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The “Wild West” Uncovered

THE MYTH OF THE WILD WEST IN EARLY 1990S
BLOCKBUSTERS

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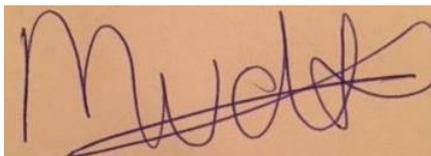
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Abstract

In this thesis, I will look at the process of constructing the romanticization of the American West between 1850-1900 to learn more about how the mythical “Wild West” came into being. The “Wild West” is usually one of the first aspects people will list when asked about the United States, and this is why it is in my opinion essential to the American narrative. One very important medium through which the public gets this mythical perspective of the Old West is through film. Therefore, I will analyze how the frontier myth is incorporated into the early 1990s blockbusters *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Unforgiven* (1992), and *Tombstone* (1993). Following a New Historicist approach, I will learn that these films do not only perpetuate the frontier myth, but at the same I will find that they are products of the time period they were made in as they are much more critical of this exact same myth in the sense that they challenge key components of the frontier myth; such as masculinity, violence, and ecological imperialism.

Keywords: frontier myth, Western, New Historicism, film analysis, 1990s blockbuster

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Introduction

“*Dances with Wolves* won this year, and while it is not as important as the rest of the world situation where it sits, it will always be important to us, and we thank you for this.” - Kevin Costner accepting the Academy Award for Best Picture at the 1991 Academy Awards

To everyone’s surprise, *Dances with Wolves* (1990) won seven out of its twelve Academy Awards nominations, including the ones for Best Film and Best Director. It was the first Western to ever do so since *Cimarron* (1930). Many critics believed other popular films of the year – like *Goodfellas* (1990) – got snubbed of their expected win. Did this major success pave the way for a return of the western back to Hollywood?

This appeared to be the case when another Western won the Award for Best Picture in 1993. Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven* (1992) managed to win four out of its seven nominations, again including the most important categories Best Film and Best Director. It somehow seemed there was a resurgent demand for a more nostalgic genre of film: the Western. How can we explain this unexpected resurgence of a genre long-thought dead?

The concept of the Wild West is vital to the American narrative. It is the opportunity to build a new society from scratch based on one’s ideals. Rooted in the historical notion of American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny, which claims it is America’s God-given right to occupy the entire continent, many settlers at the time believed the rugged lands of the West would provide them with new opportunities. Manifest Destiny also implied that Americans bore the task to civilize the Native-Americans that were already living on the lands.

Undeniably movies, and the Western in particular, are an important narrative that has played an important role in constructing the image of the West. The Western is sometimes thought to be the “most prolific genres of all time” (Langford, p. 54). Since the closing of the

frontier happened almost simultaneously with the birth of cinema in 1895, stories of the Western frontier were frequently adapted into films (Benshoff and Griffin, p. 105). Although the genre no longer seems to be popular nowadays, the classics of the genre are not forgotten. Despite its recent unpopularity, the Western continues to influence our perception of the American Old West. Here I would like to pose the question as to how the Wild West is constructed in Hollywood blockbusters in the early 1990s.

Previous scholarly research into the region of the American West has found, unsurprisingly, that the West is actually much more complex than one might think. American Studies scholars and historians have found that the story usually associated with the region, that of the untamed lands waiting to be civilized by the white Americans, was created by exactly these predominantly white settlers to justify their actions. Key components of settlement history of the West are therefore the notion of Manifest Destiny, expansionism, and the frontier.

Additionally, the tone of the research tends to be rather critical towards depictions of the Old West in films and novels especially, signaling these are heavily dramatized and romanticized. Key to this discussion is the deconstruction of the frontier myth, and its fictional, textual dramatizations in novels, paintings, photography, and film. These cultural texts then depicted the West as a place of unbound adventure, masculine heroes, and limited opportunity. Generally, the myth tends to simplify the region of the West, by either portraying it as a haven for progress, or a dangerous place filled with savage Natives.

However, as mentioned, American Studies scholars and historians have taken a critical stance towards this mythical representation of the West. A new field of studies, "New Western History," has called for a thorough study of these cultural texts, and found that history and myth are usually lumped together, making it much harder to distinguish between myth and actual history; especially for people not affiliated with the topic. Notable scholars in this field, such as Patricia Limerick and Richard Slotkin, have discovered the myth of the West was perpetuated

over time to keep people interested in the region, and also to establish a dominant range of Anglo-American power.

The theoretical approach I will take to analyze this is that of new historicism. The importance of history, and especially the interpretation of history, is extremely visible in the creation of the frontier myth. Why was history adapted and used in a certain way? And, especially relevant for my case studies, how was the history of the West interpreted in the 1990s, and then incorporated into film? And how were its makers influenced by their own historical epoch? And, equally as important, how were these films received by a larger audience? Did it change their perception of the Wild West?

To answer the research question – how is the Wild West being constructed in early 1990s blockbusters – I want to contribute to the previously conducted research by analyzing three Western films. As said, film has always been an important medium to shape society's notions. Since the narrative of a film is usually fictional, the medium of film, through a realistic means, perpetuates the myth created around the American Old West. Moreover, the Western genre has boosted the popularity of film and Hollywood. Still, when Westerns were analyzed by (film) historians, they usually tended to focus on those from early days of (American) filmmaking. This may have to do with the fact that the popularity of Westerns greatly diminished after the 1950s which resulted in fewer Westerns made. The genre of the classical Western was reinvigorated in the late 1980s, and that is why I decided to focus my research on this time period, since this is relatively uncharted territory. By analyzing *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Unforgiven* (1992), and *Tombstone* (1993), I will show how these blockbusters construct the Old Wild West and update its image to the political and aesthetic sensibilities of the 1990s to demonstrate that these blockbusters will show how the Old West was constructed.

In the first chapter, I will provide a timeline of the process of Westward Expansion from roughly 1800 to 1850. I hope this will give clarity on what motivated people at the time to make

the decision to go westward, and which ideological concepts may have influenced them (thinking of “Manifest Destiny” and Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis”). In the second chapter, I will explain the concept of the frontier myth, and its critique in previous, academic discourse. Research has found that, partly due to Turner’s “frontier thesis,” fictional narratives written at the time have led to the creation of the starkly romanticized frontier, now also known as the “Wild West;” which were then incorporated into the medium of film.

Then, in the final chapter, I will do a thorough analysis of the three aforementioned films, to demonstrate how these not only fit into the Western stereotypes that have created over time, but also how they perpetuate the myth of the frontier and the Old West. Drawing on the frontier myth explained in the previous chapter, this chapter will show how the myth was incorporated into film, and how the stories of the cowboy dominated Hollywood for a period of time.

