflict” in which more than fifty new countries would be “born in bloodshed,”⁴⁰ those skirmishes lacked, as one respondent put it, “the clear embodiment of evil like Hitler or Communism.”⁴¹ Fukuyama had himself suggested that the end of history would be “a very sad time,” expressing nostalgia for a time that “called forth courage, imagination, and idealism.”⁴² In *Geronimo*, Davis’s concern with the implications of a closing frontier summons similar nostalgia. Looking back in retrospect, he says:

Over the years, the events surrounding the Geronimo Campaign have continued to haunt me. I carry the memory of those days. Days of bravery and cruelty, of heroism and deceit and I am still faced with an undeniable truth: A way of life that endured a thousand years was gone. This desert land that we look out on would never be the same.⁴³

For Davis, Geronimo’s defeat symbolically represents the closing of the frontier as the Berlin Wall came to represent the end of the Cold War. General Miles is angry about Davis’s exalted idealism and angrily tells him, “We won. That’s what matters. It’s over, Lieutenant. Geronimo, the Apache, the whole history of the West, except being a farmer.”⁴⁴ Miles thus understands the “history of the West” as driven by the

same fundamental dynamic that has been posited in the Western: the confrontation between savagery and civilization.

Davis's concern with the end of the West reflects an inherent contradiction in the American psyche in which Americans have on the one hand seen themselves as agents of civilization, while on the other hand their national mythology portrayed the American as a *naturmensch* or alternately the biblical Adam "at home only in the presence of nature and god."⁴⁵ Vietnam revisionism debunked such archetypal myth theories whose construction, "the American" in the singular, was indissolubly bound to nature. In 1973, Slotkin in *Regeneration Through Violence*, sought to radically revise these denial-based myths and the Jungian construction of a universal American archetype. The aura of "simplicity and purity" that the heroic figures of the woodchopper, whale and bear hunter exudes are illusions that mask a darker truth where America's history with nature are no love affair but a story of a people's urge for absolute control of the environment, subjugation or extermination of its living habitants.⁴⁶ The picture Slotkin portrays of myth in his earlier works implies that myths are somewhat static or monolithic structures that determine the course of American history. For instance, Slotkin argues that the Frontier Myth shaped America's decision to go to war in Vietnam, and the various rationales offered for the way it was fought. Maxwell Taylor's statement that the "Indians" of Vietnam had to be removed "away from the fort" so that the settlers could "plant corn," thus exists within a mythic continuum where American history had followed the same course from the pioneering days of Daniel Boone and Jedediah Smith through the Indian Wars of nineteenth century to remain the same in 1973. Naturally, the recent experiences in Vietnam colored Slotkin's argumentation and his radicalism must be understood as part of his vision to revise the self-congratulatory versions of the national myth that the consensus historians and myth-critics like Henry Nash Smith had developed. To generate a paradigm shift require bold argumentation and the burden of evidence, in this case to show that the myth had power to shape consciousness and behavior in a negative way, rests on Slotkin - the reviser.

What we see in the nineties however, and this is reflected in Slotkin's later works as well, is that when the myth and the (Western) genre experienced a revival, the two structures proved flexible enough to incorporate the concerns and positions of minority groups. More than anything, the discourses of revisionism and social history informed the genre and directors sought to recover the agency of all kinds of

“marginalized” people to American frontier history. The era saw the release of “Black Westerns” with *Posse* (1993) and *Buffalo Soldiers* (1997) and “Feminist Westerns” with *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993), *Bad Girls* (1994) and *The Quick and the Dead* (1995). These films demonstrate the multilayeredness of myth because they are able to modify certain layers of the myth, for instance the myth’s phallogentricity and language of “white,” while still preserving and regenerating the deepest structures of the same myth: especially what Turner called the “significance” of the myth in shaping America. Female pioneers, black wagon trains and African-American regiments fighting in the Civil War all maintain elements from the Frontier Myth but they place minority heroes in the positions formerly reserved for white males. The centrality of the Frontier Myth is still there and what these films signal is that social progress can only be achieved by deconstructing myth. If they succeed in doing so, it is the flexibility, not the resilience and overdetermination, of myth that explains the myth’s continued presence.

