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Classical Mythology and the Western Film

MARTIN M. WINKLER

The literature of Greco-Roman antiquity is thoroughly imbued with mythological gods and heroes. The heroic figures of Greek myth exhibit most of the basic aspects of hero myths, found also in other cultures and at other times. The principal concept is that of the warrior hero: he slays large numbers of enemies on the battlefield. In the *Iliad* the fame of the Greek heroes increases with the amount of Trojan blood which they shed. The poem devotes long sections and even whole books to detailed and often gruesome descriptions of the heroes' exploits to win everlasting glory (*kleos*). The ancient Greek term for "heroic deeds on the battlefield" is *aristeia* (from *aristos*, "best," and *aristeuein*, "to be the best"). *Aristos Achaiōn*, "the best of the Achaeans," is a standard epithet applied to several Greek heroes in the *Iliad*, but especially to Achilles, whose extended *aristeia* (Books 20-22) culminates in the killing of Hector.¹

Besides killing human foes, the hero is also adept at slaying monsters, those supernatural and occasionally immortal creatures. Thus Perseus dispatches the Gorgon Medusa; several of Heracles' Twelve Labors involve monsters, while during his incidental labors (*parerga*) many more human and superhuman evildoers become his victims. During such deeds the hero often rescues beautiful maidens from their distress; these later become their saviors' brides. Heroes also institute cults and found cities and nations. Perseus is the founder of Mycenae,² as Cadmus is of Thebes; the Trojan Aeneas becomes the ancestor of the Romans. The hero fulfills tasks which are virtually impossible to perform or is sent upon a long and difficult journey, such as Jason and the Argonauts' quest for the Golden Fleece. The tricksters of folklore and mythology are most prominently found in the figures of Autolycus and his grandson Odysseus. The ultimate feat of the hero is to achieve immortality by conquering death.

From the archaic Greek warrior to the medieval knight errant

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and the Japanese Samurai, to name only a few notable examples, hero myths exhibit certain constant features; in Joseph Campbell's well-known phrase, we see before us variations on the archetypal "hero with a thousand faces."³ In the present essay I propose to relate heroic mythology from classical antiquity to what might well be considered the chief representative of American hero myths: the Westerner, hero of the Western film.⁴

I

The Rise of Hero Myths. Aside from the folkloristic elements which they contain, myths can generally be linked to historical situations or events out of which subsequent heroic figures begin to develop.⁵ Greek myths, whose roots go back to the Bronze Age and the Mycenaean civilization of the third and second millennia B.C., show how heroes emerge. The exploits of several historical but anonymous warriors or kings might become embellished through repeated telling, thus taking on superhuman dimensions, and finally be attributed to one single figure which now also receives a name, often, but by no means always, in accordance with his heroic stature. (Thus Theseus = "the Establisher," Perseus = "the Destroyer," Heracles = "the Glory of Hera," Heracles' son Telephus = "the Far-Shining One," Odysseus = "the Angry One").⁶ The Bronze-Age *tholos*-tombs — the best-known of these remarkable "bee hives" is the so-called Treasury of Atreus at Mycenae — may well have attracted legends when later generations, unfamiliar with the original purpose and meaning of these structures, tried to explain their existence by linking them with prehistorical kings or demigods. Tomb cults in general seem to have been a major cause for the rise of heroic mythology.⁷ The close links between Greek myths and history need no special emphasis after Schliemann discovered Mycenae and Troy and after Arthur Evans excavated the Palace of Minos at Knossos.

Similarly in the American West, stories and legends arose out of historical events, such as the Civil War, the westward expansion, or the cattle drives, and attached themselves to historical figures. It need hardly be stressed that most, if not all, of the historical Western heroes were of rather dubious, even criminal, nature in real life.⁸ In a subsequent step, totally fictitious heroes take over with adventures only loosely grounded in any accurate historical situation.

In ancient Greece mythical tales about heroes were recited to musical accompaniment by rhapsodes, professional and often wan-

dering singers who entertained royal courts at festive banquets.⁹ Demodocus in the *Odyssey* is our prime example of such a traditional singer-composer. With the introduction of writing, the long oral tradition of the composition of myths in epic poetry ends, and many of the archaic tales take their final shape in the poems of Homer and Hesiod. By this time, myths have become standardized.

Numerous legends and myths of the American West can also be assumed to spring from an oral tradition. Campfire stories, for instance, easily lead to tall tales, but such legends achieve far greater popularity and gain wider-spread acceptance in the mass media of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Pulp magazines, dime novels, and partially or completely invented biographies or memoirs of famous Westerners or notorious outlaws supersede oral tales and in turn prepare the way for radio, film, and television.¹⁰ Western filmmakers, or rather the advertising departments of their studios, have often claimed faithfully to portray actual events, but such claims are not to be taken too seriously. For example, Nicholas Ray's *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957) uses a screenplay based on that for Henry King's classic, but largely fictional and idolizing, film *Jesse James* of 1939. It has rightly been noted that Ray's film is "the true story of James à la Ray."¹¹

The origin and rise of a myth can be seen in several Western films. At the close of *The True Story of Jesse James*, a beggar sings the "Ballad of Jesse James" shortly after Jesse has been murdered. The placement in the film of a song which could not possibly have been composed in such short time and could have become popular only later, indicates that the myth is already on its march to eclipse the facts. In John Ford's *Fort Apache* (1948) the story of Thursday's Charge is patterned after Custer's Last Stand. Colonel Thursday's stubborn intransigence and his lack of experience as an Indian fighter have led to the massacre of himself and all the men under his command, although he has been warned repeatedly by his subordinate officer, Captain York. After York succeeds to Thursday's command, he confirms, during an interview with newspaper reporters from the East, Thursday's qualities as a leader and soldier and his heroism in battle rather than to reveal the truth about Thursday's incompetence. York's reason for this falsification is his concern for the morale of his troops after the massacre; facing an impending Indian war, they need a hero whose example inspires them into becoming better soldiers. The myth serves a practical purpose and provides an incentive, whereas the truth would only have a demoralizing effect. The subject of myth and truth, central to Ford's artistic thought and to his filmic reconstruction of the

past, is most explicit in his late Western, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1961). Senator Stoddard is famous throughout the nation for killing the notorious outlaw Valance when he was a young lawyer just arrived in the West. By shooting Valance, Stoddard not only brought justice and order to the untamed frontier territory, but also launched his political career. The politician finally reveals the truth when interviewed for a newspaper: somebody else had shot Liberty Valance. At the end of the senator's account, told in the film as a long flashback, the paper's editor burns the notes taken during the interview. Everybody, he explains, has grown up believing in the myth, and "when the legend becomes fact, print the legend."¹² At one point in the film's flashback which tells the story of the lawless past, the editor of the frontier town's paper is almost beaten to death by Valance and his henchmen for printing the truth about the outlaw and the men behind him. The facts of the killing of Valance are revealed as a flashback within the flashback, indicating the complex interrelationship of truth and the fiction arising from it. The very phrase, "the man who. . .," in the film's title promises a factual account of "what really happened," but the truth becomes apparent only after most of the film's running time has passed. The legend is more prominent, more tenacious, than the facts. There is an additional level of irony in that the whole narrative of Stoddard, Valance, and the man who "really" shot him, is completely fictitious.¹³ Appropriately enough, the Western town in this film looks like the artificial set which it is; some outdoor scenes are filmed on a soundstage rather than in open air, and the "real" landscape is as drab as the studio lot on which it was filmed.¹⁴ *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is not only the key to much of the Western *oeuvre* of Ford, but moreover to the genre as a whole. Just as the cinema marks the culmination point in the tradition of American mythmaking, the myths of the American West are forged most effectively in the Western film, particularly in the works of some of the masters of American cinema. In the following pages, some of the central aspects of heroic mythology, especially from classical antiquity, shall be examined as they reappear in some artistically significant Western films.

