

Tales of violence and revival: Persistence of the mythic hero in American cinema

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When James Mangold's *Logan* released in 2017, it was a highly anticipated superhero film.¹ While the film was all set to become a landmark in the superhero genre, as soon as it opened in theatres, fans and critics immediately noted how far removed the film was from the usual superhero fanfare and how closely it resonated with westerns. In one of the earliest reviews, Peter Travers noted, "Logan has the shape of a classic western. Shane is directly referenced in one scene and the elegiac tone of the film recalls Clint Eastwood's Oscar-winning *Unforgiven*".² While Travers might have just scratched the surface, given the limited scope and immediacy of a review, *Logan* shares far deeper bonds with westerns than just familiar plotlines and iconographies. To understand the structural similarities which impart the film its identity as a western, one must go back to the most fundamental facets of the genre, namely the frontier myth and the notion of the mythic hero and address one of the foremost preoccupations of westerns, idea of masculinity.

American West(ern): From history to myth

"When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

- *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962)

The western has not only been the most distinctive genre in the American studio system but also a quintessential American institution. Western's popularity and predominance throughout the studio era can be attributed to a multitude of social, cultural, political and historical factors. Considering Edwin Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), it can be argued that westerns predate the studio system itself. The settings and iconographies of the cinematic west, evoking the frontier experience, were already a familiar visual territory by the time the Classical Hollywood film form began to take shape.

Historically, America's frontier experience has largely been a part of the westward expansion which took place over a major part of the 19th century, approximately from the 1830s to the late 1890s. Throughout this period, and even extending into the early years of the 20th century, events and locations associated with westward expansion found its way into the American popular imagination through multiple regimes of representation including literature, painting and vaudeville performances.³ They introduced a highly romanticized notion of the frontier experience to a wider and more urban population of America.

A significant landmark in the process of idealization of the west has been the notion of Manifest Destiny⁴. The term was originally used to express the belief that United States was predestined to expand across the North American continent. Although it never took the shape of a political policy, it continued to serve as a theoretical justification for U.S. expansion outside its boundaries.

Equally impactful was historian Frederick Jackson Turner's detailed observation which came to be known as the 'Turner Thesis'. Taking his cue from Darwinian ideology and Manifest Destiny, Turner argued the American west or the frontier functioned as an eco-cultural setting against which the nation's most primal and fundamental conflicts such as man against nature or civilization against savagery are played out and resolved and thus providing the necessary thrust for American progress to continue. As Henry Nash Smith states, "The idea of nature [at the frontier] suggested to Turner a poetic account of the influence of free land as rebirth, a regeneration, a rejuvenation of man and society constantly recurring where civilization came into contact with the wilderness along the frontier".⁵

All these factors collectively contributed in the construction of a mythic imagination surrounding the American frontier advocating the supremacy of the white Christian race across the continent, promoting a narrative of progress. Thus, America's perennial fascination with the frontier experience and the frontier myth has been the cultural benchmark of American identity itself.

Thus, placed within a matrix of cultural representations and historical debates, westerns recast the events and characters from history and reorganize them into narratives with a specific ideological function, advocating a discursive accuracy over factual or material accuracy. The idea of myth in this context can thus be defined as narratives with a cultural utility of making social, political or historical experience intelligible and meaningful to oneself or the nation at large. As John E O'Connor and Peter C Rollins observe about the Hollywood westerns, "In these visual narratives, Hollywood has interpreted America to itself".⁶

Located at a poignant historical moment between America's agrarian past and industrial future, westerns have continuously negotiated with the frontier myth, conforming, subverting or even negating it. A diachronic look at the genre further reveals that the western has evolved steadily; an optimistic nation building charge of the post war years giving way to darker and bleaker films during the McCarthy era and further into the turbulent 1960s and the morally ambiguous '70s.

But irrespective of the socio-political or economic climate of the country, mainstream American cinema has always 'looked to the west' and inevitably resorted to the mythic hero, the tall and silent westerner riding across the open range carrying a six shooter, to scrutinize and intervene into the contemporary issues and in the process re-evaluate the very notion of nationhood and national identity.