With a generation of young Americans who had not experienced Vietnam, it seemed possible even to revive the myth of the American Adam as long as the genre acknowledged the negative aspects that the myth had generated on certain levels and respected the people who already lived on “Virgin land.” The most “Adamic” figure in nineties’ Western is Kevin Costner’s John Dunbar who volunteered to be stationed at an abandoned frontier fort because he wanted to “see the frontier before it was gone.”⁴⁷ When he arrives at Fort Sedgwick the first thing he does is to clean up the piles of waste and pollution that the former residents left behind. His disgust with his own culture reaches a climax when he must, in order to get clean drinking water, pull a fetid deer carcass out of the water hole. Soon after, symbolically while being all naked, he encounters his first Sioux Indian which he describes in his journal as a, “magnificent looking fellow.”⁴⁸ Then begins his spiritual journey of “becoming Indian”; the Sioux Dances with Wolves. In *Geronimo*, Davis is the Adamic figure and supported by the characteristic innocent features of a young Matt Damon he exudes an air of excusable naiveté. He had no idea that his participation in the Geronimo campaign would end “the history of the West.” To him, Geronimo and his capture becomes almost like the forbidden fruit that results in the loss of innocence.

Through Davis, *Geronimo* expresses nostalgia for the mythic space of the Western. The end of the West meant the end of Geronimo and Gatewood, both heroic figures that Davis and we (the audience) have come to admire. Davis’s concerns about

the transition from America's frontier past to modern, progressive and urbanized America and the longing for the mythic space of the Western might also relate to deeply felt concern with both director Walter Hill and audience. Before *Geronimo*, Hill had explored the two "mythic landscapes" that, according to Cawelti, replaced the frontier in "popular mind": outer space in *Alien I* and *III* (1979, 1992) and the city in *The Warriors* (1979) and *Streets of Fire* (1984). Slotkin claims that these two spaces have shortcomings compared to the frontier when it comes to heroic action, redemption and regeneration. In the urban landscapes, "possibilities for progress and redemption are constricted by vastly ramified corporate conspiracies and by monstrous accumulations of wealth, power, and corruption." Thus, victories achieved by the urban vigilante hero can never be final, nor can they have positive and "socially redemptive" outcomes as in the Western.⁴⁹ In outer space, "real historical referents" are kept at a distance and science fiction films may thus "imagine the most magical or utopian possibilities," that are impossible to implicate in the real world.⁵⁰

With *Geronimo*, Walter Hill takes a Turnerian position on what the frontier has meant in American history and psyche. For Turner the closing of the frontier did not only conclude "the first period of American history," but it also introduced a new era in which America would face serious challenges in conserving its democratic institutions and ideas now that the material conditions that had guaranteed these features were gone.⁵¹ Likewise, Hill makes his *Geronimo* into a powerful eulogy about the frontier and a meditation on what America has lost as the Western passes away from popular mind.

This thesis has argued that myths are mediating structures that can mediate between the past and the present, and by viewing the past in the light of the present, directors can illuminate modes of action, possibilities and solutions about the cultural and political realities that confront their society. So far, the analysis of the 1993-*Geronimo* has primarily dealt with Walter Hill's attempt to historicize the myth in order to grant redemption for an audience that seemed to have lost faith in its own mythology. Watching historical films is an active cognitive process that allows viewers to imagine themselves in history and Hill's *Geronimo* offers a trajectory for re-appreciating its frontier past by emphasizing the inevitability of the sad conclusion to Geronimo's resistance and, additionally, that Americans, as inheritors of that past, do not have to feel guilty about it and embrace an inclusive narrative that finds room for both appreciating Indians and white heroes. The problem then is that the film

offers very few social or political prescriptions for the future, but that again might be the most revealing aspect of the film; that the “end of history” was too indefinable and vague for clear and coherent rationales to emerge.

Karl Marx famously argued, “the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it.”⁵² According to Hellman’s definition of myth this is also one of the myths’ most central features: it is an “explanation of history that can also serve as a compelling idea for the future.”⁵³ Directors that invoke myths on screen apparently tend to have this in mind since most films, maybe apart from the most radical Vietnam-Westerns that wanted to debunk the Frontier Myth, have articulated opportunities for positive change. Although Hill’s *Geronimo* is nostalgic and more concerned with reclaiming America’s Frontier Myth than turning his story into an illuminating hypothesis for future action, he seems, nonetheless, to have found one concern where he could apply the myth as a mediating structure: the theme of masculinity.