II

The Hero and His Arms. In accordance with his warrior-like nature, the hero's basic skill is with weapons. The opening of Virgil's *Aeneid* clearly and concisely attests to this: "Arms and the man I sing" (*arma virumque cano, Aeneid* 1.1). It is the hero's special af-

finitude with his weapons which makes him a hero in the first place. Only he can wield his sword or gun, and his arms are often of divine origin or endowed with supernatural powers. Thus Achilles is the only one who can use the Pelian ash spear cut by the Centaur Chiron (*Iliad* 16.140-44 and 19.388-91; Achilles is accordingly *douriklytos* – “famous through his spear”), and in Book 21 of the *Odyssey* no one but Odysseus can shoot an arrow through the holes in the twelve axes from his old bow; this is the test by which Odysseus proves himself to be the rightful king in Ithaca. Both Achilles and Aeneas obtain suits of armor wrought by Hephaestus. His divine armor makes Achilles invincible and even invulnerable (*Iliad* 21.590-94). Heracles, besides carrying a club (this, together with the lion skin, is his standard attribute in Greek art), also possesses deadly arrows dipped in the poisonous blood of the Hydra. The supernatural power inherent in Heracles’ bow and arrows is of crucial importance to the outcome of the Trojan War: only when they are present among the Greeks will Troy finally fall. This is the dramatic starting point for Sophocles’ tragedy, *Philoctetes*. Heracles, Achilles, and Aeneas all receive shields forged by Hephaestus.¹⁵ In later mythologies we encounter Excalibur, the Sword in the Stone which only Arthur can extract, and Siegfried’s Balmung. The fact that these weapons have names indicates that they also have a personality. Even Achilles’s spear mentioned earlier is described as desiring to taste the flesh of its victim (*Iliad* 21.70); in the case of Telephus, the spear also has the power to heal the wound it has caused.¹⁶ Animism provides such dead objects with magical qualities. Western folk hero Davy Crockett called his rifle Betsy, and in Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales* Natty Bumppo derives much of his personality and heroic stature from his rifle, indeed becomes identified with it. The name with which his enemies pay tribute to him is *La Longue Carabine*, thereby acknowledging his superior marksmanship.

In the Western film, the hero’s close relationship with his gun shows itself in innumerable examples of gun-twirling acrobatics. On a more meaningful level, affinity with his gun has a direct bearing on the hero’s greatness. In *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972), the eponymous hero advances a significant step toward his later stature when a Hawken rifle, which he had long wished to own, finally comes into his possession. *The Professionals* (1966) combines four men, masters of handling weapons, horses, and dynamite, into an irresistible and lethal force, slaying large numbers of Mexicans on a mission abroad. As the film’s title suggests, professionalism in handling arms and cool, careful planning give these heroes their

distinction. Such professionalism is central to the films, both Westerns and others, of Howard Hawks. In his last film, the Western *Rio Lobo* (1970), just before the climactic confrontation between the “good guys” and the “bad guys,” the hero realizes that the rifle he is carrying is not his. He flings it into the dust and fetches his own trusted rifle; only then does he walk down the street for the show-down. The gunfighter Shane, in the 1953 film of the same name, is a solitary man without past or future. After his shoot-out with the badman he twirls his sixshooter around his trigger finger before replacing it in its holster, although he had been a model of pacifism and restraint throughout the film. Far from being an idle display of dexterity as found in many a mediocre Western for the sake of pleasing a juvenile audience, this brief moment in *Shane* is a subtle characterization of the hero. It reveals that the Westerner, even if he is on the side of peace, progress, and order, is an archaic man of violence underneath — a side of his character which he cannot completely control.¹⁷

III

Violence and Catharsis. In the Westerner’s use of violence we find one of the most important facets of the Western film. As Robert Warshaw has observed in his classic essay on the Western hero: “The Westerner at his best exhibits a moral ambiguity which darkens his image and saves him from absurdity; this ambiguity arises from the fact that, whatever his justifications, he is a killer of men.”¹⁸

In his treatment of screen violence a director of Westerns is likely to reveal his artistic integrity or its absence. While in many commercial films, both Westerns and others, violence on the screen exists merely for the sake of box-office returns, there are some directors whose attitude to violence speaks for their serious concern with what is after all an integral part of the human condition.¹⁹ In the American Western cinema the most prominent — and most controversial — case is that of Sam Peckinpah. Peckinpah’s slow-motion violence has a deeper meaning than mere audience titillation. This becomes evident when we examine the function of violence as outlined by Aristotle in the *Poetics*.

Suffering and violence are integral features of classical Greek tragedy. Aeschylus’ *The Persians* deals with the suffering inflicted upon the Persians by Xerxes’ haughty and willful contempt of the limits imposed upon humans by the gods when he invaded Greece; hubris, which leads to violence, revenge, suffering, and divine retribution (*nemesis*), figures prominently in Greek drama and occurs

even earlier in the Homeric epics. The concept of hubris is virtually omnipresent in archaic and classical Greek thought.²⁰ The violent impulse in human nature is exemplified in the figure of Medea, the mother driven to the murder of her children. In Euripides' last play, *The Bacchae*, the impact of Pentheus' violent death at the hands of his mother, who is in a state of Dionysiac frenzy (*enthousiasmos*), is at least as harrowing an experience for the spectator as any ultra-realistic screen atrocities unleashed upon the cinemagoer today. But such violence is by no means self-serving. According to Aristotle, suffering and violence on the tragic stage arouse both pity and fear (*eleos* and *phobos*) in the spectator.²¹ These two powerful emotions, accumulated within the audience during the play, are released at the drama's climax. Such draining of emotions Aristotle calls *catharsis* — "purification." Catharsis leaves the spectator numb. If no purging like this occurred, the high-pitched emotions of pity and fear would have no outlet and would remain inside the spectator as harmful forces. Catharsis, then, is a psychological safety valve through which excessive emotions, including those of aggression and brutality, are neutralized and rendered harmless.²² The social function of Greek tragedy here becomes apparent. Aristotelian catharsis is also the *raison d'être* of the violence in Peckinpah's films.²³

The most notable instance is his epic Western, *The Wild Bunch* (1969). Peckinpah has stated about this film: "It's about the violence in all of us. The violence which is reflecting on the political condition of the world today. It serves a dual purpose. I intended it to have a cathartic effect. Someone may feel a strange, sick exultation at the violence, but he should then ask himself, 'What is going on in my heart?' I wanted to achieve a catharsis through pity and fear."²⁴

While most of the running time of *The Wild Bunch* is taken up by a non-violent, often lyrical and elegiac, sometimes humorous or action-filled narrative, the work is framed by an opening scene of unexpected violence and by a longer closing sequence which must remain the most unsettling bloodbath ever witnessed on the screen, the more gripping through its powerful montage. Not since the massacre on the Odessa steps in Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) has a film portrayed an extended sequence of such harrowing, yet moral, violence as is to be found in *The Wild Bunch*. The eponymous outlaws, who realize that their time has passed, assert their heroic nature by precipitating a crisis which they know they cannot survive. Their last stand is a defiance of death by which they prove their mettle and ultimately win immortality for themselves.