Chapter 1

“I’ve always wanted to see the frontier. [...] Before it’s gone.” Lt. John Dunbar (Kevin Costner), *Dances with Wolves*, 1990

1.1. The Frontier

This quote from the 1990 film *Dances with Wolves* suggests that, the frontier is a key component of the image of the West. After all, the history of the West starts at the frontier. Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis” from 1894 has been a defining factor in the interpretation of the American frontier, and still is today. Turner described the frontier as the “meeting point between savagery and civilization.” (Turner, 1894). In other words, according to Turner, the frontier had symbolized an opportunity to reshape the identity of the nation, based on American ideals such as democracy and equality. Ideally, the frontier, and to a certain extent the West itself, exemplified the prosperity of the greatness of the American nation. It stood for progress and civilization. To Turner, the official closing of the frontier had been a tragedy, and it was vital this frontier mentality of progress was to be kept alive. This in turn helped to construct the myth-building around the frontier, as I will explore further in the following chapter.

Although Turner could not argue for further settlement on the American continent anymore, besides making a strong case for preservation of the frontier mentality. Furthermore, he fervently insisted on a thorough investigation of the frontier and its relation to American society. His point of view has been debated by scholars ever since he published his collection of essays in 1894. His statement had always been agreed on by scholars, but around the 1970s some historians and American Studies scholars, like Patricia Limerick, criticized his notion of the importance of the frontier. It is too racialized, as it leaves out one rather important group also present on and far beyond the frontier: the Native Americans. However, some more

conservative American Studies scholars, like Pierson, relativize his definition by arguing he must be included in the study of the frontier as his definition has been so important to shaping the image of westward expansion that is still known today.

1.2. New Western History

Patricia Limerick is a well-known scholar in the field of a phenomenon that is called New Western History. When studying the history of westward expansion, it should be taken into account how historical facts are conveyed and interpreted. After the 1970s, much of this history was thought to have been interpreted wrongfully and one-sided. Many American Studies scholars and historians started questioning the way the history of the West had been portrayed. There was a call for a new interpretation of this history. Thus, a new field called “New Western History” started to emerge, in which much more emphasis was laid on groups that had previously been dismissed, like Native-Americans, or women (Campbell and Kean, p. 154). Furthermore, scholars in the field “challenge the myths that have persisted for so long as the central tenets of Americanism.” (Campbell and Kean, p. 155). Now observing Western history from a revisionist stance, scholars started to investigate the “intertwined relationships with history and myths,” (Campbell and Kean, p. 153) and questioned the dominant narrative that had always perpetuated those myths about the West. This in turn, then, also helped to not only challenge, but to deconstruct this myth as well. My research is inspired by these revisionist approaches.

1.3. Manifest Destiny

Westward expansion is tied to the ever-moving frontier, and this ever-moving frontier is in turn connected to the ideological concept Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny is nowadays usually associated with westward expansion, but the rhetoric is as old as America itself

(Tabragge). Unlike other parts of American history, Manifest Destiny cannot be bound to a certain period of time as it has been present throughout American history. In other words, it is more of a phenomenon than an actual historical event (Tabragge), and it is still present in American culture and policy making today.

The concept of Manifest Destiny goes back to colonial times, although it was then not known as Manifest Destiny yet. The Founding Fathers already established that the country must be expanded, or else it would cease to exist (Hine et al., p. 137). It was named by influential editor and democratic leader John O'Sullivan in 1845 when he mentioned "the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federative development of self-government entrusted to us" (Brinkley in Tabragge), but the idea that came to be united under the single phrase as Manifest Destiny were said to be already present when Columbus sailed across the Atlantic, or when president Monroe intervened in the Florida Territory in 1822 by ousting the Seminole Indians. Manifest Destiny served in both situations as a justification; it was the idea the Anglo-Americans were the designated people to own the American continent.

The quote by Sullivan also showcases the two main components of Manifest Destiny: its fundament of American nationalism and its religious aspect. As for the nationalist component, part of the Manifest Destiny rhetoric consists of the American duty to bring American ideals, such as freedom and democracy, everywhere. By moving westward, the settlers were partly motivated by the idea that they conveyed these American values, which also in itself symbolized civilization. The religious part, then, is rooted deeply in the hope and expectations that it was God's will the continent was to be taken over and civilized. Influenced by the idea of American exceptionalism, the United States was to be a "city upon a hill;" a utopian land in which society would be perfected through faith (Tabragge). Both these

components thus gave the Anglo-Americans a sense of mission and duty to occupy the lands westward of the original colonies.

The ideology of Manifest Destiny also had a more sinister side to it, most importantly its instrumentalizing in racialized discourse and racist practices. Branded a ‘white man’s burden,’ the Anglo-Americans believed Manifest Destiny provided them the justification to become the world’s leaders, and to convert inferior people to Christianity as they stood in the way of their progress towards a better and richer American nation (Tabragge). This usually resulted in violent confrontations with the Natives living on the lands.

It should be noted that the expansionist urge was also greatly influenced by the stories of Anglo-Americans who had dared to go westward. Their stories sparked an extreme interest in the West, and soon after, these stories were turned into mythical stories that depicted the West as a Garden of Eden. Literature and art especially aided in the process, as they both depicted the Western lands as beautiful havens of freedom where adventure would await. This emerging process of myth-building could be seen as an alternating process – it would lead more people to the West – which in its turn only stimulated the creation of new myths. This is a dynamic I will further explore in the second chapter.

1.4. The Louisiana Purchase

For the remainder of this chapter, it would be helpful to discuss the actual historical facts of westward expansion, as this will provide a more complete picture of the period between roughly 1850 and 1900, and the complex intertwining of history and myth. There was not really an ‘American West’ to speak of until President Jefferson acquired a huge plot of land through the Louisiana Purchase which doubled the size of the country in 1803. Around the 1800s, everything West of the Appalachians was considered to be “the West.” To Jefferson, the West represented the future – a place where Americans could achieve “economic and social

betterment” – (Norton et al., p. 301), completely in line with the Jeffersonian agrarian dream. But for the West to be settled, the lands had to be thoroughly surveyed. One of the first and probably most well-known expeditions to do so was the one of Lewis and Clark. Instructed by President Jefferson himself, these two men went on to multiple expeditions from roughly 1804 to 1806 through the newly acquired territory (Hine et al., p. 140). Although these expeditions were partly for scientific reasons, their main purposes were nationalistic. If the United States were going to hold on to these lands, it would have to “bend nature to their advantage” (Hine et al., p. 140-141). Additionally, the group was meant to find an accessible route to the Pacific Coast in the Far West, which hopefully would stimulate trade. In other words, Lewis’s and Clark’s surveys, besides mapping the lands, had another important intention of ratifying treaties with the Native-Americans who were already living there to guarantee they would not interfere with what the nation’s leaders had in mind.

Even though the main mission of the expedition was not completed – Lewis and Clark did not succeed in finding a usable route to the Pacific – the expedition nevertheless “fixed the Louisiana Territory in the minds and plans of the nation.” (Hine et al., p. 147). The Anglo-American people used it to justify their right to the territory, and it also sparked great interest in the Far West in general.

1.5. The Midwest

The settling of the West happened in stages. In the 1820s and 1830s, the Old Northwest and Old Southwest experienced an enormous population boom (Norton et al., p. 303). Because the Old Northwest – today’s Midwest – had a more appealing climate and better access to the already existing economic markets, white settlers tended to move there. However, since migration also came with great uncertainty, the settlers usually moved to places familiar to

them. This meant the settlers moved to places where people of the same ethnicity and religion already lived.

