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The South between Two Frontiers: Confederate Cowboys and Savage Rednecks

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Mots clés

Cinéma américain, cultural studies, Frontière, Western, Sud, violence, sauvagerie

Keywords

American cinema, cultural studies, Frontier, Western, South, violence, savagery

Abstract

The myth of the Frontier, which locates the birth of the American nation in its confrontation with a bordering savagery, was a national myth in Western films until the 1960s. As a genre engaged with the exploration of Americanness, the Western attracted many ex-Confederates in search of political legitimacy and the Western Frontier became a place of national rehabilitation for the South. When the narrative of the myth inverted in favor of the Indian in the late 1960s, freedmen replaced Confederate heroes in their quest to integrate the national community on screen. The Frontier as America's birthplace gave the South a second chance and revealed its cultural potential for the nation. But the Frontier, in its confrontational version of the savage wars, also resonates with the myth of the Lost Cause, in which barbarous freedmen threaten white society. If *The Birth of a Nation* was the first and last film in which Blacks were pictured as predatory beasts in Hollywood, this internal frontier reappears with the cultural crisis of the 1960s, when the South became home to savages of a new kind, degenerate rednecks, who embody the failure of the national myth in the Western, serving as scapegoats for an American savagery revealed by the My Lai massacre and the Manson murders. The South in film thus wavers between two frontiers: the Frontier of American regeneration in the Western and the frontier as a threat to America in the Southern.

Résumé

Le mythe de la Frontière, qui situe la naissance de la nation américaine dans sa confrontation avec le monde sauvage, a été un mythe national porté par le Western cinématographique jusque dans les années 1960. En tant que genre attaché à l'exploration de l'américanité, le Western a

attiré de nombreux ex-confédérés en quête de légitimité politique et la Frontière de l'Ouest s'est muée en espace de réhabilitation du Sud. Lorsque le récit mythique s'est inversé en faveur de l'Indien à la fin des années 1960, les esclaves affranchis ont remplacé les héros confédérés dans leur quête d'intégration symbolique à la communauté nationale. La Frontière a ainsi offert une seconde chance au Sud et révélé son potentiel culturel pour la nation. Mais la Frontière, dans sa version plus martiale de la guerre sauvage, résonne également avec la Cause perdue sudiste, dans laquelle des affranchis barbares menacent la société blanche. Si *La Naissance d'une nation* a été le premier et dernier film hollywoodien dans lequel les Noirs étaient représentés comme des prédateurs sexuels, cette Frontière interne réapparaît avec la crise culturelle des années 1960, lorsque le Sud devient le lieu d'émergence de sauvages d'un nouveau type, les blancs pauvres dégénérés, qui incarnent l'échec du mythe national du Western, et servent de bouc émissaire à une sauvagerie américaine révélée par le massacre de My Lai et les meurtres de Charles Manson. Le Sud au cinéma est ainsi partagé entre deux Frontières: la Frontière régénératrice de l'Amérique dans le Western, et la Frontière corruptrice de l'Amérique dans le Southern.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the porosity of the Western and the Southern film genres¹ in American cinema through the analysis of Confederate hero-types in the Western and the violent rednecks as embodiments of the frontier savage in the Southern. To a great extent, this porosity between the two genres can be accounted for by their common use of the Frontier myth. Therefore, I will argue that the respective importance of Confederate Cowboys prior to the 1960s, and Savage Rednecks after that decade, may be understood within a broader context of the popularity and influence of the Frontier myth on American cinema.

The Frontier is a symbolic line separating civilization from savagery which emerged through colonial literature to express the new contacts between European colonists and an unknown native environment. It became a myth of the nation at the turn of the 20th century, when writers such as President Theodore Roosevelt² and historian Frederick Jackson Turner³ elevated the Frontier as the origin of American individualism, capitalism and democracy. Western films are generally considered to have supported and elaborated upon this myth until the 1960s.⁴ As such, the genre was the workshop of national mythmaking and a potential vehicle for the Americanization of the Lost Cause.

The Lost Cause is understood as a set of beliefs formed after the Civil War to glorify the *antebellum* South of “moonlight and magnolia” settings, immaculate plantations and faithful slaves.⁵ Based on white supremacy, aristocratic government and chivalric values, it came to represent either a fantasized American past or a corrupt–American present in the Southern.

Although these myths emerged from very different historical realities, they overlapped even before the invention of cinema. Both myths understand cultural conflicts along racial lines, glorify a hero of superior nature, and frequently place the moral purity of a white woman at the center of the drama. This commonality in the mythologies, one might claim, allowed for the migration of Southerners into the Western, as well as the emergence of a Frontier narrative within the Southern.

Such mythological chiasm between the two film genres raises, however, several questions. To what extent was the sectional mythology of the Lost Cause Americanized owing to its displacement into the Western? Why did the influence of the Frontier narrative on the Southern genre suddenly rocket in the 1970s? And what has been the impact of such interactions on both the Frontier and the Lost Cause mythologies?

This paper seeks to answer these questions by focusing on the figure of the Confederate cowboy as a token of the Lost Cause influence on the Western, before looking at the growing

¹I consider here the Southern as a specific cinematographic genre, although one should speak of a plurality of Southern, as Taïna Tuhkunen argues in her introduction to *Le Sud au Cinéma*: “Instead of a Southern genre, one should speak of a set of subgenres or, rather, a series of ‘southernisms’.” Marie Liénard-Yeterian and Taïna Tuhkunen, *Le Sud au cinéma : de The Birth of a Nation à Cold Mountain* (eds.), Palaiseau : Les Éditions de l’École polytechnique, 2009, 22. [My translation]

²Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West*, New York and London: Putnam’s Sons, 1889.

³Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, New York: Henry Holt, 1921. This was the first book published by the historian, which contained his famous lecture, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”, delivered at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.