Central to classical Greek tragedy is the concept of peripety, the sudden and unexpected reversal of the tragic hero's fortune (*Poetics* 1452a22-29), linked to *anagnorisis* ("recognition") for greater effect (*Poetics* 1452a29-b3). A pivot of the tragic plot and of the hero's experience, peripety often plunges the protagonist into ruin and despair; Aristotle cites Sophocles' Oedipus as an example. *The Wild Bunch*, not surprisingly, contains just such a peripety. Toward the end of the film, the outlaws demand the release of one of their men from the Mexican revolutionary general Mapache; when the latter kills his prisoner instead of setting him free, he is shot and killed immediately by one of the Bunch in an automatic, reflexive reaction. A moment of stupefied silence ensues, in which time seems to be suspended. The release comes in a way that is psychologically completely convincing. When a member of the Bunch bursts into a giggle of exhilaration and anticipation, the leader deliberately shoots Mapache's military advisor, a Prussian officer. This precipitates the final orgy of violence which none of the Wild Bunch and few of the revolutionaries survive. The outlaws' intentional plunge into the bloodbath is both *anagnorisis* and peripety in that they clearly see their destiny and accept it without hesitation. This goes deeper than the standard attitude of "a man got to do what a man got to do," found in many a standard Western. Peckinpah's care in structuring the film has mentally prepared the viewer for the moment described above when, a little earlier, the Bunch decide to demand the release of their friend against overwhelming odds ("Let's go." — "Why not?") This laconic exchange is reminiscent of Hemingway and Chandler). Peckinpah illustrates his and our fascination with death and violence and its horror, which is also its beauty, in the gripping slow-motion dances of death which disrupt the real-time action.²⁵ In *The Wild Bunch* Peckinpah demonstrates the violent roots of American society and, in this film as well as in his contemporary drama, *The Getaway* (1972), shows the persistence of frontier violence in modern urban society. Masculinity asserts itself through the individual's violent actions — this is part of the American Dream. In the words of Black Panther Rap Brown: "Violence is as American as cherry-pie."²⁶ Peckinpah's film *Straw Dogs* (1971), in which a gentle American intellectual finds himself driven to and capable of extreme violence, is positively Euripidean as the psychological study of a meek individual whose dark Dionysiac nature completely supersedes his usual disposition of well-balanced rationality.

IV

Journeys and Quests. The head of the Wild Bunch leads his outlaw gang from their homeland Texas deep into the heart of revolutionary Mexico. This journey serves as catalyst for the film's heroic theme, just as a hero's journey is a common motif in both classical and later mythologies. Greek epics and tragedies extensively dealt with the returns of heroes from the Trojan War; the best-known examples are the *Odyssey* and Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. The journey frequently represents a young hero's initiation into manhood and maturity or an older hero's pursuit of perfection. The hero goes on an inward search for himself, for his nature, and for his destiny. In the course of his wanderings Aeneas learns to accept his responsibility toward a higher order of things as ordained by fate and the gods: "thus had the Fates ordained" (*sic volvere Parcas, Aeneid* 1.22). Parzival, on his quest for the Holy Grail, finally recognizes his limitations which once before have caused him to lose the Grail; only after he realizes and abjures his imperfections does he attain his goal. The hero embarked on a journey or quest undergoes, in his interaction with nature, society, and with himself, a process of learning and increasing self-awareness. He abandons his faults and ultimately reaches an ideal state of purity, valor, and goodness. The motif of the quest naturally recurs in the Western film.

In John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) the passengers of an overland stage form a microcosm of frontier society.²⁷ Their dangerous journey through hostile Indian territory forces them to confront their social prejudices and to become aware of their moral qualities. Particularly noteworthy and striking, both visually and thematically, is Ford's use of Monument Valley in this and several other films. Monument Valley is a primeval "mythology land" *par excellence*. The towering buttes and mesas, which keep changing colors endlessly in the day's light or shade, are capable of instilling a feeling of overpowering awe in the visitor. The presence of prehistoric gods, heroes, and spirits makes itself almost physically felt. (Adjacent to Monument Valley, there are two other areas with equally spectacular red-rock formations, Mystery Valley and Valley of the Gods.) Monument Valley, Ford's "moral universe," is the ideal setting for his Westerns; its "cliffs and mesas [suggest] unassailable moral precepts" against which the human characters in his films are measured and not rarely found wanting.²⁸ It attests to Ford's artistic achievement that even today Monument Valley is regarded by many as exclusively "Ford country." In *Stagecoach*, the bizarre landscape

imparts a sense of peril, even doom, upon the viewer as well as upon the passengers in the coach. The heterogeneity of nature reflects that of society and points to the imperfections of men. In the course of the journey, reversals of received societal conventions take place, and social hypocrisy is diminished in a cathartic process of pity and fear felt alike by the characters in the film and by the spectator. The purity of the love between two outcasts, a prostitute and a young outlaw, is acknowledged; the drunken doctor overcomes his alcoholism during crisis, while the banker, outwardly a pillar of society, betrays his cowardice and corruption. An arrogant officer's wife, proud of her status and respectability, accepts the protection of a despised gambler who exhibits a Southern gentleman's chivalry and an aristocratic code of honor. By journey's end, each of the travelers has come face to face with himself and has reached a deeper understanding of human nature and society.

The journey-quest motif is central to many Westerns of Budd Boetticher and Anthony Mann, whose films form a body of work more significant for the cinema of the 1950s than their relative obscurity would lead one to believe.²⁹ The motif also figures prominently in Peckinpah's major works. His first film, *The Deadly Companions* (1961), is "a journey of self-discovery";³⁰ in *Ride the High Country* (1962) the ascent into and descent from the pure and uncorrupted mountains forms a parallel to the film's themes of past vs. present and justice vs. corruption. *Major Dundee* (1964) is an odyssey of obsession, defeat, and cathartic violence.³¹ The protagonists of *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* (1970), *Junior Bonner* (1972), and *The Getaway* — a Western in contemporary guise — are ultimately rootless drifters in space and time. David Sumner's disturbing journey into the opaque side of his nature in *Straw Dogs* ends, as does the film, on a winding road in utter darkness. The closing exchange of dialogue — Henry Niles: "I don't know my way home." David: "That's all right. I don't either." — forms an appropriate coda to the film. The divergent and convergent paths of the title characters of *Pat Garrett and Billy The Kid* (1973) end with Garrett and Billy's final confrontation. When Garrett, after killing Billy, shoots his own reflection in a mirror, i.e. kills himself, the moment signifies not only Garrett's self-disgust, but also his realization that he has long been dead inside. Billy's physical death brings about Garrett's *anagnorisis* of his own spiritual dying, a process which has set in long ago. In the final analysis, Garrett and Billy are identical; they represent two sides of the same coin. The split character of the Westerner, who in his "good guy" incarnation destroys his "bad guy" other self, is central to many serious West-

erns. The vertical hierarchy of power and money in Peckinpah's modern drama, *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (1974), is set against the horizontally moving quest and return of the social outcast who carries out the dirty work in this underrated study of the interrelationship of financial power, social hypocrisy, and both individual and anonymous violence.

The motif of the quest is frequently linked to that of revenge. The protagonist of Henry King's *The Bravados* (1958) realizes too late that he has pursued and killed three men who turned out to be innocent of raping and killing his wife; since they were criminals, he had easily taken their guilt for granted. Shattered by his own guilt, the hero returns to seek forgiveness and peace of mind from God — a move rarely to be encountered in a Western. In Howard Hawks' epic *Red River* (1948), the arduous cattle drive forms the background for a disquisition on the use and limits of power and on the larger question of power and justice.³² The conflict between aging rancher Tom Dunson, whose stubborn monomania endangers the whole undertaking, and his adoptive son, who grows into a responsible leader through his sense of justice and compassion, but who has to fear his father's revenge for taking over the herd, finally reaches a violent climax which threatens to erupt into the mutual slaying of father and son. This conflict is reminiscent of that between Zeus and Prometheus in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*. Just as Zeus initially exerts his violent authority by flinging Prometheus into Tartarus, but eventually relents (in the lost *Prometheus Unbound*), so the protagonist in the film engages his son in a brutal fight, but is finally brought to his senses.