Settlers favored the Midwest over the Old Southwest – the states of Missouri, Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana – mainly due to the better access to economic markets. Migration to the Midwest was bolstered by land speculators, who bought up great plots of land to sell to settlers, and laid strong emphasis on the region's good connection to the East. Other inventions of the time, like time-efficient devices such as the plow, also greatly stimulated the migration to the Midwest.

1.6. The Great Plains

The Great Plains – consisting of today's Kansas, Oklahoma, and Nebraska – had once been considered to be the 'Great American Desert' by explorer Stephen Long (Norton et al., p. 310), since it was impossible to grow any crops on the lands due to its climate. Until the 1850s, these lands were therefore the designated places for the Natives to live. The only people who dared to go beyond the Mississippi River were the fur traders, but their lives were not as adventurous as the frontier literature made them out to be. Usually, these traders lived among the Natives and frequently intermarried (Norton et al., p. 308).

Yet other Americans eventually decided to make the journey across the Plains, mainly because of the demand for a safe transportation route to the Far West. In the 1830s, the government established the Corps of Topographical Engineers, led by John C. Fremont, whose main task was to explore and to set up the Oregon Trail. The US Army too helped stimulating migration to the Plains by enabling a safe place for Anglo-Americans to live. This usually meant the Native-Americans living on the lands were escorted out, but from the 1830s onwards the groups were placed onto reservations where they were 'civilized.'

1.7. The Far West

Expansion to the Far West – California, Nevada, and Oregon – is mostly known today for California's Gold Rush. Gold had been discovered in 1848 at Sutter's Hill in the Sierra Nevada, and this naturally attracted many people from all around the globe to California hoping they would strike it rich. However, even though the Gold Rush greatly helped stimulate migration into the Far West, it was not the only reason why many people (not only Anglo-Americans, but also immigrants from Asia especially), decided to go further westward. As early as the 1840s, American families started the long journey to the Far West from so-called jumping-off points along the Missouri River. They had to carefully examine when to cross, as the weather conditions on the trip could differ extremely, ranging from intense heat to severe snow storms. Even though usual interactions with the Native-Americans were amicable, the American government nevertheless pursued to negotiate treaties, which usually favored American expansion.

1.8. The Transcontinental Railroad

One could argue the frontier closed with the completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869 (Billington, p. 648; Norton et al., p. 449). The government started constructing the first plans for the railroad in the early 1850s, but the worsening frictions between the North and the South put those plans temporarily on hold. Eventually, two companies – the Central Pacific Railroad and the Union Pacific Railroad – were assigned to each build one half in 1862 (Billington, p. 644). Once this was thus completed in 1869, the nation's leaders were quick to realize one railroad would not suffice. Over the course of roughly 25 years, the number of tracks grew from 35,000 to 200,000 miles (Norton et al., p. 449). Not only did the railroad boom stimulate the steel and coal industry, it naturally also fueled Western urbanization, and it sprung up hubs like Los Angeles, Kansas City and Cheyenne.

1.9. Conclusion

The historical and ideological background serves as a stepping stone to the discussion of the frontier myth and the myth of the Wild West as it is intertwined with the discussed history of settlement of the Old West. In the next chapter, I will find that the line between actual history and fiction has become blurred in the construction of the frontier myth. The myth, then, was a result of westward expansion, but at the same also served as a means to attract more attention to the Old West. It was subsequently popularized through literature and film, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters.

Chapter 2

“I’m your huckleberry...” – Doc Holliday (Val Kilmer) in *Tombstone* (1993), challenging Johnny Ringo (Michael Biehn) to a duel

2.1. Myth

This quote is from the 1993 film *Tombstone*, and it is rather interesting in the light of the subject of this second chapter – frontier mythmaking – since it signifies an exchange between two men who have been turned into eternal legends through popular culture. Through their respective reputations of being dangerous and cunning outlaws, these two men acquired a sense of fantasy to their name, and the line between historical accuracies and myth has been blurred ever since. This sentence in and of itself has been used frequently in popular culture, and thus greatly mythicized the alleged rivalry between these two men. Therefore, this quote is a good demonstration of how the frontiersmen of the Wild West were subsequently turned into myths by and for greater audiences.

To understand the frontier myth/myth of the Wild West, one must first get acquainted with the concept of myth. Don Bahr, an American Studies scholar who focuses on American folklore, provided the following definition: “a myth is taken to be a story about origins that people believe but are unable to proof” (Bahr, p. 44), meaning, a myth consists of naïve understandings of a certain phenomenon, and is not necessarily grounded in scholarly or historical fact. Importantly, the contents of myths may change over time, since it is told by one person to another. As long as myths survive through a process of vernacular circulation, it can be assumed to be alive. Still, even though narrators and audiences change, the plot of the myth always survives (Bahr, p. 45).

It could thus be argued that the term “frontier myth” is problematic (Bahr, p. 45), since it is a combination of fiction and history at once. A myth is supposed to be unquestionably

based on fictional events (or on facts that are fictionalized, for that matter), but this would mean there would not be a frontier myth as a myth is spared from the debate over factual accuracy (Bahr, p. 47). Moreover, the myth of the West claims to tell the story of how civilization was brought to these lands (i.e., the origin of civilization in the West), but the Native-Americans had already established a harmonious civilization long before the Anglo-American arrived. Therefore, the term “historical fiction” (Bahr, p. 45) would be more appropriate for these western stories, but this debate has not been settled yet.

Then there is the distinction between the history of the actual West and that one of the mythical West. These two frequently are lumped together being part of the same narrative, but in fact they are distinct. When one is told about the history of the Old West, this usually tends to be about the myth (Cox, p. 378). For example, there have been numerous stories written about these brave frontiersmen engaging in heroic battles against the Native-Americans, when in reality, the actual history is much more passive. The history and the frontier myth usually intertwine since authors and historians themselves were in charge at the time of how they presented their stories in which “the myth slips in” (Cox, p. 379). Historians drew up what they hoped to find in the West combined with accounts of what it actually was like, and these two separate interpretations fed on each other (Nash, p. 69). Then, these stories were subsequently regarded as history, and therefore treated as such.

2.2. The Frontier Myth

What are these romanticized elements incorporated into stories about the West? Much research has been done into the construction of these myths, recurring themes are masculinity/individualism, ecological imperialism, and violence. As soon as the Anglo-Americans started to arrive on the American shores, the myth of the frontier, which would morph into the myth of the West eventually, was born. While these men fantasized about the

“virgin lands” of the New World (Kolodny, p. 2) long before the first voyages to the American continent were made, once they settled their dreams were put into practice. The wilderness of the American lands then provoked mixed feelings. It was a place where their manliness could be proved by hunting the Native-Americans down. However, at the same time, this wilderness conveyed a sense of grace and beauty which felt overwhelming and sparked a feeling of subjugation. This dualist attitude would also eventually come to define the myth of the West once the open prairies were reached, as will be observed later on in this chapter.