⁴Schatz speaks of “the Western’s essential conflict between civilization and savagery.” In Thomas Gerard Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*, Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1981, 48. Michael Coyne argues that the Western mostly supported the Frontier myth: “The revisionism of the 1960s and 1970s notwithstanding, the Western’s overall thrust sanctified territorial expansion, justified dispossession of the Indians, fuelled nostalgia for a largely mythicized past, exalted self-reliance and posited violence as the main solution to personal and societal problems.” In Michael Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1997, 3.

⁵For a detailed account on the origins and manifestations of the Lost Cause, see the essays collected in Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, eds., *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.

presence of the Frontier myth in the Southern through the emergence of savage rednecks in the cinema of the 1970s. And lastly, it provides a case study of two specific films that cross the Western and Southern genres in ways that allow them to develop a critique of the Frontier and Lost Cause mythologies, namely John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972) and Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012).

Confederate Cowboys: Americanization of the Lost Cause in the Western

The promotion of the Lost Cause in Western films has been supported mostly by two archetypal figures of the Confederate cowboy: the Virginian and Jesse James. Both stand for a different aspect of the Lost Cause and serve opposite narrative purposes in the Western. The Virginian is a progressive agent of order in a lawless, excessively democratic ranching frontier. As such, he represents, in many ways, the frontier version of the southern aristocrat. His bent for violence is put to the service of the conquest of civilization. Jesse James is a yeoman version of the Confederate rebel, a populist agent of disorder on a farming frontier oppressed by a tyrannical combination of corrupt politics and greedy big business. His killing skills support the people's resistance to the violent excesses of civilization. On a more mythical level, however, both of them highlight the qualities of Southern ethics in the construction of the American nation and in the fulfillment of its ideals.

The Virginian

The Virginian first appeared in the novel *The Virginian* by Owen Wister published in 1902. It has inspired four film adaptations, a widely popular TV series and a more recent TV movie.⁶ In Wister's novel, the main protagonist's southern origin is clearly emphasized as *the* reason for his superior nature.⁷ His southern respect for social hierarchy is faced with the democratic chaos of the Western Frontier which he contains thanks to a hard-boiled conception of justice much alike southern lynching.⁸ Less characterized by nobility than by virility, he translates the Southern aristocracy of wealth into a Western aristocracy of malehood. The Virginian influenced the characterization of the Western hero as a natural aristocrat on a frontier threatened by democracy, where expeditious violence stands for laws and honor for social codes.

Virginian-type characters quickly influenced the cowboy heroes in films from *The Covered Wagon* (James Cruze, 1923), in which Will Banion (J. Warren Kerrigan) has the

⁶ The most important films are: *The Virginian* (Victor Fleming, 1929) with Gary Cooper in the title role; *The Virginian* (Stuart Gilmore, 1946) with Joel McCrea. The TV series *The Virginian* with James Drury as the Virginian ran for 249 episodes from 1962 to 1971, making it the third most popular Western TV series of all times.

⁷ The Virginian is presented as a "son of the soil" who teaches the educated Easterner that "the creature we call a gentleman lies deep in the hearts of thousands that are born without chance to master the outward graces of the type" (10). The hero's "Southern and gentle and drawling" voice (3) is constantly emphasized, while he is presented as "the quality" against "the equality" (121), the true aristocracy of deserving men capable of rising above the people in the American meritocracy. For Wister, "true democracy and true aristocracy are one and the same thing" (121), and the Virginian is the natural aristocrat of the democratic nation. Owen Wister, *The Virginian, a Horseman of the Plains*, New York: Macmillan, 1917.

⁸ In a famous scene of the book where schoolmarm Molly Wood questions the popular hanging of a horse thief, Judge Henry is at pains trying to distinguish Western "justice" from southern lynching: "in all sincerity, I see no likeness in principle whatever between burning Southern negroes in public and hanging Wyoming horse-thieves in private. I consider the burning a proof that the South is semi-barbarous, and the hanging a proof that Wyoming is determined to become civilized. We do not torture our criminals when we lynch them. We do not invite spectators to enjoy their death agony. We put no such hideous disgrace upon the United States. We execute our criminals by the swiftest means, and in the quietest way. Do you think the principle is the same?" *Ibid.*, 365

distinguished bearing and honorable pride of a Southerner, to *Dodge City* (Michael Curtiz, 1939), whose ex-Confederate hero, Wade Hatton (Errol Flynn), brings order to the notoriously wild Western town. This type of character became particularly prominent in the Western after its revival as an A-feature genre in 1939. The reason for the growing interest in the Confederate cowboy can be found in what Peter Stanfield, in his analysis of 1930s Westerns, describes as a narrative shift of the genre away from “the structuralist opposition between savagery and civilization” towards a focus on “a *fear of secession*”⁹: “[r]ather than replay epic stories of the winning of the West (as exemplified in films such as *The Covered Wagon* and *The Big Trail* [Raoul Walsh, 1930]), A-feature Westerns of 1939-41 invoke Frontier mythology with a view to recasting it in terms of the fissures represented by the Civil War.”¹⁰ In these films, “the South is eventually included in the Union. [...] Conflicts are, then, determined by a symbolic North/South divide where the West provides the space in which the Union can be reunited.”¹¹ This growing concern with sectional issues, which marked the Western genre far into the 1950s, allowed the filmmakers to repress the more problematic aspects of the Lost Cause myth to emphasize, instead, the reconciliation with a national mythology.

Played by Gary Cooper, Randolph Scott, Alan Ladd, Errol Flynn, John Wayne or Gregory Peck, the Confederate cowboy became prominent in the Westerns of the 1940s and 1950s and saw his Southern identity increasingly foregrounded. The popularity of such heroes reflected a conservative turn in American politics and provided a platform for the rehabilitation of the South. At a time when white violence in the South started to attract nation-wide media attention and when the Southern started blaming that violence on white trash rednecks, values that were established as American in the narrative frame of the Western were upheld by ex-Confederates.