Knights on open range: *Shane* and western's concern with masculinity

Harmonica: So, you found out you're not a businessman after all.

Frank: Just a man.

Harmonica: An ancient race.

- *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Sergio Leone, 1968)

Discussing the idea of genre films, Barry Keith Grant avers, "...genre movies are those commercial feature films, which through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations".⁷ The western, being hardly an exception to this principle, presents a gamut of recognizable character types such as sheriff, Indian, homesteader families, outlaws, gamblers, whores but none more identifiable than the cowboy or the westerner. With the growth of an industrial capitalist economy and urban way of life, the collective consciousness of America chose the archetype of cowboy – a gun wielding shepherd riding a horse across western plains – to endow with a mythic excess. The westerner thus stood for a symbol of hard work and mobility, residing at the brink of civilization and wilderness; a figure which not only recalls a lost plenitude but in its rugged individualism, it also becomes a touchstone of American masculinity.

Masculinity has always been one of western's primary concerns and the films have always been preoccupied with the sheer spectacle of the male body. In fact, the camera's obsession with the male body puts westerns quite ill-at-ease among the conventional Hollywood repertoire where the film form is largely derived from an objectification of the woman-on-screen, which Laura Mulvey describes as, "to-be-looked-at-ness".⁸ Right from John Wayne and Gary Cooper to Paul Newman or Clint Eastwood, westerns have not only cast actors possessing the classic Anglo-Saxon features in the role of the mythic westerner but have always framed and lit them up in a way to allow the camera to linger upon their angular faces, thin lips, slanted eyes, strong jawlines and broad shoulders. But it is to be noted that contrary to the objectification of women, westerns indulge in a celebration of male body, constituting an idea of American masculinity. Even, the familiar position of sitting erect on a horse invokes the mythological image of a centaur renowned and often notorious for their sexual prowess, and thus poses the westerner as a sexual being, literally emphasizing on his manhood.

However, it should be noted that westerns are not confined to portrayal, observation and celebration of male bodies. The body is made to go through elaborate rituals of violation and reconstruction. The westerner goes through customary visits to the barber shop, disrobing in bath houses, toiling menial tasks, bar brawls and even the occasional gunfights leading to flesh wounds. All these minute details of the 'idealized' frontier life foreground the male body in a vulnerable or broken condition, only to be gradually reconstructed and reconstituted before the camera, leading to the final showdown. In fact, westerns can be understood as a series of rituals performed and experienced to reinstate the masculine identity on to the male body; the rite of passage of becoming the mythic hero.

One of the most significant films among the post WW II westerns, in this context, which deals with the mythic nature of the westerner is *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953).⁹ As Andre Bazin notes, "George Stevens set out to justify the western - by the western. The others do their ingenious best to extract explicit themes from implied myths but the theme of *Shane* is the myth".¹⁰ The film, both content and the form, is conscious in the mythic representation of the westerner. It largely unfolds from the ocular and psychological perspective of little boy called Joey whose head is filled with tales of courage, chivalry and gunfighting in wild west. On getting acquainted with Shane, Joey continuously invests his fantasies and speculations about adventures and gunfights, upon Shane.

Shane formally foregrounds the very process of mythification as both the camera and Joey looks up to the westerner inevitably framed against nature, the valley, the sky or the mountains; the towering closeups in 'flat' widescreen illuminated with an ethereal glow and isolating him from other characters and everyday surroundings. The opening scene is particularly poignant where Joey's gaze follows the arrival of Shane as he descends the mountains and rides leisurely across a quaint pastoral setting and is framed in between the ornate antlers of a buck grazing by the brook. As he comes into focus, he is almost like an ancient luminous God, clad in buckskin, who has arrived from Olympus into the realm of mortals in their times of trouble.