Geronimo as the Modern American Man

In the early nineties scholars began discussing a “crisis in masculinity.” A dominant proportion of the anxious respondents in the *New York Times* competition were men and the two patterns, the uncertainty about their own era and the masculinity crisis, are interrelated features of nineties society. Laurent Berlant notes that men in the nineties were “anxious about their value to themselves, their families, their publics, and their nation.”⁵⁴ That men are anxious about their own masculinity is of course not a new phenomenon, recent works have argued that we can speak of such crisis in the fifties and 1890s as well, but the considerable attention this “crisis” received was new.⁵⁵ Gender scholars such as Michael Kimmel and Robert Connel argue that the crisis was partly due to an unrealistic hegemonic model of masculinity like that of John Wayne.⁵⁶

“The theme of Masculinity” has always been at the heart of the Western and the Western has been influential in shaping certain models of masculinity.⁵⁷ Hence, it is a productive site of modifying inherited models from the past. Maggie Greenwald’s feminist Western, *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993) embraced the viewpoint of Judith Butler who suggested that gender was completely performative.⁵⁸ In *Little Jo*, Josephine Monaghan has everyone fooled as she reinvents herself as a man in the

West. All she had to do was to adopt certain manners of walk, speech and dress in order to be perceived as a man by others.

We can only speculate whether the theme of masculinity was at all a concern for Walter Hill but within a work of art, we can see, at least from the structuralist point of view, how streams of thinking, art and discourse play into the construction of artistic works. From that viewpoint, every work of art becomes almost over-determined by the culture that produces it and certain cultural features find their way into the film sometimes unconsciously. Nonetheless, on the surface level, *Geronimo* appears as very self-conscious about its models of masculinity and seen in the light of its other agendas we can assume that it is.

First, Wes Studi's masculine performance as Geronimo stands in sharp contrast to that of Chuck Connors's in 1962-*Geronimo*. Chuck Connors demonstrated the traditional virtues of what Kimmel calls "our culture's blueprint of manhood"; brave, strong and "emotionally inexpressive," he exuded an "an aura of manly daring and aggression."⁵⁹ In 1993-*Geronimo*, Wes Studi exhibit different virtues from a new model of masculinity, that of the Clinton era's "new man," where "sensitivity" and "softness" were the most celebrated traits.⁶⁰ Geronimo in 1993 is a sensitive, thoughtful man with a deep affinity for nature and environmental concerns. Geronimo's masculinity is therefore a counter-performance that confronts inherited models from the John Wayne-era of the Western. Geronimo also accepts his fate as subject to larger historical forces which he cannot oppose, a fate analogous to men who feel emasculated by larger historical forces like the "end of history" or the alleged feminization of society.

Several reviewers also commented on the special friendship between Geronimo and Gatewood. Gerald Thompson even suggests that their friendship is the most developed sub-plot of the film and that a more apt title would have been "Gatewood and Geronimo - Cross-Cultural Male Bonding."⁶¹ Male friendships in the Western are not new. In fact, the buddy-theme has been one of the genre's most recurring sub-plots.⁶² These friendships have traditionally revolved around action-oriented pursuits, the kind of friendship that during the second wave of feminism received some criticism in gender debates where men were accused of being incapable of having intimate and meaningful friendships.⁶³ In *Geronimo*, however, Geronimo and Gatewood demonstrate that men are capable of developing close friendships; they joke, laugh, confess intimate thoughts and exchange gifts; in many

ways, their friendship becomes the epitome of what scholars would later term a “bro-mance.”⁶⁴

Geronimo's incorporation of a nineties-embedded theme of masculinity and the title character's embodiment of new modes of masculinity are again demonstration of the adaptability of the Geronimo symbol. Along with numerous other aspects, the theme of masculinity serves to make Walter Hill's *Geronimo* an incredibly complex Western. This complexity is a manifestation of how the myth must now mediate in a longer and more intricate national narrative that includes immigration and emancipation as well as new discourses of gender and queer theories and modern environmentalism. Although Geronimo has not appeared as a cinematic character in the twenty-first century, the mythology that surrounds him has continued to inspire other films. The two diverging views of Geronimo, as the good American and the savage enemy, clashed together in an intricate way during the post 9/11 war on terror.