Climactic violence is also averted in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). The protagonist Ethan Edwards, one of the psychologically most complex figures in the history of the Western, is an errant, solitary, and embittered soldier of fortune who has conducted an obsessive but futile search over several years for his little niece abducted by Indians. When he eventually finds her, he learns that she has become one of her kidnapper's wives and is now virtually an Indian herself. During the search Edwards has traveled ever more deeply into his own heart of darkness and has become increasingly violent and racist in his hatred of Indians. He goes as far as to desecrate an Indian warrior's grave; he shoots out the dead man's eyes to make his spirit "wander forever between the winds," which he knows to be the Indian belief. This is clearly an act of vengeful insanity. In his mad vindictiveness Ethan abrogates most of his humanity. He senselessly kills buffalo to cause the death of Indians through starvation, and finally takes the dead Indian chief's scalp.

In a highly dramatic scene at the end of the film, Edwards is on the verge of killing his niece for having been defiled by miscegenation. But in a surprising reversal of the viewer's expectations, he takes the girl back to white society.³⁴ Although hitherto bigoted and obsessed to the brink of madness, Edwards now acknowledges the stronger ties of family; in this he is consistent with most Fordian heroes. But even so he himself remains an outcast from civilization. In a moving poetic image at the film's conclusion, a door closes on Ethan as he is walking back into the desert wilderness, and the screen goes dark. (Similarly, the film had begun with a door opening through which a solitary horseman is seen approaching from afar — Ethan coming from out of the depths of Monument Valley.) Unlike Homer's Odysseus, Ethan Edwards can't go home again; his spirit too will wander forever between the winds. Ethan resembles Moses in his endless and futile journeying across the desert, both in the past (before and during the narrative told in the film) and, presumably, for all future. It is hardly by accident that the name of Ethan's brother is Aaron. And like Moses, Ethan will be granted only a glimpse from afar into the Promised Land of home and family.

V

Immortality and Apotheosis. The hero's highest achievement is his conquest of death. Since death more than anything else distinguishes humans from gods, the transcendence of his mortal nature transforms the hero into a god. Gaining immortality, we may say, is the ultimate quest upon which the hero can embark, and represents the touchstone of his mettle. As early as in ancient Near Eastern mythology — Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian — do we witness heroic attempts to overcome death, the bane of the human race. Gilgamesh, originally a historical figure (he was the Sumerian king of Uruk in Southern Mesopotamia during the first half of the third millennium B.C.), twice attempts to gain immortality, but fails both times. To avoid death, he travels to Utnapishtim, the only man to survive the flood and to be made immortal by the gods. Although Gilgamesh succeeds in crossing the waters of death, he cannot pass the test Utnapishtim sets him. Upon Utnapishtim's information, Gilgamesh obtains the plant of rejuvenation; before he can ingest it, however, a snake steals it from him. In the face of his failures Gilgamesh consoles himself with the realization that his deeds will be remembered for all future. The medium for this remembrance, representing a different kind of immortality, is the *Epic of Gilgamesh* itself.

The hero's conquest of death is most clearly illustrated by his descent into and unharmed return from the underworld, a realm to which entrance is normally forbidden to the living. Even deities hesitate to enter it without urgent reason. (An exception might be the Sumerian goddess Inanna – later, Semitic Ishtar – who enters the underworld for reasons unknown to us, owing to the fragmentary nature of our surviving text.) The motif is also present in Gilgamesh's journey to Utnapishtim; in crossing the waters of death, Gilgamesh is aided by the ferry-man Urshanabi. Urshanabi parallels the Greek Charon who ferries the shades of the dead across the river Styx, just as Utnapishtim and his wife resemble Deucalion and Pyrrha, the sole survivors of the flood in Greek myth.³⁵

Greek heroes appear to be more successful in their journeys to the world of the dead; several of them enter upon a *nekuia*, a descent into Hades. Odysseus' *nekuia* in Book Eleven of the *Odyssey* is the model for that of Aeneas in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*. Similarly, Orpheus descends and returns, if without Eurydice. The wanton hubris with which Theseus and Peirithous invade Tartarus, intending to kidnap Persephone, meets with appropriate punishment when both are denied return. Descents to the underworld are such a staple of Greek mythology that they are duly satirized by Aristophanes in *The Frogs* and by Lucian in the *Cataplus*. It is, however, the greatest hero of Greek mythology who is most extensively associated with overcoming death, both through *nekuiai* and otherwise. The myths around Heracles on more than one occasion point to his conquest of death.

The last three of Heracles' Labors are closely connected to the idea of death and the underworld and to his victories over both: his capture of the cattle of Geryon and of Cerberus, and his obtaining the apples of the Hesperides. As G. S. Kirk has convincingly argued,³⁶ both Geryon and the Western end of the world where he lives, are linked with Hades (whom Heracles on one occasion has shot and wounded; *Iliad* 5.395-97); according to Apollodorus, Hades' cattle graze close by Geryon's (*Library* 2.5.10). The west is easily related to the end of mortal life and to the afterlife – the Islands of the Blessed are located in the far West. Similarly, the garden of the Hesperides (= "Daughters of Evening") is situated at the Western end of the world (Hesiod, *Theogony* 215, 275). The golden apples, which they and a dragon guard, were Gaia's present to Zeus and Hera upon their wedding and probably represent a food of life; this must be why they are watched over closely by the gods. That Heracles' capture of Cerberus points to his conquest of both Hades and death hardly needs to be stressed. Heracles' superior

stature as a conqueror of death is proven when he frees Theseus from his imprisonment in Tartarus and when he returns the dead queen Alcestis to the living after wrestling her away from Thanatos (Death); this is the subject of Euripides' tragedy, *Alcestis*. Heracles furthermore achieves immortality for himself. His physical death on a pyre atop Mt. Oeta leads to his apotheosis and his life among the Olympians as husband of Hebe, goddess of everlasting youth.³⁷ The fire, property of the gods as the myth of Prometheus attests, has burnt away Heracles' mortality, just as Thetis attempted, unsuccessfully, to make Achilles immortal by holding him over fire.³⁸

While not as immediately discernible as it is in ancient mythologies, conquest of death and the achievement of immortality are nevertheless an important motif in the mythology of the American West. Such prominent historical Westerners as Davy Crockett and George Armstrong Custer owe their fame largely to the remarkable circumstances of their deaths at the Alamo and at the Little Big Horn. (The same holds true for John Dillinger, whose death gave rise to the legend of the mysterious Lady in Red.) Like Heracles and, for that matter, Jesus Christ, the myths of Crockett, Custer, and Dillinger reach their culmination with and after their deaths.³⁹

As Gregory Nagy has shown for Achilles and the *Iliad*,⁴⁰ the hero's glory derives not only from his exploits but also, and in equal measure, from the fact that the myths surrounding him form the subject of epic poetry, at whose center the hero is situated. Achilles deliberately chooses a short heroic life as a warrior, culminating in death on the battlefield, in preference to a long and peaceful existence in obscurity, knowing full well that his heroism will make his name eternally famous (*Iliad* 9.410-16). He is aware that in this way he will become a hero of epic.⁴¹ In this context we may compare Diotima's precepts to Socrates in Plato's *Symposium* (209c-e): Through his spiritual "children," i.e. his deeds and accomplishments, a man achieves the highest degree of immortality open to him; Diotima names Homer and Hesiod, whose children are their poems, and Lycurgus and Solon, whose children are the constitutions they gave Sparta and Athens.