One of these heroes is the widely influential Shane (Alan Ladd, in *Shane*, George Stevens, 1953). Though his Confederate identity is not openly stated in the film, his opponent, the black-clad villain Jack Wilson (Jack Palance) is clearly identified as a murderous Yankee. As the charismatic savior in a tale of mythical dimensions, Shane embodied a model of selfless chivalry for many American heroes to come and so did his implied politics (for instance in the Westerns featuring or directed by Clint Eastwood).¹² Once again, Alan Ladd again plays a Confederate veteran in the less famous yet more straightforward *The Proud Rebel* (Michael Curtiz, 1958). Another striking example is Ben Trane (Gary Cooper) in *Vera Cruz* (Robert Aldrich, 1954). Trane is an ex-planter from Louisiana¹³ who may have turned mercenary in Mexico, but occupies the moral center of an otherwise highly cynical film. He is fair, gallant, and sensible. He saves damsels in distress and believes that the South will rise again. A defender of lost causes, Trane redemptively decides to stand for the Juarista rebels, the oppressed Mexican people fighting for independence against the European emperor Maximilian. This selfless decision turns the Confederate gentleman into an all-time American hero. To Confederate heroes could be added shady Unionists such as Howard Kemp (James Stewart) in *The Naked Spur* (Anthony Mann, 1953) or gunfighter characters celebrated as members of a

⁹ Peter Stanfield, *Hollywood, Westerns and the 1930s: the Lost Trail*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001, 195.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 197.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹² In *The American Western*, Stephen McVeigh considers Shane as the archetype of the cowboy hero for the latter part of the 20th century. See Stephen McVeigh, *The American Western*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, 203. In *From Shane to Kill Bill: Rethinking the Western*, Malden: Blackwell Pub., 2007, Patrick McGee develops the same idea.

¹³ In traditional northern accounts of *antebellum* America, Louisiana, the south of the South, is generally associated with the worst slave system and most elaborate “aristocratic” society. See, for instance, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852). In *Django Unchained*, it is Mississippi, another state south of the South.

distinguished aristocracy of killers (Gregory Peck in *The Gunfighter*, Henry King, 1950). As a counterpoint to Ben Trane, one could argue that the most famous of all Confederate cowboys, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) in *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), is also the darkest of all Western heroes. But quite tellingly, despite his racism and conspicuous savage instincts, Ethan was praised by critics and the public as a model of American heroism. More recently, when Church Workman edited a montage of clips taken from classic epic films to celebrate American heroism after 9/11, *The Spirit of America* (2001), he used Ethan's image to introduce and close the film. The influence of the Virginian on the Western hero allowed for the integration of Old South aristocracy and chivalry into the myths of the nation. Embodied by a cowboy turned Confederate-gray by the desert dust, these values temporarily dominated the frame of national ideology in the 1950s. Meanwhile, the more traditional American ideals of economic independence and political freedom were embodied by another Southern figure: Jesse James.

Jesse James

The son of slaveholders and a renegade fighter in the border state of Missouri, Jesse James was an ex-Confederate whose beliefs and politics were strictly sectional. But the political conflicts of the Gilded Age¹⁴ helped make this Southern rebel the hero of a “national myth of resistance”¹⁵ by the time of his death in 1882. He quickly became the archetype of the populist outlaw in late 19th-century Western fiction, and then in the twenty films celebrating his legend. The most influential of these is, without a doubt, the 1939 version directed by Henry King (*Jesse James*) which also largely fostered the assimilation of the Lost Cause into a national narrative at the end of the 1930s. When the popularity of the Southern reached a peak with *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), King and his screenwriter Nunnally Johnson preferred portraying Jesse as a populist gangster of the Depression Era. They avoided direct references to Jesse's Confederate identity and emphasized instead his connection with the West and the building of the nation. The opening titles frame Jesse's outlawry as a struggle against the “predatory” railroad, presenting him as the embodiment of the economically independent rural middle-class pitted against big business and a crooked justice system. His defense of the farmers of Missouri resonates with national brands of populism from Thomas Jefferson's agrarianism to Frederick Jackson Turner's theory of the Frontier. To further establish Jesse as a Westerner, the editorials of a local journalist—and a former Confederate soldier—Major Cobb (Henry Hull) root the narrative in the West; Jesse (Tyrone Power) is called twice a “buckaroo”¹⁶, another word for a “cowboy”, and he is characterized as a Frontier hero (part yeoman, part Indian¹⁷). The concluding eulogy of Jesse James delivered by Major Cobb links the character to the bold and lawless heroes America has always been proud of. Ironically, it is the Northern railroad tycoon Mr. McCoy (Donald Meek) who would have the James brothers lynched, while the local marshal Will Wright (Randolph Scott) claims that it “ain't the way things are done here”. Purifying the South from its historical sins, the Western thus turns the town of Liberty, Missouri, into the symbolic site of an American epic.

¹⁴ The Gilded Age (1877-1901) was a period of American history characterized by rapid industrialization and economic growth, as well as corruption and growing inequalities. The expression is a derogatory term coined by Mark Twain to describe a time of ostentatious wealth masking appalling poverty and discriminations.

¹⁵ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998, 137.

¹⁶ The word “buckaroo”, first used at the beginning of the 20th century, comes from the Spanish *vaquero*, and means cowboy.

¹⁷ Jesse communicates secretly by whistling like a bird, a device first used in the wilderness. The train robbery sequence highlights his agility and animality, an element later confirmed by Zee's comparison of him with a wolf, a reference to his wild nature. His impact as a hero is largely drawn from visual and thematic associations with the wilderness.