Conclusion and Afterthoughts:

“Fighting Terrorism since 1492”

“The paradigm of the frontier and of the Indian wars settled deep into the American soul,” writes Tom Engelhardt in his *Victory Culture* sequel, “and the framework of the Indian wars, however suppressed and transformed, remains in some fashion powerfully with us.”¹ Engelhardt and his publisher found new relevance in his book about America’s “victory culture” and “War Myth” after the George W. Bush administration led America back into “Indian country” to fight new culturally alien enemies.² When America’s global war on terrorism began to lose sight of its objectives, especially after the invasion of Iraq, the general public turned against him and protesters started to wear t-shirts with the famous Camillus Fly photography of Geronimo over the caption: “Homeland Security: Fighting Terrorism since 1492.” Both Johnny Depp and Bill Cosby, neither of them Native American, have worn the shirt in public.^{**} To the protesters, Geronimo had unique counter-symbolic power against government policies especially because of George W. Bush’s “cowboy image.”

By using the Geronimo symbol, whether on t-shirts or in Hollywood films, producers of culture are in touch with the fundamentals of American mythology and can therefore address cultural issues on the deepest level. Geronimo’s symbolic power has remained significant for more than a century after his death, but the meaning of that symbol has evolved through interplay with the Myth of the Frontier in which he is deeply entangled. The Myth of the Frontier and the Myth of Geronimo have developed in parallel and the interplay that is going forward between them make possible for one myth to revise and modify the other as historical, social and cultural circumstances change. This thesis has viewed the development as an evolution, an apt framework since evolution theory’s most basic concept is adaptability. The meaning of Geronimo has changed and adapted to different historical circumstances and cultural needs. In 1939, Geronimo allegorized the enemy and Paul Sloane used the symbol to summon America to intervene against the evils that waged savage war on civilization and democracy in Europe. In the fifties, he was still the enemy and *Broken Arrow* and its sequels used him as contrast to the peace-minded and good Indian

^{**} Johnny Depp has later claimed to “have some Cherokee” in him. In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* (May 8, 2011) he said “My great grandmother was quite a bit of Native American.” <http://insidemovies.ew.com/2011/05/08/johnny-depp-tonto-lone-ranger/>

Cochise. Since pro-Indian Westerns of the fifties are frequently understood as allegory for African-Americans' struggle for Civil Rights, Geronimo's violent rejection of assimilation signaled that there are bad men on both sides of racial confrontations that delay the "logic" of assimilation. By 1962, Geronimo was gradually becoming "good" by incorporating features of other good Indians like Cochise and although he was still an enemy in Arnold Laven's film, the 1962-version of *Geronimo* offered a trajectory of peaceful resolution between the U.S. and the Apaches since their interests were basically the same, an apt allegory for present foreign policy concerns in America's struggle to win the hearts and minds of people in the third world. During Vietnam, when the counterculture movement turned to "the others" of the frontier to express their disapproval of America's political and ideological direction, Geronimo became the hero of the American frontier. In this period he drew strength from sympathetic representations of other famous Native Americans, most notably from the Great Plains region, and in the 1993 film *Geronimo: an American Legend* he was a composite of famous Native American figures like Black Elk, Sitting Bull, Red Cloud and Crazy Horse, the perfect Indian whose capture and imprisonment symbolically ended the history of the West. In the new millennium, he gathered even more strength as he symbolized all people that have faced oppression in the course of American history since Columbus landed on the American shores in 1492.