The Achillean choice of early death with eternal life in myth vis-a-vis a long life in obscurity is central to Peckinpah's film, *Pat Garrett and Billy The Kid*. Garrett sells out to the money men and trades independence for security. As a paid hireling, he hunts down and kills his old friend. Billy, by contrast, refuses to compromise. He rejects the security of a despised and corrupt civilization and chooses an outlaw's violent life, realizing that he will be relentlessly pursued. The violence in the film arises from the conflict between an

independent individual and a society beginning to change into a vast business machine which feels threatened by individualism. Peckinpah's theme here and in his other films is the individual's resistance to corporate American society; in Peckinpah's words, his heroes are "individuals looking for something besides security," and: "The outcast is the individualist."⁴² Garrett's feeling of disgust at himself after shooting Billy thus takes on added significance; he realizes that he has made the wrong choice. In the opening of the film as Peckinpah had intended it – this was radically changed by the studio – Garrett meets a pathetic and completely unheroic death many years later at the instigation of the men who had hired him earlier and to whom he is now no longer useful.⁴³

On the most basic level, the motif of immortality in the Western film appears in a short apotheosis-like reprise at the film's fade-out. At the end of Henry King's *The Gunfighter* (1950), the title character, after being killed treacherously, reappears riding on his horse and surrounded by the expanse of the West. Whereas almost the entire film had taken place in a claustrophobic frontier town, the hero is now photographed from a low angle against the vast Western sky. At the end of *The Wild Bunch* we see the outlaws revived in a brief montage from two earlier scenes in the film. It is significant that now their non-violent, serene nature is emphasized. First, a vignette of relaxation, joy, and laughter, and then a reprise of the entire film's most lyrical and poetic moment – the Bunch's farewell from the village of their Mexican friends, with a haunting folksong ("La Golondrina") repeated on the soundtrack. Our last glimpse of the Wild Bunch is thus not one of heroic, but bloody, violence, but one of peaceful quiet instead. The device of such a reprise at the close of a film is practically as old as the cinema itself. In Ford's 1926 Western, *Three Bad Men*, the title characters give their lives to save the young couple they have befriended and are shown to guard over them even years later. Similarly, in Ford's highly biblical Western, *Three Godfathers* (1948), two of the three outlaws appear after their deaths to the only surviving third, instilling by their presence the strength in him to save the life of the child whom they have found in the desert. The savior-like character of the three is emphasized on more than one occasion, just as in the earlier film the three bad men appear in a Christ-like pose as silhouettes against the sky.⁴⁴ More dramatically, Judge Roy Bean, presumed dead, returns from nowhere after a twenty-year absence and burns away the evils of modern civilization in John Huston's *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* (1972). In Clint Eastwood's crudely allegorical *High Plains Drifter* of the same year, a nameless stranger purges a

corrupt town, painted red and rechristened “Hell,” by burning it down. The stranger seems to have come from beyond the grave to execute his mission as avenging angel and exorcist of guilt and shame.⁴⁵ In Peckinpah’s *Convoy* (1978), which is “really” a Western, the protagonist dies in a sea of flames, only to rise phoenix-like from the ashes in an upbeat ending which deliberately flaunts the conventions of narrative cinema.

The motif of immortality is fully integrated into the plot of Sydney Pollack’s *Jeremiah Johnson*, which traces Johnson’s transformation from inexperienced youth to hero to myth. Jeremiah Johnson, who is based on the authentic figure of John “Liver-Eating” Johnson,⁴⁶ leaves civilization behind to become a mountain man. His teacher is Bear Claw, an old man of the mountains, who initiates the youngster into the skills of survival in the wilderness. Jeremiah’s initiation into the heroic mold evolves in two parts. He acquires a special weapon (on which see above), with which he shoots his first deer and thus survives the winter. In a scene both dramatic and humorous, Jeremiah slays his first grizzly. He now becomes a skilled hunter, tracker, and Indian fighter. The revenge motif serves as catalyst for his career as a hero. When hostile Indians murder his family, Jeremiah turns into the invincible Crow Killer. He becomes a legendary and godlike figure when the Indians acknowledge his superiority as a warrior. They even build a cenotaph to him where they deposit sacred objects as at a shrine or altar. The last scene of the film shows the completion of Jeremiah’s journey into the land of myth. Photographed against the grandiose panorama of the wintry Rocky Mountains, Jeremiah is espied by the chief of his enemies. Upon recognizing the fur-clad horseman high on the mountainside, the Indian in the valley below raises his hand in salute and deference. When Jeremiah wordlessly acknowledges the greeting by raising his hand in return — there is deep silence except for the wind blowing — the frame freezes, not signifying the end of the story, but indicating that there can be no end. Jeremiah lives on in the Indians’ legends and tales. Before the final credits appear, the voice of the off-screen narrator tells us that “some say he’s still up there” in the mountains.⁴⁷ Jeremiah has surpassed even his old teacher Bear Claw. The changes and the learning process which he has undergone are represented by his attire. In the beginning, when he is coming from human society, Jeremiah is wearing man-made clothes; he gradually abandons these for animal skins and furs. In a significant scene, his Indian wife puts on his shoulders the bear-skin coat which she has made for him. By the end of the film, Jeremiah’s garments are scarcely distinguish-

able from those worn earlier by Bear Claw — Jeremiah's apprenticeship is now over. That he has abandoned civilization and completely returned to nature is seen in the final scene already described. Not only does Jeremiah blend perfectly into the surrounding countryside, but he is also wearing skin and skull of an animal of prey as his headgear. This, of course, emphasizes his prowess as a hunter and fighter.

A young man's initiation by an older hero is also prominent in *Barbarosa* (1982), filmed by Australian director Fred Schepisi. A youngster becomes apprenticed to the outlaw Barbarosa, an idiosyncratic imp of a hero with long hair and scraggly beard. In the course of the film the young man begins to resemble his master more and more; he grows a beard, wears a hat similar to Barbarosa's, etc. The outlaw is engaged in a long-standing feud with a Mexican *haciendero* whose men regularly try to hunt him down. Barbarosa, however, is a superior Westerner, and the story of his invincibility becomes legend throughout the Southwest. When he is finally killed by one of his enemies after all, the Mexicans celebrate their victory with a nightly *fiesta*. In the middle of their festivities they see to their horror the figure of Barbarosa emerging from the shadows. The young apprentice has completed his period of initiation: he has donned Barbarosa's clothes, and it is he who appears among the Mexicans. He shoots Barbarosa's killer and vanishes back into the night. Although Barbarosa is dead, he will continue to live in the young hero who has become his teacher's double. The Mexicans are now convinced that Barbarosa has not and cannot be killed. His legend will endure. The motif of the apprentice hero goes back as far as the *Odyssey*, where Telemachus embarks on a journey of initiation into manhood when he searches for his father. At the close of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus and Telemachus fight side by side against Penelope's suitors.

VI

Western Mythology Today. Invoking the myth of the West has by and large been a matter of course for critics dealing with American history, sociology, literature, or cinema. However, there seems to be a general vagueness about what this myth really consists of or how it manifests itself in American culture. Critics of the Western film in particular often exhibit no more than some inkling about Jungian archetypes and proceed to discuss the Western from that starting point. The preceding examination of four *topoi* of hero mythology has aimed at providing a more precise idea about the

mythological content of the Western by linking the genre directly to ancient hero myths. (This, of course, has by no means exhausted the subject.) The myth of the West can be delineated and interpreted in its artistic context quite as precisely as can other mythologies. Examining the artistic intentions of a Ford or Peckinpah by a discussion of the mythological contents of their works will yield insights as valuable as those gained from some other critical starting points. As a conclusion to this paper, a word about the persistence of the Western myth in post-frontier urban America may round out the present examination of the Western hero.