While the Confederate rebel is Americanized, the mythology of the Lost Cause, under the eye and pen of Southerners Nunnally Johnson and Henry King, discreetly permeates the picture. The opening titles foreshadow a southern perspective when they designate the Civil War by its southern name of “the war between the states.”¹⁸ The railroad enemy is associated with the Union through the song “Battle Cry of Freedom” and the presence of Union flags when the train first departs from St. Louis. Jesse’s resistance to the railroad resonates with the agricultural South’s regressive rejection of northern industries.¹⁹ The solidarity of citizens and local authorities against northern intruders (robber barons backed by federal troops) sympathetically mirrors the Southern resistance to Reconstruction. The presence of Pinkie (Ernest Whitman) as Jesse’s black servant, although unique in all Jesse James films,²⁰ serves an idealized portrayal of race relations in the Reconstruction South. Two elements highlight this ambiguity in the film’s treatment of the South. The first is the song “O Susanna” hummed several times during the film: it is both a Southern tune (“I come from Alabama with a banjo on my knee”) and a folk song in the national repertoire. The second is Jesse’s avenging of his mother’s death: set in a Western saloon with a Southern name (“Dixie Belle Saloon”), it blends elements of the Western with a ritual reminiscent of aristocratic dueling²¹. Although we are told that Missouri is a Western state, Jesse’s resistance is marked by Southern honor codes, and by the history of rebellion.

Later movie versions of the character (*The True Story of Jesse James*, Nicholas Ray, 1957; *The Long Riders*, Walter Hill, 1980; *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, Andrew Dominik, 2007) gradually emphasize Jesse’s Southern identity so as to darken his character. Yet none of them goes as far as to debunk the mythical hero. King’s film became a model for later film versions of the character, as well as for other good outlaws like Billy the Kid or Butch Cassidy.²² Resonating with the ideals of the American Revolution, the populist outlaw provided the Western with films that praised the Lost Cause ethics of conservative rebellion. It was also the type of character embodied by Clint Eastwood in his ambitious yet failed attempt to revive the Western genre in his 1976 film *The Outlaw Josey Wales*.

While frequently downplaying the more explicit connections of heroes like the Virginian or Jesse James with the Old South, the Western actively participated in popularizing ideological tenets of the Lost Cause and tied these tenets to a myth of the nation. On the other hand, the Western started to crumble as the genre of national mythmaking in the 1960s, when its core structure, the Frontier narrative, was exposed as a cynical justification of America’s

¹⁸ “War between the States”—coined by former Vice President of the Confederacy Alexander Stephens—implies a plurality of sovereign belligerents, implicitly recognizing the states’ rights to secede from the Union. The use of that phrase in a Western reflects the success of the Southern in establishing the Lost Cause—favored by the historians of the influential Dunning school—as the national interpretation of the Civil War and Reconstruction in the first decades of the 20th century.

¹⁹ Discussed in Wilbur Joseph Cash, *The Mind of the South*, New York: Vintage Books, 1941.

²⁰ The real Jesse James grew up in a slaveholder family of Clay County, MO, an area called “Little Dixie” because the percentage of slaves in the area (approximately 20%) was twice superior to the rest of Missouri. No other film with Jesse as the main character tackles the issue of race in Missouri. The character of Pinkie is a blend of Uncle Tom and the mammy: at once a faithful servant and a maternal maid.

²¹ The colts, **the** visually dramatized showdown and **the** hero drawing his gun after the villain are elements typical of the Western genre, while the explicit setting of **rules** (when Jesse asks the bartender to count to three); **the** emphasis on **fair play** (when Jesse asks his opponent to “keep [his] hands in sight”); and the external mediation provided by the bartender (suggesting the presence of witnesses, or seconds, in aristocratic duels) recall the aristocratic ethos and Southern practice of dueling.

²² “Over the next twenty years a Jesse James ‘canon’ developed in which themes, figures, scenes, and characters clearly derived from King’s original treatment were continually varied, reprised, and reinterpreted. [...] The populist outlaw figure became an important symbol in the lexicon of movie mythology.” Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 301-302.

history of genocidal violence and territorial aggression. By the 1970s, the Frontier narrative had moved south to focus on a new kind of savage: the redneck.

Savage America: the Frontier Goes South after Vietnam

After 1960, John F. Kennedy's New Frontier was the high point in the political uses of a myth that had gradually come to encapsulate a national identity.²³ Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty" and the escalation of the Vietnam War were to be explained and justified by similar mythical formulas.²⁴ But these broad and powerful narratives collapsed at the end of the decade when race riots in American cities revealed the blatant failure of domestic social programs, and the Vietnam War turned into an increasingly deadly quagmire. Facts and images circulated by the media now directly questioned America's national mythology. As John Hellman famously argues in *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*, "the legacy of Vietnam is the disruption of our story, of our explanation of the past and vision of the future."²⁵ Or, to use Michael Coyne's outright observation, "it was hard to cling to concepts of American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny in the age of Manson and My Lai."²⁶

America divided

The major consequence of Vietnam on American culture was its blatant revelation of American savagery. The coverage of the My Lai massacre by *Time* magazine, *Life*, and *Newsweek* in the fall of 1969²⁷ presented white American soldiers killing and raping a native population their original mission was to rescue. The discovery of My Lai represented what Richard Slotkin called "a cross-over point."²⁸ Now the national media and most Americans thought that the US involvement in Vietnam was, in fact, a shameful crime. The killing spree of the infamous "Manson Family", whose cult leader Charles Manson made the frontpage of *Life* magazine two weeks after the My Lai revelation,²⁹ fueled the conviction that such violence was born of domestic conditions (Manson was a white man born in Ohio). In other words, barbarous violence was no more the sole work of colored savages beyond the Frontier; it was homegrown and perpetrated by white Americans on a frontier within the nation.—American culture at large, and particularly its intellectuals, journalists, artists and politicians, reacted by looking for a signifier and a potential scapegoat for savage white violence in a context where cultural stereotypes seemed to point at the South and at the redneck.

Indeed, in popular culture, the South had been associated with violence since the Reconstruction. Accounts of gruesome acts of collective violence, such as the Memphis riots in 1866 and the Colfax Massacre in 1873 had outraged the national public opinion in the northern press.³⁰ More than the "moonlight and magnolia" atmosphere of *Gone with the Wind*,

²³ President Kennedy defined the Frontier of the 1960s in his New Frontier speech of July 15, 1960 as follows: "Beyond that frontier are uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered problems of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus." <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/AS08q5oYz0SFUZg9uOi4iw.aspx>. Accessed on April 3, 2016.