Furthermore, when Shane comes back from a prolonged bar brawl sustaining injuries on his face and body, Joey's mother tends to him by cleaning the wounds, wiping the blood and applying medication. All throughout, Joey sits there wide eyed and awe-struck speculating about Shane's larger than life ability to endure bodily pain, the much-venerated restraint and resilience inherent to his persona. While Shane goes through the ritualistic violation and subsequent healing, Joey constructs romanticized narratives about Shane's superhuman ability to withstand the sting of the medicine; myths preceding the actual events. As Lee Clark Mitchell remarks, "We watch, that is, men becoming men in the principal way the Western allows, by being restored to their male bodies".¹¹

Legends from other realms: Displacement of the mythic hero

“Maybe a quarter of it happened – but not like this!”
 - *Logan* (James Mangold, 2017)

As westerns approached its demise in the late 1970s, the genre’s ability to serve as a contemporary cultural artefact was slowly draining away.¹² However, westerns have been an essential component of the mainstream American cinema, responsible for addressing some of the fundamental concerns throughout the years. The notion of the frontier myth and the mythic hero traditionally demanded a film form that has been provided by the western genre. In the wake of the genre’s decline, the issues still being relevant and contemporary, the responsibility of articulating them through a familiar narrative structure thus fell upon the other existing genres such as fantasy, gangster, sci-fi, superhero, etc.

Thus, one can argue that western’s decline had witnessed a displacement of the essential generic concerns into narratives belonging to other genres, although the shift that is being discussed here cannot be described solely as a dislodgment of elements from films of one genre to another. It is important to note that while films of other genres are addressing the issues and concerns of the western genre and appropriating the codes and conventions of the same into their film texts, they are doing it in a template resembling the western. The above argument can be further illustrated with the examples of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991) and *Logan*, a sci-fi and a superhero film respectively, both of which can be considered as loose reworkings of *Shane*, while sharing an array of concerns with classic westerns, most significantly refiguring and reaffirming the idea of mythic hero.

Both the films unfold in a dystopic, technocratic near future, throwing into sharp relief the darker side of the frontier myth; a Frankenstein effect of manifest destiny and spirit of expanding the horizon, fuelled by an unchecked growth of corporate greed. With the very democratic fibre of the nation in peril and the future uncertain, the films call for heroes, who are perennial outsiders possessing enhanced physical abilities and tasked with a mission that could save the day for the everyday American way of life. Furthermore, the mythic nature of the heroes is foregrounded by the presence of a child, in both the cases.

Terminator 2 does an interesting thing by separating the narratorial voice belonging to the mother and the narratorial gaze belonging to the son, John (Edward Furlong), emphasizing the mythic nature of T-800 (Arnold Schwarzenegger), the guardian machine sent from future to protect John. As both John and the camera witness his superhuman abilities, the gaze is loaded with narratives John had heard about the future, and for the spectator it invokes the memory of the previous film in the series. Schwarzenegger’s remarkable physique imparts an excess to the character, separating him from his immediate surroundings. *Logan* is evidently more self-reflexive. The child entrusted to Logan’s (Hugh Jackman) care is an avid reader and believer in comic books that narrate a romanticized account of the X-Men’s adventures. The film is almost centred upon the contradiction between the Wolverine described in the comic books and the aging, out-of-shape Logan in real life.

Keeping with the tradition of classic westerns, both films subject the male body to extreme violence. The T-800 takes a sadomasochistic punishment till the light literally goes out of his eye, leading to an alternate power backup that enables him to finally overthrow the antagonist. Logan too is beaten up to the point that his self-healing fails and lies unconscious in the care of children. The film does a playful take on the barber-shop shaving scene in westerns, as the children shave off Logan’s facial hair and he wakes up to see his own reflection in mirror to find his face resembling Wolverine from the comics and earlier films, before the final showdown. On close scrutiny, one can find clear resonances of Turner’s notions of ‘rebirth, regeneration and rejuvenation’ at play in these scenes. Just like the west ceases to

remain a geographical location and becomes a mythic space, the body of the westerner becomes a site of transformation of society and nation.

In these films, as in westerns, the heroes have more in common with their adversaries than is apparent. The fundamental difference is that the hero is aware of his location in history and fights for a future which will have no place for him. The final shootout scene in *Shane* is preceded by an exchange of words between Shane and old man Ryker which echoes this exact sentiment. Thus, killing the antagonist becomes almost a sacrificial ritual. *Logan* does a clever take on this phenomenon by turning the antagonist into a lab made soulless doppelganger of Logan while in *Terminator 2* both the T-800 as well as the rival T-1000 are products of same manufacturer. And be it the bullet in *Shane* or molten steel in *Terminator 2* or Adamantium claw in *Logan*, both the hero and the villain finally succumb to the same factor, time. One lies dead while the other disappears into myth.