Most remarkable in this regard is the American obsession with firearms. In some quarters, the attainment of freedom and the pursuit of happiness appear to be inseparable from the possession and use of handguns by private citizens and the resulting absence of gun control. The constitutional right to bear firearms, originating in the American revolution, has frequently been abused; the principle of defending home, family, and self, invoked to legitimize the private possession of weapons, can easily lead to situations in which the gun seems a handy – or indeed the only – problem solver, the only “peacemaker.” The high crime rate in the United States is closely related to the ready availability of handguns and manifests itself in the alarming incidence of urban and intrafamilial violence. The problem is, of course, foremost a psychological and sociological one, but also has a mythical dimension. Subconscious nostalgia for the Westerner and his gunplay in the days when men were still men and when “a man got to do what a man got to do,” i.e. use his gun, can at least to some extent account for the hoarding of arms and ammunition. And the two-dimensional “good guys vs. bad guys” outlook of many a standard and substandard Western film or dime novel appears to have drawn ever-widening circles in American politics since World War II. “Us vs. them” has been the motto during the Cold War and, at least to an equal extent, in the cold war currently waged by Ronald Reagan against the Soviet Union. In the present nuclear age the traditional Western shootout – “High Noon at the OK Corral” – threatens to turn into a global showdown which even the supposedly good side stands little chance to survive, much less win. Reagan, the third prominent Cowboy President of the twentieth century – and the first wholly synthetic one after Rough Rider Theodore Roosevelt and Texas rancher Lyndon Johnson – and his simplistic “Code of the West” mentality, derived at least in part from Hollywood B-movies, are too well-known to need comment here. But it might be appropriate in the context of this paper to consider briefly what the myth of the West had to do with the American involvement in Vietnam.

According to a recent biographer, Lyndon Johnson was brought up steeped in Texas lore of the Old West and especially in the story of the Alamo. "Confronted, during the first days of his presidency, with the prospective fall of South Vietnam, he told the National Security Council, 'Hell, Vietnam is just like the Alamo. . . .'"⁴⁸ Similarly, "Henry Kissinger went into the last stages of the Vietnam peace talks in Paris identifying (ingratiating?) himself to the press as a wary gunfighter coming into town, to clear up the mess created by Lyndon Johnson, who once provoked Charles de Gaulle to say (according to his biographer Pierre Galante): 'He's a cowboy . . . born in the land of the ranch and the Colt, who shot his way up to sheriff.'"⁴⁹ Another link between Vietnam and the American West lies in two John Wayne films of the 1960s. In 1960 Wayne appeared as Colonel Davy Crockett in his own production of *The Alamo*, directed by himself; eight years later his Western persona had metamorphosed into Colonel Mike Kirby in *The Green Berets*, also produced and co-directed by Wayne. This film is nothing but a Western "shoot-em-up" set in Southeast Asia.⁵⁰ (While the Westerner traditionally rides off into the sunset at film's end, *The Green Berets* ends with Kirby and a little Vietnamese boy walking off toward a sun mistakenly setting in the East.) Conversely, two legitimate Westerns were films *à clef* in regard to the war in Vietnam. *The Professionals*, mentioned earlier, warned against U.S. military involvement abroad (as did the historical drama, *The Sand Pebbles*, also 1966), while *Chato's Land* (1972) foreshadowed the defeat of the U.S. armed forces in its story of an Indian *guerrillero* single-handedly destroying a superior force of Americans through endurance, cunning, and intimate knowledge of the terrain.⁵¹

The survival of the Western myth into the atomic age is caustically satirized in *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) by expatriate American director Stanley Kubrick. Major T. J. "King" Kong, played by veteran Western actor Slim Pickens with a heavy Texas accent (shades of Lyndon Johnson), is commander of a B-52 bomber carrying its nuclear load on an "Eastward ho!" mission into the Soviet Union. When things get serious, Major Kong replaces his modern helmet with an old-fashioned Stetson hat ("This is it, boys, toe to toe with the Russkies"); he later rides an H-bomb as if it were some bucking rodeo bronc, waving his hat about and shouting "yiiippeee!" in a scene of mesmerizing exhilaration and terror. When the Major dies "with his boots on," we realize that outer space has become the last frontier and that the nuclear destruction of the world is the ultimate showdown. Here we return full circle to Ronald Reagan.⁵²

The Westerner, then, is the quintessential figure of American

mythology. His trials and tribulations, quests and exploits, achievements and failures, particularly as portrayed in the works of some of the great masters of American cinema, deserve to be placed alongside those of classical Greek and Roman epic and dramatic poets. The Western hero in turn provides the model for subsequent hero figures in literature and cinema. He is the prototype for the lonely urban hero, especially the hard-boiled detective of Hammett, Chandler, and, later, Ross Macdonald. (In a well-known characterization, Chandler elevated his private eye to the level of a questing knight errant: "Down these mean streets a man must go . . .")⁵³ The Westerner is also a close relative of Hemingway's heroes of the Lost Generation. Lastly, we encounter the futuristic hero of science fiction who often looks very familiar indeed. *High Noon* reappears as *Outland* (1981) with, however, little if any artistic significance. And the *Star Wars* films are nothing but a gigantically overblown Republic or Monogram serial. While laser guns have replaced six-shooters, Mad Max in the Australian film, *The Road Warrior* (1981), and Han Solo (note the name!) in *Star Wars* still carry their weapons in gun holsters on their hips. Even if the traditional Western has been proclaimed dead, the Westerner simply dons a new outfit and survives. "Return of the Gunfighter" becomes "Showdown in Outer Space" — the cowboy is "back in the saddle (i.e. spaceship) again." The eternal return of the hero is nowhere seen more clearly or to better effect than in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). At the completion of his journey through space and time — or, "from prehistory to infinity"⁵⁴ — the astronaut metamorphoses into the Star Child, eternal guardian over the universe. A fitting apotheosis indeed.⁵⁵

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NOTES

1. On *aristeiai* and the *Iliad* see Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

2. Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 2.15.4 and 2.16.3; Apollodorus, *Library* 2.4.4.

3. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2nd. ed. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968).

4. The affinity between the Samurai hero and the Westerner can be illustrated by some well-known examples. Akira Kurosawa's films *Rashomon* (1950) and *The Seven Samurai* (1954) have both been remade as Westerns (*The Outrage* [1964] and *The Magnificent Seven* [1960], respectively). Cf. the words of American Western director Sam Peckinpah: "I'd like to be able to make a Western like Kurosawa makes Westerns" (Joel Reisner and Bruce Kane, "Sam Peckinpah," in *Directors in ACTION*, ed. Bob Thomas [Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1973], p. 129; rpt. from *Action* [May-June, 1970]). Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961) served as the basis for Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964; the motif of the man pursuing his own goals by playing two opposing

sides against each other is also present in Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* [1929] and goes back to Carlo Goldoni's *Il Servitore di Due Patroni* [1745]). Kurosawa himself has been influenced by the American Western and by John Ford: when, at the end of *The Seven Samurai*, the Samurai leader states that the farmers and not the warriors are the winners of the preceding battle ("the farmers will live forever with their harvests"), he echoes Ma Joad at the close of Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940): "We're the people that live." On Kurosawa's admiration for Ford see his memoirs, *Something like an Autobiography*, tr. Audie E. Bock (New York: Random House, 1982), p. 12. Curious hybrids between the Samurai film and the Western are the European-made *Red Sun* (1971), co-starring Toshiro Mifune (the star of the Kurosawa films mentioned above and actor *par excellence* of Samurai roles), and the crude 1975 American film, *The Master Gunfighter*, a remake of the Japanese film *Goyokin* (1969). For a comparison between Samurai and Western films see Stuart M. Kaminsky, *American Film Genres: Approaches to a Critical Theory of Popular Film* (1974; rpt. New York: Dell, 1977), pp. 49-61.