²⁴ For instance, Lyndon B. Johnson's speech on the escalation in Vietnam resonates with images and figures of the captivity narrative, a central narrative of the Frontier myth: "[I]t is a war of unparalleled brutality. Simple farmers are the targets of assassination and kidnapping. Women and children are strangled in the night because their men are loyal to their government. And helpless villages are ravaged by sneak attacks. Large scale raids are conducted on towns, and terror strikes in the heart of cities." In Lyndon B. Johnson, "Peace without Conquest", address at Johns Hopkins University, April 7, 1965.

²⁵ John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, x.

²⁶ Michael Coyne, *op. cit.*, 122.

²⁷ *Time*, November 28, 1969. *Life*, December 5, 1969. *Newsweek*, December 8, 1969.

²⁸ Richard Slotkin, *op. cit.*, 578.

²⁹ *Life*, December 19, 1969.

³⁰ Two of the deadliest outbursts of collective racial violence targeting African Americans in the South after the Civil War.

the South was equated with backwardness, lynching, and secession, which would again make the national headlines in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Lost Cause myth presented the South as an area divided by an internal frontier into the world of savage blacks and besieged whites.³¹ The shift from race to class, from blacks to rednecks, had already taken place in the films of the late 1950s, when “blackness all but disappeared from the screen as *intra*racial confrontation assumed interracial connotations, and white battled white for cultural supremacy,”³² so that the South could now become a metonymy of a nation divided between the civilized and the savage whites.³³ The choice of the redneck, hillbilly, or any other slur for the lower class white,³⁴ as the white savage was facilitated by the fact that rednecks, with their ambiguous “status of the ‘white other’”³⁵ crystallized a social and racial anxiety at least as old as William Byrd’s 1728 portrayal of white settlers in North Carolina³⁶ or the backwoodsmen of St. John de Crevecoeur. They also came to represent the backward forces of the Old South pitted against a New South of economic development described as a new frontier for investors,³⁷ the remnants of a barbaric sectional past in a national discourse of progress. These cultural clichés responded perfectly to the difficult question of American violence in the wake of the Vietnam War, accelerating the rise of savage rednecks on a Southern frontier in the cinema of the 1970s.

The turning point in cinematic history was *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), a film that unfolds with all the promises of a Western, yet ends in the stifling South. The film concludes with a seemingly final statement: the road of modern pioneers leads to death, as the leading characters are murdered (not by the now-vanished Indians, but) by Southern white trash. Two kinds of frontiers are thus pitted against each other: the frontier of virgin lands and godly revelations exclusively located in the West, and on the other hand, the frontier of hostile environment and murderous natives now strictly associated with the South.

The redneck as redskin on a Southern frontier

The famous father of the modern road movie genre also initiated what Carol Mason calls “the hillbilly defense,” defined as “a defense of the United States of America as a civilized nation—a defense in which hillbillies are the scapegoats for any behavior deemed uncivilized.”³⁸ In the context and aftermath of America’s uncivilized behavior in Vietnam, rednecks provided an easy target to deflect criticism that found its way onto the films of the early seventies. Following the transitional *Easy Rider*, redneck violence was brought to a whole new level of savagery in which “the American search for a meaning [in the years after Vietnam was] confronted with nonsense”³⁹. Redneck violence threatened the domestic core of American

³¹ Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* (1905) and David Griffith’s film adaptation of the novel, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), describe the Reconstruction South using structural elements of the Frontier myth: a racial opposition threatening the white civilization and human progress, dramatized by a struggle over the body of the white female.

³² Allison Graham, *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003, 13.

³³ The South, with whites and blacks, rich and poor, Old South and New South, conservatives and liberals, also powerfully embodied the political divisions of the nation from the Civil Rights movement to the Vietnam War.

³⁴ Anthony Harkins discusses these different labels and concludes that “many of these derogatory labels were used interchangeably as putdowns of working-class southern whites.” In Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: a Cultural History of an American Icon*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁷ Derek Nystrom, *Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men: Class in 1970s American Cinema*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 60.

³⁸ Carol Mason, “The Hillbilly Defense: Culturally Mediating U.S. Terror at Home and Abroad,” *NWSA Journal* 17, n° 3, October 1, 2005, 39

³⁹ Maxime Lachaud, « Le Sud de tous les dangers: retour au primitif et dégénérescence dans le ‘cinéma de redneck’ américain », in Marie Liénard-Yeterian and Taina Tuhkanen, *Le Sud au cinéma*, 93. [My translation.]

society in films such as *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), *Eaten Alive* (Tobe Hooper, 1976), or *Southern Comfort* (Walter Hill, 1981). *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven, 1977), though set in the West, is often counted among these redneck films since it depicts a man-eating bunch of white trash degenerates.

To signify his otherness, the redneck of these films is often pictured as a redskin.⁴⁰ His savagery is emphasized by his shared characteristics with the Indian: “Like the world of the movie Apache, the world of the horror movie’s redneck is a world of tribal law, primitive hygiene, tyrannical patriarchs (or matriarchs), cannibalism, incest, genetic failure from inbreeding, enslaved women, drunkenness, poverty, and cognomina in place of Christian names.”⁴¹ On screen, the redneck appears as an emanation of the wilderness, living in depopulated areas or in the woods (in *Deliverance*⁴²), covered with filth and animal skins (in *The Hills Have Eyes*, *Southern Comfort*); and even adept of pagan cults of death (the bone totem in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*).⁴³ Although the initial reason for despising the redneck was a class prejudice, the cliché of inbreeding and racial degeneration, as illustrated by the banjo player of *Deliverance*, perpetuated a racial reading typical of the frontier which made the redneck more than simply a scapegoat of white American violence, but “a signifier of racial ambiguity [offering] a spectacle of racial redemption, for with the expulsion of the lawless redneck from southern society, the moral purity of whiteness itself is affirmed.”⁴⁴

After the Frontier myth was discredited in the late 1960s, it seems that the rural South became the set for the internal frontier dividing the nation. Rednecks were often turned into homegrown savages and thrown beyond that frontier so that the national violence exemplified by Vietnam could be contained both geographically and socially.⁴⁵ However, by doing so, most of these films only perpetuated the mythical roles of the Frontier and of the South in defining the American nation. This is not the case with *Deliverance*, which will be analyzed more closely, as well as the more recent crossing of the Western and Southern genres, *Django Unchained*. Both films displace the Frontier myth into the South with very different purposes, yet with equally powerful criticism of American mythologies.