The popularity of westerns in American cinema is nowhere near what it used to be thirty years back. The image of the lone rider across an arid landscape has indeed become a rarity on American screen. But the exigencies of a globalized world will persistently bring forth the question of identity and its cultural construction, something which popular cinema cannot ignore, overlook or neglect. Thus, the mythic hero, with or without his usual outfit, ride and firearms, will continue to be a spectral presence in American cinema addressing and resolving the collective crises and anxieties of the nation.

Notes

¹ It was the tenth instalment in the popular X-Men film series besides being the third and final solo Wolverine film. This film marked Hugh Jackman's final appearance as Logan/Wolverine, a role he had reprised nine times over seventeen years.

² Travers, Peter. "'Logan' Review: Hugh Jackman's 'X-Men' Swan Song Is Bloody, Violent, Brilliant". *Rolling Stone*. 28 February 2017. Web. 8 July 2018.

³ The leather stocking novels by James Fenimore Cooper deserves a special mention in this respect as they not only laid out the essential thematic structure for the genre, but also contributed vastly to the construction of the 'West' as we know of it as a hallmark of American identity. Cooper's novels, which were contemporary to the early years of the Westward expansion, almost became prophetic about the collective anxieties and apprehensions about the permanent loss of the frontier; a theme that will become a recurrent motif in films more than a hundred years hence. Equally significant are the Hudson River and Rocky Mountain school of paintings. Thomas Cole's works have been interpreted more as a lament for man's estrangement with nature rather than a celebration about the achievements, another concern to be taken up in films. On the other hand, the paintings of Frederic Remington, Charles Russell, Albert Bierstadt, etc. have been described as a consistent effort to articulate a Darwinian notion (Man vs. Nature) and thus a celebration of the progress and triumph of the White civilization, an issue with direct resonances with the concept of Manifest Destiny, discussed later. The Vaudeville performances collectively termed as the Wild West Shows, marked the introduction of essential 'western' themes and elements such as cowboys, Indians, wild animals, outlaws, cavalry, etc. in the domain of performing arts.

⁴ The term arguably originated in 1839 but came into wider use in columns of John L. O'Sullivan, a journalist from New York in 1845, while campaigning for the annexation of Texas.

⁵ Smith, Henry Nash. *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. 2000. Print

⁶ Rollins, Peter C., and John E. O'Connor. Ed(s). *Hollywood's West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History*. Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005. Print

⁷ Grant, Barry Keith. *Film Genre: From Iconography To Ideology*. Wiltshire: Wallflower Press, 2007. Print

⁸ Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure And Narrative Cinema". *Film Theory And Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Ed. Gerald Mast, et al. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 746-57. Print

⁹ The plot of the film deals with a family of farmers who are violently forced to leave the lands by a villainous cattle baron called Ryker (Emile Meyer). As the farmers try to make a stand, a mysterious lone rider called Shane (Alan Ladd) comes in their aid while striking up a special bond with a little boy called Joey (Brandon deWilde).

¹⁰ Bazin, Andre. *What Is Cinema? Vol. II*. Berkeley: University Of California Press, 2005. Print

¹¹ Mitchell, Lee Clark. *Westerns: Making The Man In Fiction And Film*. Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press, 1996. Print

¹² By middle of the 1970s, westerns faced almost a crisis of extinction from American cinema. The WW II with all its nationalist fervour has already become a distant memory and events such as McCarthyism, assassinations of Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King, the Vietnam War, Watergate Scandal and the overarching threat of cold war had exposed the glaring ruptures in the apparently smooth narrative of American progress. It became difficult for westerns to survive in such a climate in its pure form. The decline of the genre becomes empirically evident considering the number of westerns dwindled from 34 in 1959 to a mere 9 in 1979 and that too 5 of the films blending in other genres.

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