5. See especially Martin P. Nilsson, *The Mycenaean Origin of Greek Mythology* (1932; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); for a more recent summary see G. S. Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), pp. 213-19.

6. On the naming of Odysseus see *Odyssey* 19.399-409 (and cf. 1.62, 5.340, 5.423, and 19.275), and W. B. Stanford, *The Ulysses Theme*. (2nd. ed. 1963; rpt. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1978), pp. 10-12.

7. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, vol. 1 (3rd ed.; Munich: Beck, 1967), pp. 378-84; summarized by Kirk (above, note 5), pp. 217-18. Cf. Thucydides' account of the honors which the Amphipolitans accorded Brasidas, the Spartan general who fell in the battle for their city in 422 B.C.: "The people of Amphipolis made an enclosure round his tomb, and for the future they sacrificed to him as to a hero and honoured him by holding games and making annual offerings to him. They gave him the official title of founder of their colony, and they demolished all the buildings of Hagnon, destroying everything that could possibly remind them of the fact that Hagnon had founded the place. It was Brasidas, they considered, who had been their preserver . . ." (*The Peloponnesian War* 5.11.1; tr. Rex Warner [1954; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978], p. 355).

8. See Wayne M. Sarf, *God Bless You, Buffalo Bill: A Layman's Guide to History and the Western Film* (East Brunswick, N.J.: Associated University Presses; London and Toronto: Cornwall Books, 1983), for expositions of the facts concerning famous historical Westerners. Due to his exclusive emphasis on historical truth, the author measures Westerners only by that standard; the films, however, are no "documentaries," despite occasional claims to historical veracity. Sarf rarely evaluates them for their cinematic or artistic qualities and roundly condemns them for their mythopoetic aspects.

9. For the oral tradition of Greek epic and its importance regarding composition and recital see especially Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), and *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, ed. Adam Parry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

10. Prominent examples of unreliable accounts of the lives and times of historical Westerners include the following: Stuart N. Lake, *Wyatt Earp, Frontier Marshal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931); Walter Noble Burns, *The Saga of Billy the Kid* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1926), and Pat Garrett, *The Authentic Life of Billy the Kid* (rpt. Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), actually written by journalist Ash Upson; John Wesley Hardin, *The Life of John Wesley Hardin, as Written by Himself* (rpt. Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961); Burns, *The Robin Hood of El Dorado: The Saga of Joaquín Murieta* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1932) — this outlaw never lived; see Joseph Henry Jackson, *Bad Company* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1949), pp. 3-40 and 331-33, and Sarf (above, note 8), pp. 220-24. For modern and factual accounts of some famous Westerners see, e.g., Kent L. Steckmesser, *The Western Hero in History and Legend* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), on the facts and the legendary developments of Kit Carson, Wild Bill Hickok, Billy the Kid, and George Armstrong Custer; William A. Settle, *Jesse James Was His Name* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1966); Joseph G. Rosa, *They Called Him Wild Bill: The Life and Adventures of James Butler Hickok* (rev. ed. Norman, Okla.: University of

Oklahoma Press, 1974); and Donald B. Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960).

11. John Francis Kreidl, *Nicholas Ray* (Boston: Twayne, 1977), p. 172 (author's emphasis).

12. See Joseph McBride and Michael Wilmington, *John Ford* (1974; rpt. New York: Da Capo, 1975), pp. 175-89, for an analysis of the film.

13. For Ford's attitude toward "print the legend," see Peter Bogdanovich, *John Ford* (rev. ed. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1978), p. 86: "it's good for the country to have heroes to look up to." In the opening sequence of Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), the "real" action is frozen at intervals into grainy black and white stills (in which the credits appear): the legend is printed even before it is told.

14. Ford, who has some of the visually most exquisite films to his credit, both in color and in black and white, has often been faulted for the look of *Liberty Valance*, but its artificiality becomes meaningful when integrated into the film's themes. A similar reproach, equally short-sighted, has been leveled against the obvious rear-projection photography in some of Alfred Hitchcock's films; for an appropriate answer to such charges see Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films* (3rd ed. S. Brunswick: A. S. Barnes, 1977), pp. 134-36 (on Hitchcock's *Marnie*).

15. Heracles' shield is the subject of the short pseudo-Hesiodic epic, *Aspis*. The shield of Achilles is described at *Iliad* 18.478-608; this is the model for the shield of Aeneas (*Aeneid* 8.626-728). After Achilles, the greatest Greek warrior in the Trojan War is Ajax, son of Telamon (*Iliad* 2.768, 13.324, 17.279-80). Ajax is most famous for his shield which is compared to a tower (*Iliad* 7.219 = 11.485 = 17.128); Ajax' little son bears the name Eurysaces ("Broad Shield") after his father's weapon (Sophocles, *Ajax* 574-76). The importance of the shield for the warrior is enhanced by the fact that even Zeus carries one: the Aegis, also a work of Hephaestus (*Iliad* 15.308-10); Zeus creates thunder and lightning by shaking it (*Iliad* 17.595; the Aegis is described at *Iliad* 2.447-49 and 5.738-42).

16. Apollodorus, *Epitome* 3.17; Hyginus, *Fabulae* 101; Propertius 2.1.63-64; Ovid, *Epistulae ex Ponto* 2.2.26. Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 3.3.8, tells us that at his time the spear of Achilles was exhibited as a relic in the temple of Athena at Phaselis in Lycia.

17. In Italian Westerns, the excessive emphasis on the hero's special weapons, sometimes custom-made in a rather ludicrous manner, easily degenerates into a meaningless "gimmick." In Sergio Corbucci's influential *Django* (1966), the hero drags a coffin concealing a machine-gun through the film; the 1969 film *Sabata* not only features a protagonist with a suitcase full of preposterous weaponry, but also boasts a character named "Banjo" who has a Winchester hidden in his musical instrument. The advertisement campaign for the sequel (*The Return of Sabata*, 1972) quite appropriately, if anachronistically, marketed its "hero" as "the James Bond of the West." Actor Lee Van Cleef had prepared for his part as Sabata in both these films by playing a similarly gun-crazy bounty hunter in Sergio Leone's *For a Few Dollars More* (1965).

18. Robert Warshaw, "The Westerner," in his *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre, and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962), pp. 135-54; rpt. in excerpts in *Focus on the Western*, ed. Jack Nachbar (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1974), pp. 45-56. The quotation is from this reprint, p. 49. Warshaw's essay first appeared in *Partisan Review* (March-April, 1954).

19. For scientific theories concerning violence and aggression see, e.g., Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*, tr. Marjorie Kerr Wilson (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966); contra Lorenz are the reviews and essays collected in *Man and Aggression*, ed. Ashley Montagu (2nd ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Friedrich Hacker, *Aggression: Die Brutalisierung der modernen Welt* (1971; rpt. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1973). Cf. also John Fraser, *Violence in the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

20. See Nilsson (above, note 7), pp. 734-40; but cf. Richmond Lattimore, *Story Patterns in Greek Tragedy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), pp. 22-28.