2.3. Frontier Literature

Literature was one of the first media through which the stories of the mythical Wild West were transmitted to a greater audience. These heavily romanticized stories generally follow a basic formula that consists of a few standard elements (French, p. 76-77), and has barely any resemblance to the history of Western settlement discussed in the first chapter. Most of the time, these stories are re-working of paradigmatic myths. The key component of each story is the battle between good and evil, which could be for example the frontiersman battling against the Native-Americans, or it could be the cowboy opposing a corrupt sheriff. Contrary to what has been found in settlement history, the setting is usually outside of town; for example a ranch or somewhere in nature, while the cities actually became much more populated during this time period. As for the characters of the story, they are greatly simplified so that the actions of the main character are emphasized (French, p. 78). Women contribute little to nothing to the plot, and are sometimes merely the love interest for the main character. Finally, these stories commonly end with an epic battle between the hero and the villain, in which violence is seen as a rightful means to achieve justice, since there is no actual judicial as this would make the story too dull (French, p. 79). It has now been established by literary scholars that such stories

were written in a “social vacuum,” as it was simply too difficult to write about the factual social history of the time period (French, p. 79).

Yet these are the stories that have stuck throughout generations. An example of someone who wrote such stories was the author James Fenimore Cooper, who is the man behind the Leatherstocking Tales from the early 1800s. Mostly set in the forests of the Northeast, these stories centered around Natty Bumppo, a white man who lived among the Native-Americans and who braved the harsh circumstances of the New World; saving damsels in distress and fighting off ‘savage’ rival Native-American tribes. Natty Bumppo could be probably nowadays be considered to be one of the first fictional frontier heroes, and thus of great influence on the later emerging heroic cowboys and sheriffs in the Western dime novels. Furthermore, as he was influenced by the European Romanticist movement, Cooper not only described the landscape in a picturesque-like manner, he also attached symbolic value to these lands (Barry, p. 14-16). Thus, Cooper’s depiction of the landscape in his stories laid the foundation for the romanticization of the Western lands.

As mentioned, Frederick Jackson Turner advocated for a continuation of the frontier lifestyle, even though it had been closed in 1890. This call inspired a group of white, rich, influential, and highly-educated male Easterners to go on a journey of self-exploration to the Western lands, and consequently write an account of their experiences. Among these men were painter Frederic Remington and future president Theodore Roosevelt. Motivated by a nostalgic longing to the times of the Old West, which was getting lost to the rapid process of industrialization, these men embarked on a journey westward to experience what it meant to be a true man by hunting animals and engaging in shoot-outs.

Owen Wister was also one of these men. He mixed his own experiences in the West with his own fantasies about the West in which came to be one of the most influential fictional stories about the Wild West: “The Virginian.” This was a story about a nameless hero who shot

bandits while riding on his horse on the plains. “The Virginian” is seen by many scholars as one of the most significant stories when it comes to perpetuating the myth of the Wild West. Some of them argue that Wister and his companions deliberately bolstered the myth to stay in power (Bold in Smith, p. 666). Prompted by a strong sense of xenophobia and a persistent demand for hunting grounds, these men held onto the ideology that the West was indeed a place where the United States was still untouched and traditional.

2.4. Frontier Art

A somewhat lesser known medium among the larger public that contributed to the mythicization of the West was frontier art. Paintings were used during the period of westward expansion to stimulate the American people to make the journey westward. In art, the western lands were sometimes depicted as an untamed and dangerous wilderness where the Native-American ‘savages’ lived. To make it more appealing, another way of portraying the West was to emphasize on the vastness of these stretched lands, playing into the idea that this was a “cultivated garden where the Jeffersonian ideal could be realized.” (Norton et al., p. 303). Artists were hired by the American government to go on expeditions so that they could paint what they experienced in the most attractive manner possible.

2.5. The Frontier Hero and Masculinity

Natty Bumppo, Daniel Boone, Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, Buffalo Bill: These are all men. It must then not be a surprise to learn that masculinity has always been a common association with the Old West (Campbell and Kean, p. 159). As observed in the Leatherstocking Tales, the lives of pioneers, explorers, and mountain-men were turned into hero-like figures, fighting the wilderness to bring civilization. The frontier and subsequently the West was a “testing ground

for manhood” (Campbell and Kean, p. 160), and this enabled the perfect circumstances for these aforementioned heroes to emerge.

Kent Ladd Steckmesser, a prominent figure in the field of studies of the West, has made the distinction between four common sorts of heroes: The Mountain Man, the Outlaw, the Gunfighter, and the Soldier (Steckmesser, p. 3). To respect the word limit of this thesis, I will only discuss the Cowboy (who can be considered a Gunfighter), and the Outlaw as these two are probably the most known to the wider public. These two usually oppose each other, as the gunfighter inherited the reputation of being the brave and heroic savior while the outlaw is regarded as the cunning and violent villain.

The cowboy is probably the mythical figure that is most associated with the Wild West even today. The cowboy first started to appear in dime novels of the 1880s. Like the other frontier heroes, he represents a memory of the once open frontier (Wright, p. 7). However, the myth of the cowboy vividly endures because the cowboy needs a frontier to survive. Now that the frontier is closed, he remains appealing as he serves as a reminder of what has been. He perfectly fits into the mythical West story since he is a lone rider that emerges from the wilderness to establish a civil society – exactly what the myth entails. Not defined by his job, but by his qualities, the cowboy is regarded as the true individualist hero; by representing the values associated with the West such as freedom, equality, and rationality.

Thus, even in today’s everyday life, the cowboy still remains visible, although at times no longer donning his typical attire. As will be observed in the next chapter, which will go deeper into the Western genre in film, the Western has always been a popular American film genre; in fact, it was the most popular genre between the 1920s and the early 1980s (Buscombe in Wright, p. 8). The main explanation for this was that it appealed to all levels of society. Subsequently, the Western influenced everyday American life. People still wear cowboy hats, dress in jeans, or wear cowboy boots. Rodeos and ranches are a popular place of entertainment.

In advertising, the cigarette-smoking Marlboro Man (a cowboy) made for one of the most successful advertisements in history (Wright, p. 10).

2.6. Outlawry and Violence

Another recurring theme in the myth of the Wild West is violence. Cowboys and bandits are fiercely shooting their six-guns to determine who is in charge in the territories. This violent association does not come from just anywhere, and is, like the other characteristics, rooted in history, as it is heavily romanticized at the same time. Between 1850 and 1910, the West was known as one of the most violent regions of the United States; this could be one of the reasons why this time period is also known as the “Western Civil Wars” (Brown, p. 6). The most important cause at stake in these wars was the matter of “incorporation” of the Native-Americans, and it is therefore argued by some scholars its alternative name should be the “Indian Wars” (Brown, p. 7); since the Native-Americans tried to fight the system imposed on them by the Anglo-Americans in various ways, for example through the means of arson, theft, and sometimes even murder (Brown, p. 7).