The Southern Western and the End of Myths

Deliverance, “an exemplary demonstration of the ways in which generic elements from the Western were adapted to the Southern,”⁴⁶ is a projection of the Frontier myth into the

⁴⁰ “But it is not just the demonizing mechanism that the city-revenge films have inherited from the Western. It is the redskin himself—now rewritten as a redneck.” Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, 135.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁴² John Boorman explains how he “strove for the illusion that [the mountain men who rape Bobby] had actually come out of the trees themselves, like malevolent spirits of nature seeking retribution.” John Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, London: Macmillan, 2004, 195.

⁴³ Christopher Sharrett gives an analysis of the Indianness of rednecks of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in “The Idea of Apocalypse in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*”. In Barry Keith Grant et Christopher Sharrett, *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004.

⁴⁴ Allison Graham, *op. cit.*, 13.

⁴⁵ Less prominent since the Reagan era, the redneck character can still be the perpetrator of American monstrosities (see the serial killer Buffalo Bill in *The Silence of the Lambs*, Jonathan Demme, 1991). By the 1990s, the cliché of Southern violence was tempered by the acknowledgment of white violence as a national problem. On this point, see Claire Dutriaux, « Deux visions, deux Suds? Évolution de la représentation du Sud d’un *Cape Fear* à l’autre », in Marie Liénard-Yeterian and Taïna Tuhkunen (eds.), *op. cit.*, 197. Carol Mason nevertheless convincingly argues that the hillbilly defense was again used in American media and political discourses during the Iraq War, for instance to contain the scandal of the American army torturing prisoners in Abu Ghraib in 2005: “The legacy of deviant hillbillies, popularized by *Deliverance* during the Vietnam War era and later by *Pulp Fiction*, has successfully been recycled in the image of Lynndie England to contain and explain away some of the most disturbing images of our nation’s military.” In Carol Mason, *op. cit.*, 50.

⁴⁶ Derek Nystrom, *op. cit.*, 60.

Georgian wilderness whose purpose seems to be the exploration of the historical and mythical origins of American frontier violence in the context of the Vietnam War. On the other hand, *Django Unchained* appears as a displacement of the Western genre into the mythical *antebellum* South whose purpose is to blow up to pieces, not the Frontier myth, but the Lost Cause, by revealing the inherent violence, racism and exploitation concealed in its cinematographic clichés.

***Deliverance* and American frontier violence**

Critics have often considered *Deliverance* as the starting point and epitome of violent redneck films.⁴⁷ A group of four friends from middle-class Atlanta, Ed (Jon Voight), Lewis (Burt Reynolds), Bobby (Ned Beatty) and Drew (Ronny Cox), go on a canoe trip on the last wild Georgia river before it is flooded to build a new electric dam. During the trip, they are sexually assaulted by white trash natives of the area, and their vacation turns into a struggle for survival in a hostile wilderness. The central sequence from the rape scene to Drew's death and Lewis's injury articulates two very different movements in the film.

The first part of the film up to the rape sequence focuses on the reenactment of the seminal American experience of contact with a virgin wilderness. Much like Wyatt and Billy in *Easy Rider*, the characters, led by Lewis, seek to relive the experience of the sacred, transcendentalist bond that has tied the Americans to their wild continent. This bond is part of a Frontier mythology of which Lewis is the most vocal representative. Manly, reckless, a wilderness-loving hunter armed with a bow, Lewis is not only the voice of the myth, but also its heroic image. This iconic dimension is crucial to his function in the film, which is to expose at once the murderous consequences of the Frontier myth and its artificial fallacy. Despite his attractive charisma and lecturing attitude, we learn from Drew that Lewis has no first-hand knowledge of the wilderness: everything he knows about it comes from books. Lewis is thus less a genuine and active Frontier hero than a passive product of cultural formulas glorifying the Frontier. At one point, he peremptorily declares that "sometimes you have to lose yourself before you can find anything,"⁴⁸ which seems to echo the regenerative process of immersion of the Frontier hero into the uncharted wilderness. But this knowing statement is voided by his own earlier assertion that he has "never been lost in [his] life." His first speech on the "vanishing wilderness" and the river as "the last wild, untamed, unpolluted, unfucked-up river in the South" is undermined by images of a landscape already 'raped', in Lewis's own words, by industrial activity. Like the discredited Frontier myth itself, Lewis's voice merely echoes trite aphorisms disconnected from reality. Still, he represents a powerful myth whose influence on himself and the other characters will fatefully bear on their reactions to a brutal natural environment.

The rape scene is not the first time the theme of sexual violation is brought up in the film. While Lewis's opening statements associate the characters with the New South of air conditioners and recreation facilities, the images expose the relentless work of destruction performed by bulldozers on the once virgin landscape as a new hydro-electric dam is being built to provide electrical power for the expanding Atlanta suburbs. Although Ed deems extreme Lewis's conclusion that "They're gonna rape this whole goddamned landscape", a siren does seem to announce an apocalyptic explosion. The resonance of Lewis's discourse with the mythical images of the "vanishing wilderness" and virgin land links the contemporary destruction of the river with the larger rape, in the name of economic progress, of the American continent by capitalistic exploitation. The rednecks, forced off their land to make way for progress, mirror the territorial dispossession of the original native peoples in American history: "in [the urbania films as in the settler-versus-Indian Western], both redneck and redskin are

⁴⁷ Carol Clover considers it to be "the influential granddaddy of the tradition" of urban revenge films in Carol Clover, *op. cit.*, 126.