Although the Myth of the Frontier has been polemically modified, the parallel evolution of Geronimo and the ultimate paradigm that sees him as an American hero and embodiment of the American ethos seem to have revived the American "War Myth" in its original form. Rhodes described the American war story as the success story of an "embattled, outnumbered people fighting against long odds."³ In the 1939-*Geronimo*, the brave men of the sixth cavalry who fought Geronimo and his hordes of Indians constituted the heroes of that story. In the sixties, Native Americans were gradually included in the nation's mythological narrative and Arnold Laven's 1962-*Geronimo* fought against impossible odds and became truly American at the film's end. By 1993, heroic whites and noble Indians found common ground fighting side by side against the inexplicable forces of history. The latter storyline persists today and found its way into James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) which bases its plot on premises familiar from nineties' pro-Indian Westerns like *Geronimo* and *Dances with Wolves*: A group of whites gain privileged access to the world of the Native, originally as part

of a larger white scheme serving the cavalry but then through a spiritual journey learn how to be “Indian” and starts fighting the Indians’ cause against larger forces of modernization and environmental exhaustion. In *Avatar*, there is a Geronimo-like character, Eytukan, notably given voice by Wes Studi, who has a healthy skepticism towards human intrusion of his world Pandora. An important difference though, is that unlike *Dances with Wolves* or *Geronimo*, the indigenous people of Pandora win and effectively drive the alien invaders off their planet. In other words, it offers an alternative to the “end of history” scenario and envisions a possibility of victory for those who oppose capitalist imperialism.

In Quentin Tarantino’s blockbuster *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), Brad Pitt’s character, Aldo Raine, made a noteworthy statement that is indicative of the Geronimo myth’s nature by 2009. In Tarantino’s film, Aldo Raine leads an elite squad of American Jews in a vendetta against Nazis. As he explains to a terrified Nazi:

Now, I’m the direct descendant of the mountain man Jim Bridger. That means I got a little Injun in me. And our battle plan will be that of an Apache resistance. We will be cruel to the Germans, and through our cruelty they will know who we are...Each and every man under my command owes me one hundred Nazi scalps.⁴

Compared to the 1939-*Geronimo*, where Apaches served as Nazi transfigurations, Geronimo and the Apaches were in *Inglorious Basterds* part of a hero’s anatomy fighting Nazis. Although Tarantino intended his artistic work as mere entertainment, it has relevance as a cultural phenomenon because it reveals, with brief anecdotes like Aldo Raine’s quote, the current condition of cultural symbols as Geronimo and the Apaches. Both *Avatar* and *Inglorious* have examples of non-Indigenous people who claim “Indianness.” In later years, claiming “indianness” has become more attractive as a way of mediating in widespread ambivalence and anxiety about modernity,⁵ and as a way of reconstructing American national identity where positive and foundational aspects are found not only in Plymouth Rock but also within Native American culture.

Tarantino’s films seem to have a thematic paradigm of justified violence, and the quote by Aldo Raine is therefore interesting because the “bad” violence that was traditionally associated with Geronimo is appropriated by asserting “Indianness” and when used by “good” people for “good” purposes such as punishment for Nazi villains. *Inglorious* and *Avatar* thus provide examples of how meanings and associations migrate and proliferate and the resulting intricacy of evolving cultural symbolism was at the core of the Geronimo code name controversy of 2011.

What sparked off the debate were news stories that, in an almost cinematic manner, sought to retell how Obama and his national security team experienced the assassination of bin Laden. The *New York Times* explained how Obama received the cryptic message: “Geronimo E-KIA” or “Geronimo: Enemy Killed in Action,” followed by silence in the room before the President got up to proclaim “We got him!”⁶ President Obama confirmed on *60 Minutes* that Geronimo was the code name for bin Laden and the message he received was “Geronimo has been killed.”⁷ Hence, it is no wonder that Native American groups protested when the American military, in which so many Native Americans have served, used a Native American icon as code name for America’s most hated person.

The strong reactions cannot be explained from this particular case alone but must be viewed in the light of built-up frustration among Native Americans who in the subsequent hearings in the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs cited government neglect, cultural attitudes towards Native Americans, racist stereotypes and the Hollywood tradition of constructing Indians into “empty others” on screen. It was of little help that other officials kept insisting that “Geronimo” was the code name for the operation’s success and cited that “Geronimo” had been part of the American military vernacular since, as the legend has it, paratroopers saw Paul Sloane’s *Geronimo* (1939). We should not rule out the possibility that both sides told the truth. Might it be that several of the involved, including Obama, just slipped their tongue and were unconscious of the vitality of the mythological symbol they had invoked?