Those who at the very least tried to restore order were the gunfighters from the Old West, whom may have very well been a source of inspiration for the books and films that followed, and gave common people this perception of the West as a place of violence. In this “civil war of the West,” there was a division between the incorporation gunfighters, who supported the newly imposed American system of government and businesses; and the opposition consisted of the so-called rejection gunfighters, who did not accept the newly imposed American system of ruling government and business (Brown, p. 7). For the most part, the incorporation of gunfighters were men who had their roots in the North and supported the Republican Party, whereas the rejection gunfighters were mostly Southern Democrats; and usually, the first group tended to be the dominant one. What followed were many wars and

battles between the two groups, for example the Tonto Basin War or the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral; both in Arizona.

Fights like these made the way for what came to be known as the concept of “western honor,” (Brown, p. 14), which had its roots in the no duty to retreat law; which practically meant that the old British way to actually retreat was something only a ‘coward’ would do, and therefore it was considered to be highly un-American. The “Code of the West” (Brown, p. 15) thus consisted of values such as courage, pride, indifference towards pain, and vengeance towards insults. These “hippocket ethics” were at the root of every fight, and were subsequently romanticized in stories and novels, such as in Owen Wister’s “The Virginian.” Usually, in these fictional stories, the incorporation gunfighters were depicted as the ‘good guys’ fighting for what was right, whereas the rejection gunfighters were portrayed as bandits or outlaws.

In today’s popular culture, the gunfighter hero is seen as someone who hesitatingly, yet decisively, used the violence of the Old West as a means to establish a new and civilized society in the New West (Brown, p. 20). In other words, the gunfighter is on the verge between savagery and civilization; a notion that has been previously established in this chapter already. These “Wars of Incorporation” at the same time ensured a division in the field of the mythical heroes, with ‘the social conservatives’ on the one hand (men such as Wyatt Earp and ‘The Virginian’) and on the other hand ‘the social bandits’ (men like Jesse James and Billy the Kid). Although the first group tends to dominate in the popular fictional stories, it does not mean the latter are idolized to a lesser extent. This may be the cause because the American society is ambivalent in her opinions on power and authority (Brown, p. 21).

2.7. Fascinating Nature and Ecological Imperialism

Lastly, a common theme in the myth of the Wild West is the landscape. In the first Westerns, the film would usually start with a long shot of the hero emerging from the stretched

lands as if he already owned it, yet at the same time he appeared to be small in this vast nature. This abundance of land may seem overwhelming, but in reality, it was meant to be believed that these men dominated the land. Characteristics that may be associated with femininity, like the softness and fertility of the land, were deliberately left out. Although this is a heavily fictionalized image, it is still the dominant image of the West. The man cannot settle, since this would connect him to the domestic and thus feminine sphere. He is completely free and on his own, and he needs this freedom in order to be able to possess the land completely (Campbell and Kean, p. 161).

Native-Americans had rather different attitudes towards the land than the Anglo-Americans. To the Natives, nature was something sacred. Everything is spiritually connected, and since everything has its own soul, nature cannot be owned. On the contrary, the Anglo-Americans that came to the West viewed the lands as something to be possessed for the fulfillment of their own (capitalist) dreams. The West provided for a perfect opportunity to manifest the capitalist ideology, it was a “cultural imperative” (Limerick, p. 53) to simply divide the lands between its white settlers. If the land was vacant, and therefore also ‘virgin,’ and settlement could thus be justified along the lines of Biblical stories – it was the ‘promised’ land. This constant “conflict between wealth and the spiritual” (Campbell and Kean, p. 157) has come to define the West.

Chapter 3

“First off, Corky never carried two guns. Though he should have. [...] A lot of folks did call him “Two-Gun” but that wasn’t because he was sporting two pistols. That was because he had a d– that was so big it was longer than the barrel of that Walker Colt he carried. [...]” – Little Bill Daggett (Gene Hackman) in *Unforgiven* (1992), recalling the real story behind English Bob’s (Richard Harris) gunfight

3.1. The Western as a Film Genre

This quote is from the 1992 film *Unforgiven*, and it is rather interesting because it attempts to portray how myth-making took place in the Wild West era. This is an exchange between Little Bill Daggett, a stoic and no-nonsense sheriff, and W.W. Beauchamp, a dime novelist who is writing stories about the ‘heroes’ of the Wild West. In a rather blunt manner, Daggett deconstructs all the assumptions Beauchamp previously had of the West, and thus shining a new light on the frontier myth, like the revisionist Westerns in this chapter do, as I will demonstrate later on in this chapter.

Although the Western is not as popular today as it used to be in earlier times, it is still considered to be “one of the most prolific genres of all time” (Langford, p. 54). Even a neophyte would be able to select a Western from a range of films due to its recognizable imagery of the cowboy on the horse, the stretched lands, and the Native-American in the tipi. Like the other cultural texts discussed in the previous chapter – literature and art – the Western as a genre of film creates a mythical image of the West, with the myth of the frontier at its core. The Western at the same time ensured that with certain conceptions, such as the frontier or “dead or alive,” one is immediately inclined to think of the West, and in a way, also of America itself. Furthermore, the Western has been a vital factor in constructing the image of the American identity, with its unique combination of history, ideology, and fantasy, brought together in the everlasting frontier myth (Langford, p. 54).

3.2. History of the Western

To be able to put these three Westerns in their (respective) time period, it is useful to first analyze the history of the Western genre. There has been some discussion among scholars to which film should be carry the title of 'the first Western,' but the general consensus seems to be that this should be *The Great Train Robbery* (1901) (Langford, p. 54), since this 8-minute long film set the tone for what was to become a Western, with elements like a chase on the horseback, masked villains and the climatic shoot-out (Langford, p. 54). Now an established genre, the Western rises to popularity in the silent film era, only to reach its peak in the late 1930s; although this peak were to last roughly twenty years. In the 1950s, the genre became more 'complicated.' In other words, the genre took on deeper themes, and the films often had more psychological meaning (Langford, p. 56). Notable examples of these 'adult westerns' include *Shane* (1951) and *High Noon* (1952). Then, from the 1960s onwards, the genre lost its popularity, and its appeal completely vanished in the early 1970s. It is sometimes argued this may be attributed to the emergence of the 'Spaghetti Western,' low-budget films that were either made in Europe or made by European directors. These Spaghetti Westerns were much less mythical and usually revolved around violence. Examples include classics such as *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (1966) and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1969). In both actor Clint Eastwood has a starring role, and these films secured his way to fame. This then led filmmakers to question the traditional components of the Western, marking the beginning of a new subgenre of the "revisionist Western," that started to bloom from the early 1970s onwards. These new Westerns offered a different take on the history of westward expansion and the Old West, as will be demonstrated later on in this chapter.

3.3. Historical background and New Historicism

The historical background against which these films were made may help to understand why they were made in the way they were. At the end of the 1980s the Cold War – the conflict between the capitalist West and the communist East – was coming to an end, and at first glance, it looked like the United States had ‘won.’ At the same time, the United States started another conflict: the first Gulf War in Iraq. These times of war might have contributed to an uprising of patriotic and nationalist sentiments, resembling a sort of modern-day Manifest Destiny. The Cold War had tried to demonstrate that democracy and freedom will always prevail, and these are values the United States have always triumphantly championed. A proliferation of the Western genre – the only film genre that is unmistakably American – seemed like a logical next step in meeting the demand for films that celebrate the United States and the values it represents.