⁴⁸ [00:16:30]

figured as indigenous peoples on the verge of being deprived of their native lands, and the force of the demonizing mechanism derives, I think, from just this issue of land- and genocide-guilt.”⁴⁹ The four educated businessmen contemptuous of the native rednecks⁵⁰ appear connected with these violations, and the rape turns into a native revenge on continental imperialism and contemporary class domination. In accordance with Clover’s thought, the rape scene could thus be read as a reversal of the relation between the conquerors and the conquered.

Another crucial function of the rape scene is to reveal a seminal trauma, and precipitate the transformation of the second hero of the film, Ed Gentry, from a civilized urbanite into a brutal killer. Ed stands for the average American of the early 1970s but, in the broader subtext of Frontier mythology in resonance with the history of colonization, he also reenacts the experience of the early colonists confronted with an unknown and distressing environment. This historical dimension of the characters’ journey was, indeed, part of Boorman’s intentions: “the journey of these urbanites is also a journey through time, through America’s history.”⁵¹ Therefore, Ed’s responses can be read as a form of brutalization or dehumanization of the European transplant who is exposed to the hardships of the wilderness, the very adversities which supposedly produced the American character and people. Mistakenly convinced by Lewis that Drew has been murdered,⁵² Ed must now play the game of survival, step into the clothes of the Frontier hero and regress into savagery to match his savage enemy. But the mythical reflex is again debunked. The toothless mountain man killed by Ed could well be an innocent bystander and Drew, on closer inspection, may not have been shot. As doubt and a sense of guilt were emphasized through the adaptation of the novel into a screenplay, and to the final film, Boorman opened the possibility of downright murder of an innocent native. And this may well be the director’s representation of the rape of Vietnam by American heroes: the traumatic experience of wilderness at home and the cultural influence of the Frontier myth having displaced the violence perpetrated onto native bystanders. In any case, Boorman “wanted to say that the myth of regeneration through violence” which, for Richard Slotkin is largely responsible for America’s involvement in Vietnam,⁵³ “is an illusion.”⁵⁴

The scenario strikingly associates Ed with savagery not when he kills the mountain man, but when he realizes that he may have made a mistake: “ED takes the knife into his hand again. A low growl comes from him. This is a moment balanced between infinite possibilities: ED could do anything at this point. He has the face of a primitive man. His features are transformed by extreme effort and lack of sleep. He looks savage.”⁵⁵ America’s brutalization in the native wilderness does not seem to come so much from the violence inflicted on the native people as from the immoral nature of such violence and the sense of guilt it creates. The fallacy of mythical formulas about the Frontier is replicated in a concluding criticism of the clichés regarding Southern rednecks. The people of Aintry are presented as neither rapists nor degenerates. Ed and Bobby are invited to share a comforting dinner table with friendly old

⁴⁹ Carol Clover, *op. cit.*, 136.

⁵⁰ Arriving in a remote village of mountain people, Billy scornfully remarks: “I think this is where everything finishes up. We may just be at the end of the line.”

⁵¹ Interview with Boorman, in Michel Ciment, *John Boorman*, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986, 129.

⁵² The ambiguity as to Drew’s murder by a mountain man, suggested in James Dickey’s book, is emphasized in the script: “Something happens to DREW; it is impossible to tell what. He shakes his head violently (but this might just be the canoe bumping on a rock) and his paddle is whirled out of his hand by the river. He pitches over, or is thrown over or something. Whatever it is, the canoe goes out of control. ED lets go of his paddle and grabs for the bow at his feet as his last act before the canoe overturns in the boiling angry, murderous water.” (59) Once the characters meet up again, Lewis is adamant: “Drew was shot. I saw it. He’s dead.” This has a tremendous impact on Ed’s beliefs: “Ed is stunned. Even in this condition LEWIS has the power to shake his equilibrium.” (61). James Dickey and John Boorman, “Deliverance,” Second Draft, January 11, 1971.

⁵³ Richard Slotkin, *op. cit.*.

⁵⁴ John Boorman, *op. cit.*, 184.

⁵⁵ James Dickey and John Boorman, “Deliverance,” Second Draft, January 11, 1971, 73.

folks. As to the local sheriff (James Dickey), although suspicious of wrong-doing, he does not abuse his authority, but sticks to the law which Lewis thought did not exist in these remote regions. This suggests that the characters might have had a fair trial if they had brought the matter to the police instead of burying their crime. This again suggests that their vision of the rural South as a lawless area may have been completely misguided. *Deliverance* thus exposes the artificiality and violence of the American myth of the Frontier. It responds to the cultural crisis surrounding the Vietnam War by exploring how the Frontier myth brutalized and misled America into unjustifiable and haunting violence. Locating this Frontier tale in the South resonates with contemporary class-conflicts created by the rise of the New South⁵⁶. It not only allows for an efficient use of the clichés concerning Southern confinement and redneck violence, but also their partial critique in the final sequences. More than rednecks, what eventually appears truly dangerous is the American wilderness itself, America's haunting trauma,⁵⁷ as violence is less likely to be regenerative than irreversibly corruptive.

***Django Unchained* or the Lost Cause blown up to bits**

While Boorman's *Deliverance* seeks to debunk the Frontier myth to reveal its inherent violence in the exploration of a contemporary Southern frontier, Tarantino's *Django Unchained* reclaims the forms of the Western genre to act out a symbolic revenge on the mythical plantation South of *Gone with the Wind*. To do so, the film relies on the central narrative of the Frontier myth: the captivity narrative.