A thesis that deals with myth and culture will inevitably face the question whether myths shape and determine culture, or the reverse, that the present culture shapes and modifies its myths to fit its current direction. This thesis has argued that the direction of influence goes both ways. The Myth of the Frontier continues to be one of America’s most important and recurring myths and frontier symbolism is still an essential ingredient in American political rhetoric and often used to conceptualize and explain the necessities and opportunities of political trajectories. When the President puts on his “cowboy hat,” we know what modes of action this symbolic gesture communicates. Coyne notes that presidents have consciously invoked frontier symbols to “deepen their own sense of national identity and also, vitally, to reinforce their relationship with the American people.” The Presidents’ political supporters might do the same: Steve MacDonogh’s recent book about Obama, for instance, is

entitled *Pioneers: the Frontier Family of Barack Obama*. Turner's Frontier Thesis about the "Significance of the Frontier in American history" thus becomes almost prophetic because American producers of culture have continuously revitalized the significance of the frontier as a mythic space long after it was closed as a physical one. Nevertheless, the Myth of the Frontier has experienced considerable fragmentation and scholars now understand it as less universal and less deterministic for American behavior. In other words, the study of myth is no longer in line with old historicist methods that downplayed the contradictions in the liberal consensus narrative, but it is still useful as a framework for understanding how different social and political groups have turned to the frontier in order to construct identities. Scholars who seek to trace the persistence of myth in a more fragmented national experience, must look outside of the canon to capture a more authentic reality where the essential struggle between patriarchal structures and subaltern groups might be found in niche movies, alternative music and art.

As the American political environment is polarizing and the most contested topic is the nature and meaning of fundamental American "ideals," we might see this polarization find its way into new Westerns. Cawelti once said that the genre would never survive "unless from time to time it attracts the interest of original and imaginative artists who are capable of revitalizing its conventions and stereotypes to express contemporaneous concerns."⁸ At the time of writing, interest in the Western seems to have resurged to something that can equate its early nineties' popularity. About the biggest release so far this year, Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2013), the director said "I wanted to make a Western...but not a relic from another time...I wanted it to speak to me and have a modern voice,"⁹ apparently unknowing that this has been a central feature of the genre the whole time. This year will see a new release of Owen Wister's *The Virginian* and even Tonto and the Lone Ranger ride again this summer.¹⁰ The trailer of *Lone Ranger* promises everything of an epic western with railroads, Monument Valley, hostile Indians, outlaws and crooked businessmen. Johnny Depp plays Tonto with recognizable features from his Jack Sparrow character in *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003-2011), implying that directors are still not entirely comfortable with making serious Westerns and a certain ironic distance is still required. Whether *The Virginian* will return to a more mature form will be interesting to see.

The films that a culture produces, independent of whether we regard that culture as national, global or civilizational are among the most significant documents that we leave behind from our own time. Films that deal with history have a double significance: it is a site of understanding ourselves and a relic for later generations that seek to understand *us*; but we should not forget that films are also important as a way of learning and understanding history and critical as such since more people learn their history from film than will ever graduate from our History programs. We should then substantiate the popularity of such films with knowledge and it is important to move that debate from discussions about the accuracy of material facts to episteme; the meaning of those stories that has relevance for us today. American Studies in particular has proved itself a very dynamic space for scrutinizing film, especially because of its interdisciplinary focus that allow students to combine cultural expressions such as music, film, art with political speeches, history and works from the literary canon in order to study a cultural phenomenon. As a Norwegian, I would like to see works like those of Slotkin inspire similar projects that enquire how we have constructed our national experience into mythic constructions. The debate surrounding *Max Manus* (2008) showed not only that Norwegian history has equally contested myths but also that the Norwegian national (consensus) narrative remains relatively resilient to revision and nuancing.¹¹ This year, the Norwegian cinema has proclaimed for itself a “new spring” and a bright future,¹² and as history seems to be the most attractive subject for big productions, we should hope to see some more daring films, or at least, constructive debates that would generate cinematic bravery in the long term.

However uncertain our future might be, a continued fascination with the past seems to be among the few certainties. The United States, like other countries, will continue to reimagine its past on screen. What the nature of that reimagining will be and exactly what we can expect in the future of the past are naturally hard to predict but since every American generation seem to play its fantasies and concerns into frontier narratives it is not unlikely that we might see another version of Geronimo.

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