However, as these films will demonstrate, the nineties were also a time of pessimism in the United States. Not everyone approved of the decisions made by the neoliberal Reagan and Bush Sr. administrations. Angered by the American intervention in for example Granada and Nicaragua, and shocked by the worsening police violence in the American streets – resulting in the race riots in Los Angeles – the early 1990s also marked the demand for a more liberal United States. This optimism for a new sort of leadership went hand in hand with the emergence of new roles for minorities, like women and Native-Americans.

Whereas historians analyze historical text as unchangeable and definite subjects, cultural studies scholars and new historicists take the influence of the time period these were made into account as well. Examining the social-historical circumstances of cultural texts, as well as genre and intention, new historicists try to establish how these discourses affected the ways in which cultural texts are analyzed (DBNL). New Historicism is related to cultural materialism in the sense that both of these theories explore how cultural texts are received, but cultural materialism pays more attention to how cultural texts are consumed by the greater

public. Therefore, it is essential that not only the contents of the films are being discussed, but also in what environment they were made, and how they were received by contemporary audiences. Usually, for the analysis of historical films, the real analysis lies not so much in observing whether the events were portrayed accurately, as in examining the time period in which these films were made. Historical context – in this case, the early 1990s – can tell a lot about the motivations of filmmakers and the demands of the audiences (Willner, p. 4).

3.4. Analysis

I have chosen the films for various reasons. Besides from the time period they were made – the early 1990s – they have more in common. Although the contents of films tended to get more advanced, there was a certain melancholic desire for the past, which resulted in the emergence of the nostalgic blockbuster. Considering the box offices of these three films (more than \$20 million dollars each), all three films could be seen as blockbuster. All three films were popular among large audiences, and they are nostalgic in the sense of their genre. The Western had been thought to be something of the past, but the late 1980s saw a resurgence of the genre. Other well-known Westerns from this time period are *Geronimo: An American Legend* and *Thunderheart* (both 1993). Because these films were relatively popular, they made have set a certain notion of what a Western should entail, and there reinforced the image of the Old West. The time period in which they were made, could be a deciding factor in the sense that it was the time of a new generation seeing a Western. Yet assumptions like these are not strong enough to make a well-considered decision, and therefore the time period in which they were made should be taken into account when taking a closer look at these three films.

I have planned to study these films along the following self-invented system. I selected *Tombstone* (1993) as a classical Western, since it contains most of the themes from the original Westerns, that is the 1930s-1950s. *Dances with Wolves* (1990) is somewhere in between a

classical Western and a revisionist Western. Although this film is usually considered to be a revisionist Western for its inclusion of Natives, it is nevertheless criticized for its standard Hollywood narrative. Finally, *Unforgiven* (1992) is a clear revisionist western as it completely debunks the myth of the Wild West as it is usually known today.

3.5. *Tombstone* (1993)

Although *Tombstone* (1993) may be the least critically and financially successful, it nevertheless was one of the most popular films of 1993. Some of its success might very well be attributed to the enormous success of *Unforgiven* (1992) the previous year, which in turn sparked a resurgence of the Western genre altogether. *Tombstone* (1993) could be typified as the classical Western of these three, mainly for its storyline and the portrayal of its characters. The story bears much resemblance to the components listed in the previous chapter: a newly established community – hence, Tombstone, Arizona – is threatened by a group of bandits – the cowboys – and is urgently in need of a heroic savior. This savior is personified by Wyatt Earp, who is hesitant at first, but eventually notices his sense of morality is getting the better of him. Accompanied by his brothers and friend Doc Holliday, Earp tries to restore the order in the small town. Eventually, after the occasional tragedies – the killing of his youngest brother, Morgan and the worsening tuberculosis of Holliday – Earp manages to bring peace back to Tombstone; after which he himself runs off with Josephine Marcus (according to the myth, surrendering authority for love) to California.

In *Tombstone*, the plot is greatly simplified. It is the typical fight between good (Earp) versus evil (the cowboys). This feud is the main plot line of the film. The only two characters to have depth to their characters are Earp himself, depicted as rugged, yet sophisticated rightful individual, and Holliday, portrayed as a cunning yet respectable bandit. What is most interesting, is the dynamic between the two. Earp is supposed to resemble the socially

conservative gunfighter; he is stern and reliable, and only uses violence when he has to since he has retired. Holliday, on the other hand, is more of a social bandit type. As he is introduced, he is cheating on his poker game – resulting in a violent win. He also never becomes a sheriff, for instance, but nevertheless fights the cowboys for the sake of his friendship with Earp. As for the remainder of the characters, they are being reduced to stock characters with merely one or two main personality traits. Morgan Earp, for instance, is the friendly and innocent brother; Curly Bill is the ruthless and lunatic villain; and finally, Josephine Marcus is the stunning and seductive woman.



Fig.1

As for the imagery, *Tombstone* unmistakably qualifies as a neotraditional Western (Aquila, p. 305). The backdrop of the film is a booming miner town, where most of the action takes place either in the saloons or in the streets. This is then alternated with broad shots of scenery and sunsets, combined with a bombastic melody that is supposed to invoke a melancholic feeling. There is also much shooting, gambling, and cursing.

In that sense, *Tombstone* is a reflection of the time period it was made in. In the 1990s, many of the romantic elements present in Westerns from earlier decades were stripped. In this vein, *Tombstone* has much darker themes; Earp's violent vendetta ride is such an example

(Willner, p. 7). Being an “amalgam of modern ambiguity and wistful classicism,” (Willner, p. 8) *Tombstone* symbolized the skepticism of the early nineties. On the one hand, the film echoes the conservatist and optimist sentiments of the Reagan/Bush Sr. era of the late 1980s, while on the other hand, it represents the confusion of the early 1990s paired with the victory of the Democrats, resulting in Clinton’s win. It takes him the violent vendetta ride to realize that is not what he truly wants.



Fig.2

Although much research has been conducted into the actual historical circumstances in *Tombstone*, some of the historical events in the film have been dramatized for the sake of the plot. This is an easy trap to fall into, as the film is based on men who have been the subject of many previous novels and films. For example, according to historical facts, it is highly unlikely Holliday killed Ringo. Yet this has been implemented into the plot, probably because the rivalry between these two men has much been written about. Another example is the film’s last sequence, in which the narrator tells about the death of Earp, emphasizing on how many Western stars attended his funeral: “Tom Mix wept.” (Tombstone, 1993). This is meant to exemplify Earp’s status as mythical hero.