One of the oldest narratives of the American Frontier myth, the captivity dates back to the late 17th century and traditionally involves a civilized white woman abducted by colored savages. The woman ends up captive in the wilderness on the other side of the frontier, before she is rescued by a white Frontier hero. Slave narratives, and later abolitionist tales sometimes used the forms of the popular captivity narrative to reach a wider audience and endow their indictments of slavery with vivid, emotional color. In *Captivity & Sentiment*, Michelle Burnham approaches captivity and slave narratives as part of a common body of "captivity literature" that relies primarily on sentiments to engage readers.⁵⁸ In slave narratives and abolitionist tales, black slaves were depicted as captives of uncivilized slaveholders, the abolition of slavery being presented as a means of rescue. Religion served to create empathy with the black victims of white violence, as slaves sometimes appeared as budding Christians whose religious yearnings were quelled by slavery. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a case in point, with Simon Legree as the white savage and Uncle Tom as the Christian captive.

In his more recent movie, Tarantino adopts an extreme take on abolitionist captivity tales, using them as the underlying structure for his film. Django (Jamie Foxx) and Broomhilda (Kerry Washington) are captives of perversely sadistic, disgustingly racist proto-aristocratic masters on the one hand (Calvin Candie played by Leonardo DiCaprio), and ridiculously moronic, desperately mean white trash overseers on the other (led by Billy Crash played by Walton Goggins). At the beginning of the film, Django is rescued by a bounty-hunter and a would-be abolitionist King Schultz (Christoph Waltz) and becomes the eventual rescuer of Broomhilda. The structure of abolitionist tales is visible, but crucial departures are introduced by an integration of the blaxploitation heritage. First, Christian liberation is replaced by yearning for freedom and equality. Second, the hero of the central plot is not a white abolitionist

⁵⁶ Derek Nystrom's *Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men* underlines the resonance of the film with the historical context of the early 1970s and convincingly argues that the film can be read as dramatizing the class-conflicts created by the rise of a New South in the decades after the Second World War.

⁵⁷ See Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007 and Lauric Guillaud, *La Terre et le sacré: la nuit gothique américaine*, Paris: Michel Houdiard Éditeur, 2003.

⁵⁸ Michelle Burnham, *Captivity & Sentiment: Cultural Exchange in American Literature, 1682-1861*, Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1997, 3.

but a black buck freedman “coming back to collect some dues.”⁵⁹ Third, the Uncle Tom character (Stephen played by Samuel L. Jackson) is no innocent victim but the scheming, menacing racial traitor as portrayed by the black liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s.⁶⁰

The result of this mix of black cinematographic empowerment and abolitionist tale is a return to a form of captivity narrative which is far more similar with the original Frontier myth, except for the most complete reversal of racial roles since *Buck and the Preacher* (Sidney Poitier, 1972). The manly, superiorly gifted Virginian-type cowboy is embodied by a black character elevated to the status of mythical American hero through references to the Western genre that go from *Navajo Joe* (Sergio Corbucci, 1966) and the Italian operatic grandeur to the landscapes of *The Searchers*, and Tom Mix’s horse parade. His captive bride, who speaks German while her master only pretends to speak French, is the embodiment of immaculate innocence and an enlightened civilization in a barbarous environment, mirroring what white heroines stood for in the American wilderness. As for the lustful torturers inhabiting the Southern frontier, they not only comprise the savage white trash of the 1970s, but also the central figures of the Lost Cause iconography, the white aristocratic planter and his sacred “Southern belle”. The horde of savages is not Thomas Dixon and David Griffith’s freedmen, but the white lower and upper classes united in the horse charge of the Ku Klux Klan **riding down on Django**, whooping and crying like Indians. As opposed to many earlier Southern films, the film does not demonize one class of white Americans to redeem another. The entire white American society is pictured as savage and racist. However, the presence of Dr. Schultz, a civilized German Aryan,⁶¹ demonstrates that the problem does not lie in race as much as in the American nation and its founding myths. These myths deserve moral correction and formal reinvention. The new Western hero is black; his presence in the Southern reveals the violent nature of the genre’s mythical icons; and he uses Frontier violence to redress America’s wrongs on the symbolic level. As highlighted by one of the shots in *Django Unchained*, America’s cherished Southern myth is no longer cotton-white nor immaculate, but sprinkled with the blood of its white torturers.

Conclusion

The Frontier has been an imaginary line on which the Western and the Southern have met with mutual benefit. When the Frontier myth was at its peak as a national narrative in the Westerns of the 1950s, the genre absorbed Southern types to counter the widespread perception of the South as backward and violent. When the Frontier narrative came under heavy criticism after the Vietnam War, it was relocated in the Southern to circumscribe the charges brought against a violent nation. But neither the Frontier myth nor the Lost Cause completely disappeared as national narratives. The former has dissolved into different genres such as science fiction and action movies, as well as amidst war films, continuing to shape Hollywood’s ideological consensus for national and international audiences. The latter has arguably been integrated into American culture as a signifier of nostalgia and a legitimate part of national history.⁶² The latest crossing of these myths, *Django Unchained*, may nevertheless prove that

⁵⁹ A quote from the ending title of *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* “WATCH OUT, A baad asssss nigger is coming back to collect some dues...”, the first blaxploitation movie by Martin Van Peebles released in 1971.

⁶⁰ Cf. the use of the Uncle Tom character in the speeches of Malcolm X in the 1960s, to designate a subservient black man threatening African American emancipation. This interpretation of the character by African American activists originated in the speeches of Marcus Garvey in the 1920s.

⁶¹ I use the word “Aryan” because the film features a man named Candie who is versed in scientific racism, and says at one point that Schultz has “quite adapted European germs”. In this light, he represents the superior class of the white race in racialist theory. Incidentally, Schultz is played by Christoph Waltz, who played the SS colonel Hans Landa in Tarantino’s previous World War II film, *Inglourious Basterds* (2009).

⁶² For a more complete analysis of this phenomenon, see Claire Dutriaux, “Héros blanc du Sud dans le cinéma américain : normes, marges, ambivalences”, PhD diss., Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense University, 2011.

the Frontier narrative remains the most powerful one in expressing as well as exposing American progressivism and mythical regeneration.

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