3.6. *Dances with Wolves* (1990)

Dances with Wolves (1990) could be considered the most well-known among these three, considering its box-office of over \$400 million dollars worldwide. To everyone's surprise, the film managed to win seven Academy Awards, including the ones for Best Film and Best Scenario (Fisher). Its main character is decorated Lieutenant John Dunbar, played by Kevin Costner, who also directed the film. Because of his heroic actions in the Civil War, Dunbar is allowed to pick his next assigned post. He asks to be placed at the very end of the American territory; the frontier, because he wants to see it "before it's gone." (*Dances with Wolves*, 1990). When he arrives at his post, he finds it to be deserted, but he decides to stay nevertheless. Soon after, he develops a peculiar connection with a wolf that visits his camp every day. As time passes, he runs into the Lakota Indians, and after a while, decides to fully 'go Indian' and live with them.

Due to its great popularity, the film has also been the subject of extensive scholarly studies, with the main point of focus being the portrayal of the Natives in the film. On this account, *Dances with Wolves* is generally considered to be a groundbreaking Western. It was the first time that the main characters of such a well-known film were almost all played by Native-Americans. It was not the depiction of a mythical white Wild West, like previous Westerns had always been; but it was an "Indian West." (Aquila, p. 313).

At first glance, the film seems to be a noble attempt to humanize the Lakota Indians, still, it has also been criticized. There is much praise among critics for the way in which the Lakota's are portrayed. For most of the film's duration, the dialogue completely consists of the Lakota language (disregarding tiny flaws), and it seems that great detail has gone into presenting its customs and clothing. Yet the Lakota's are "too perfect to be real" (Aquila, p. 314). Dunbar constantly emphasizes their peacefulness and innocence, which makes them rather one-dimensional. This is a good example of the "Hollywood Indian," that is, molding the

Native into a politically correct character, rather than depicting them as multi-dimensional complex characters (Aquila, p. 314; Benschhoff and Griffin, p. 108). Usually, the Hollywood Indian resembles the myth of the noble savage. In other words, this means the Native is seen as “a human in a pure, uncorrupted state of nature” (Stromberg, p. 34), and this sentiment is exactly what the Lakota’s in *Dances with Wolves* are also supposed to convey. According to historical accounts, the Lakota’s actually tended to be a rather vicious tribe. In *Dances with Wolves*, however, this stereotype is left to the Pawnee tribe, whom are depicted as the marauding wild men.



Fig.3

The greatest problem, however, lies in the fact that the story is told from the perspective of a white man. It is through Dunbar and his voice-over that the spectator learns about his experiences with the Natives; it is his story, not that of the Lakota Indians (Stromberg, p. 35). This categorizes the film as a “white savior” narrative to some extent, in the sense that it is Dunbar who saves the Lakota’s from the violent Pawnees, and it is yet again Dunbar who tells them to flee for the advancing Americans. In this way, the story is made appealing for its dominantly white audience. This can also be observed in the fact that Dunbar marries Stands-with-a-Fist, the only Anglo-American woman in the tribe – this way he can still marry someone

of his own race. For the white audience, then, the Lakota's are once again being reduced to the stereotype of the noble savage (Stromberg, p. 35).



Fig.4

Dances with Wolves resonated with audiences at the time because it tackled the emerging liberal issues of the early 1990s. It gave more powerful roles to women, such as the brave Stands-with-a-Fist, and the reliant Dark Shawl. It played into contemporary issues, such as violence and sex. The negative depiction of the American military was more relevant than ever with the recent involvement in the Cold War and the Gulf War. This useless need for American adventurism resulted in a growing sentiment of distrust in the government; like the Lakota's mistrusted the American army. Finally, the film reflected the enhancing environmental concerns at the time – symbolized by the Lakota's peaceful relation to nature.

3.7. *Unforgiven* (1992)

The success of *Dances with Wolves* marked the return of the Western genre in Hollywood as revisionist Western *Unforgiven* (1992) hit theaters in August 1992. Clint Eastwood, the film's star and director, is not a new name in the Western genre. He is most known for his roles in the notorious Spaghetti Westerns *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) and *The*

Good, The Bad, and The Ugly (1966), but he also directed previous Westerns, such as *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976) and *The Pale Rider* (1985), both in which he played the leading role himself. Because of his associations with the Western genre, Clintwood has come to be the epitome of masculinity in Hollywood, which is interesting for this study.

Unforgiven (1992) has been called a “revisionist masterpiece” (Aquila, p. 324), and has won four out of its nine nominations at the Academy Awards, including the ones for Best Film and Best Director. The film counts as a revisionist Western since it debunks the myth of the West as a place of heroic outlaws and ruthless violence; and it is therefore a title very interesting to discuss in the light of how the Wild West is romanticized, as this title does the exact opposite. Yet, the film proved to be extremely popular, making almost \$160 million at the box office.

As for the film’s story, *Unforgiven* is about William “Will” Munny, a retired outlaw who has been known to have killed many people, including women and children. He then met a woman who changed him, and he has been retired since. However, his wife died soon after and he is now running an isolated and unsuccessful pig farm with his two children in Kansas. Therefore, when he is asked by the Schofield Kid to assist him in assassinating two cowboys who have assaulted a prostitute up in the town of Big Whiskey, Wyoming, he hesitantly accepts, insisting his old companion, Ned Logan, can have a share of the profits. Once in Wyoming, Munny and Logan soon realize they are not as ruthless as they used to be anymore – slowly grasping the uselessness of violence.

As said, *Unforgiven* is a revisionist Western in the sense that it completely reverses the traditional myth of the Wild West. This deconstruction of the myth already lies in the film's plot. By handing out a reward, the women uncover the myth: no one of the men in this film are actually brave heroes (Engel, p. 262). Rather, they are depicted as reformed gunfighters, but it is clear their great days are behind them. For instance, the men are hesitant to kill Davey, as they even let him drink some water before he dies. Then, when the Kid is supposed to kill Quick Mike, he waits until he is in the outhouse – not a rather brave murder. Munny even struggles to get onto his horse. By portraying the men in the film like this, Clintwood is “undercutting the conventional Western.” (Engel, p. 262).



Fig.5

Another way in which this film debunks the myth is developing the dynamic between corrupt sheriff Little Bill and dime novelist W.W. Beauchamp. Bill quite literally deconstructs the myth by telling the ‘truth’ about shoot-outs and mythicized heroes in a rather harsh manner. At first glance, the film's beautiful scenery may give the impression this is a Western like any other; showcasing the west as a majestic place. Yet the audience soon learns “all is not well in this Wild West” (Aquila, p. 324-325). It is an ‘unforgiving’ place: every character will pay for his or her sins. Unlike the two previous films, this film has no true hero. The story ends bad for

everyone: Munny is back his old, killing ways; the Kid is traumatized after his first kill; and Daggett and Logan both die.



Fig.6

Like *Tombstone* and *Dances with Wolves*, this film too is a reflection of the time it was made in, but it is safe to say *Unforgiven* is the most pessimistic out of these three. *Unforgiven* mirrors the turning mood of the United States in the early 1990s. Whereas the 1980s had been a time of economic opportunism and optimism, the American people started to have their doubts about the feasibility of the American Dream. The 1990s were also a time of increasing police violence and other shootings reaching its climax with the Rodney King Riots in Los Angeles, California, reflected in the film's violent themes.

Conclusion

The award-winning success of *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Unforgiven* (1992) marked a definitive return of the Western to mainstream Hollywood. Other notable blockbuster Westerns from the 1990s such as *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), *Geronimo: An American Legend* (1993), and *Thunderheart* (1993) seemed to make the revival of the Western complete. Following *Dances with Wolves*, these three films attempted to portray Native-Americans in a positive light. Another blockbuster from the 1990s is the epic biopic *Wyatt Earp* (1994), which seeks to give a historically correct view of the life of Wyatt Earp and his friendship with Doc Holliday. From the 1990s onwards, Westerns increasingly started to tackle historically sensitive issues, such as the treatment of Native-Americans, American greed, and the prevalence of violence in American history and the American present, and not as a last resort but as a seemingly automatic reaction when faced with the Other.

Considering this seemingly surprising revival in the context of American history and politics of the late Cold War, we return to my research question: How, now, is the Wild West being romanticized in these 1990s blockbusters?

The discussed revisionist Westerns – *Tombstone*, *Dances with Wolves*, and *Unforgiven* – are significantly different in terms of plot. The storyline is more critical towards historical developments in the history of the Old West and challenges; hence, the myths discussed in the second chapter (the portrayal of masculinity, the usage of violence, and the concept of ecological imperialism). This more critical manner of filmmaking may have been influenced by the field of New Western History that was discussed in the first chapter. Additionally, the films were influenced by contemporary events of the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the new historicist approach in the third chapter has demonstrated.

However, even though these films are much more critical of the history of the Old West than their predecessors, these films still portray a glorification of some of the key components of the myth, such as masculinity, violence, and ecological imperialism, backed by the recognizable imagery of Western films in terms of setting, characters and characteristics – saloons, vast lands, Native-Americans, damsels in distress, the six-guns, and horseback-riding.

This thesis has tried to demonstrate that the new manner of studying westward expansion has greatly affected the interpretation of the myth. History of the west is no longer simplified, and other groups, vital to westward expansion, are now included and given a positive position in history. These films and their reworking of the traditional Western deserves more scholarly and critical scrutiny. Furthermore, the first chapter has shown how defining factors such as the ‘frontier thesis’ and Manifest Destiny have greatly shaped the way history has been interpreted.

The second chapter has demonstrated that the main themes attributed to the myth – discussed here were masculinity, violence, and relation to the land – will always be present, usually in its most simplified form. History and myth are thoroughly intertwined, especially in fictional products. The theory of New Historicism has shown us that no matter in what time period these cultural texts are studied or read, they will always be read on the limited horizon of our cultural knowledge and expectations.

However, New Historicism has also shown us that these characteristics – masculinity, violence, and relation to the land – are still present in the three studied films – *Tombstone*, *Dances with Wolves*, and *Unforgiven* – but these are then adapted to the time period in which the films were made. For example, the uselessness of violence was emphasized in *Unforgiven* to symbolize the confusion regarding the Rodney King riots in the early 1990s. Or, to name another example, the American army was depicted as an evil force in *Dances with Wolves*, to illustrate the attitude towards American adventurism of the Reagan/Bush Sr. administration

among leftist America. Then, western films may thus superficially perpetuate the myth of the Wild West, in terms of its imagery and storylines, but when these are then more closely interpreted, one can conclude that they have definitely evolved in terms of one-sidedness.

The interpretation of these three films may enable us to see how the Western made a comeback and how, even while taking a seemingly more critical stance towards the tradition of the genre, they are inscribed in mythical renderings of the Wild West. A future study into Westerns beyond the limited time-frame chosen for this thesis, would take more films into account. While doing research, I found that many scholars take an interest into 'Westerns' of the past decade; films such as *Django Unchained* (2012) and *The Revenant* (2015). I say 'Westerns' even though these movies seem to have further stretched genre boundaries. They may not seem recognizable, since they have lost the frontier as place of action or because they do not star cowboys anymore, but in terms of contents, they definitely constitute as Westerns. It would be interesting to study these films in the light of new historicism, and see how these films have adapted to new historical circumstances, especially considering today's (June 2020) discussions in the United States, and worldwide regarding police and military violence, racism, and the ever-changing, ever-dynamic meaning of the unescapable past.

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List of Illustrations

Cover Photo: Movie / Publicity still from *Dances with Wolves* (1990), featuring Lt. John Dunbar on one of his first visits to the Native-American campsite as he continues to become increasingly fascinated with their way of life. *IconicGreats*. This still was taken from iconicgreats.co.uk/kevin-costner-in-dances-with-wolves-premium-photograph-and-poster-1003187/.

Images of Chapter 3:

Fig.1: Movie / Publicity still from *Tombstone* (1993), featuring Wyatt Earp (Kurt Russell) and Doc Holliday (Val Kilmer), the two main protagonists of the story. *MovieStillsDB*. This still was taken from www.moviestillsdb.com/movies/tombstone-i108358#addd8dc5.

Fig.2: Movie / Publicity still from *Tombstone* (1993), featuring Wyatt Earp (Kurt Russell), Doc Holliday (Val Kilmer), Sherman McMasters (Michael Rooker), Texas Jack Vermillion (Peter Sherayko), and Turkey Creek Jack Johnson (Buck Taylor), depicting the notorious “Earp’s Vendetta Ride.” *MovieStillsDB*. This still was taken from www.moviestillsdb.com/movies/tombstone-i108358#boXTc3.

Fig.3: Movie / Publicity still from *Dances with Wolves* (1990), featuring Kicking Bird (Graham Greene) and Wind-In-His-Hair (Rodney A. Grant) as they meet Lt. Dunbar for the first time; trying to overcome vernacular and cultural barriers. *MovieStillsDB*. This still was taken from <https://www.moviestillsdb.com/movies/dances-with-wolves-i99348#e2271a>.

Fig.4: Movie / Publicity still from *Dances with Wolves* (1990), featuring Lt. John Dunbar (Kevin Costner) and Stands-with-a-Fist (Mary McDonnell), whom have gotten married and are getting on their way to flee from Dunbar’s fellow American army soldiers.

MovieStillsDB. This still was taken from www.moviestillsdb.com/movies/dances-with-wolves-i99348#5130a6.

Fig.5: Movie / Publicity still from *Unforgiven* (1992), featuring William “Will” Munny (Clint Eastwood), Ned Logan (Morgan Freeman), and The “Schofield Kid” (Jaimz Woolvett) as they kill “Little Davey” (Rob Campbell) to receive part of their reward. *MovieStillsDB*. This still was taken from www.moviestillsdb.com/movies/unforgiven-i105695#q7Te6e.

Fig.6: Movie / Publicity still from *Unforgiven* (1992), featuring Little Bill Daggett (Gene Hackman) as he is ridiculing W.W. Beauchamp’s (Saul Rubinek) dime novel “The Duke of Death,” and subsequently tells him the truth about the legends of the Old West. *MovieStillsDB*. This still was taken from www.moviestillsdb.com/movies/unforgiven-i105695#a03e62.