21. *Poetics* 1449b24-28. There is little agreement among scholars about the exact meaning and implications of Aristotle's theory of catharsis, largely because Aristotle does not provide an adequate definition. My outline attempts to summarize the tradi-

tional views. For older scholarship on catharsis see, e.g., S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, 4th ed. (1911; rpt. New York: Dover, 1951), pp. 242-73, and Ingram Bywater, *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), pp. 152-61. The commentary by G. F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (1957; 2nd ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), is extremely controversial; see pp. 224-27 and 423-47 on catharsis. For recent scholarship see, among numerous others, Hellmut Flashar, "Die medizinischen Grundlagen der Lehre von der Wirkung der Dichtung in der griechischen Poetik," *Hermes*, 84 (1956), 12-48; D. W. Lucas, *Aristotle: Poetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), pp. 273-90; Ada B. Neschke, *Die Poetik des Aristoteles*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1980), pp. 115-22; and Werner Söffing, *Deskriptive und normative Bestimmungen in der Poetik des Aristoteles* (Beihefte zu *Poetica* 15; Amsterdam: Grüner, 1981), pp. 57-65. All of the last-mentioned contain bibliographical references to additional work on the subject. Cf. also René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, (3rd ed. New York and London: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963; rpt. 1977), p. 36.

22. Cf. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); see especially pp. 286-97.

23. In the fall of 1948, Peckinpah enrolled as a drama major at the University of Southern California and graduated with a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1954. His then wife has pointed to Peckinpah's interest in Greek philosophy, drama, and particularly Aristotle's *Poetics*; she is quoted in Paul Seydor, *Peckinpah: The Western Films* (Urbana, Ill., Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press, 1980), pp. 255-56; see also *ibid.*, pp. 107-8.

24. The quotation, originally published in *Rolling Stone* magazine, is taken from Max Evans, *Sam Peckinpah: Master of Violence* (Vermillion, S.D.: Dakota Press, 1972), p. 81 (I have corrected the printing error, "sick, exultation").

25. For an extensive analysis of *The Wild Bunch* see Seydor (above, note 23), pp. 84-139; see *ibid.*, pp. 78-80 and 115-19 on the use and meaning of the film's violence, especially pp. 115-18 on Peckinpah's use of slow-motion cinematography. About the film's cathartic effect upon himself, Peckinpah has stated: "I'm exhausted when I see it, I'm literally exhausted for hours . . ." (Seydor, p. 107; first quoted in Stephen Farber, "Peckinpah's Return," *Film Quarterly*, 23 [1969], 11).

26. Quoted in Philip French, *Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973), p. 114. See also the chapter on "The Masculine Principle in American Art and Experience" in Seydor, pp. 229-49.

27. For a careful interpretation of *Stagecoach* see McBride and Wilmington (above, note 12), pp. 53-62. The film is loosely based on Maupassant's "Boule de Suif" (Ford in Bogdanovich [above, note 12], p. 69).

28. The quotations are from French (above, note 26), p. 104, and John Baxter, *The Cinema of John Ford* (London: A. Zwemmer, and New York: A. S. Barnes, 1971), p. 81. On the significance of Monument Valley for Ford's Westerns see Baxter, pp. 69-71; McBride and Wilmington, pp. 36-37; and J. A. Place, *The Western Films of John Ford* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1974), pp. 36-37 and 171.

29. Boetticher: *Seven Men from Now* (1956), *Comanche Station* (1960), and, especially, *Ride Lonesome* (1959); Boetticher's Westerns are analyzed by Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, Sam Peckinpah: Studies of Authorship Within the Western* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), pp. 89-130. Mann: *Winchester 73* (1950), *Bend of the River* (1952), *The Far Country* (1954), *The Man from Laramie* (1955), and, especially, *The Naked Spur* (1952; a journey into relentlessly increasing violence, obsession, and despair resulting in the hero's emotional and physical exhaustion [see Kitses, pp. 33-46, on the moral dimensions of the Mann hero, and *ibid.*, pp. 66-72, on the significance of landscape in Mann's films]) and *Man of the West* (1958), in which a violent past catches up with the aging and now civilized hero; see French (above, note 26), pp. 108-9. The two films last mentioned are analyzed in detail by Jeanine Basinger, *Anthony Mann* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), pp. 111-16 and 144-57, respectively.

30. French, p. 110.

31. On this film see Seydor (above, note 23), pp. 43-70.

32. The most thorough analysis of *Red River* is by Gerald Mast, *Howard Hawks: Storyteller* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 297-346.

33. The film is analyzed in detail by McBride and Wilmington (above, note 12), pp. 147-63; they also point out the thematic similarities between Ethan Edwards and Tom Dunson (pp. 153-54). Both parts are played by John Wayne.

34. Film critic Andrew Sarris on this highly emotional moment: "a man picks up a girl in his arms and is miraculously delivered of all the racist, revenge-seeking furies that have seared his soul" (*The John Ford Movie Mystery* [London: Secker & Warburg, 1976], p. 173). The moment is one of peripety and *anagnorisis* within the hero.

35. For the close connections between Ancient Near Eastern and Greek mythologies see, e.g., Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Cambridge, Berkeley, and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), and *The Nature of Greek Myths* (above, note 5). For the Near Eastern myths see, e.g., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard (3rd ed. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology: A Study of Spiritual and Literary Achievement in the Third Millennium B.C.* (rev. ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1961). The similarities between the Gilgamesh epic and the Homeric poems are traced by Gerald K. Gresseth, "The Gilgamesh Epic and Homer," *Classical Journal*, 70 (1975), 1-18.

36. Kirk, *Nature of Greek Myths*, pp. 190-93.

37. The mythical apotheosis of Heracles finds its counterpart in the deifications accorded to humans after death or even during their lifetime. The apotheosis of kings in the Ancient Near East can be traced back to the third millennium B.C.; see, e.g., Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Interpretation of Society and Nature* (1948; rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), and Cyril John Gadd, *Ideas of Divine Rule in the Ancient East* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948).

The earliest examples of a human's apotheosis in Greek myth are found in the Homeric epics: Tithonus (*Iliad* 11.1, *Odyssey* 5.1), Ganymede (*Iliad* 20.232-35), Ino (*Odyssey* 5.333-35). The concept of hero cults is also important in this respect; see Kirk, *Nature of Greek Myths* (above, note 5), pp. 216-19 and *passim*, and Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (above, note 1), pp. 69-210 and *passim*.

Lycurgus, while still alive, was hailed as a god by the Delphic oracle (Herodotus 1.65); similarly, the Spartan Lysander was honored by altars erected to him after he defeated the Athenian fleet at Aegospotami in 405 B.C., thereby deciding the outcome of the Peloponnesian War (Duris, the Greek historian, in *Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, ed. Felix Jacoby, vol. 2A [Berlin: Weidmann, 1926], p. 154 no. 71). On the apotheosis of Philip II of Macedon see Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 5.20.10, and Diodorus Siculus 16.95.1; his son Alexander was greeted as a son of Zeus-Ammon by the priest of the god's oracle (Arrian, *Anabasis* 3.3.4; Diodorus Siculus 17.49-51; Strabo 17.1.43; Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 27-28); on this see William Woodthorpe Tarn, *Alexander the Great*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), pp. 347-74, and F. W. Walbank, *The Hellenistic World* (1981; rpt. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 41-43. On the ruler cults of Hellenistic kings see *ibid.*, pp. 212-18. At Rome, an early example of such cults is Titus Flamininus; cf. Plutarch, *Life of Titus* 16. See also Michael Crawford, *The Roman Republic* (1978; rpt. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 177-79. The posthumous deification of Julius Caesar leads to the apotheoses of Roman emperors; see Lily Ross Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor* (Middletown, Conn.: American Philological Association, 1931). The apotheosis of Claudius is satirized in Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* ("Pumpkinification").

38. Apollodorus, *Library* 3.13.6; Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica* 4.869-72.

39. Much the same can be said for such figures of popular culture as Rudolph Valentino, James Dean, and Marilyn Monroe. On a more significant level, consider the cases of Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, or Martin Luther King (cf. Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* 6.55.4 on the posthumous fate of Hipparchus). Cf. also the curious case of Juan Perón, on which see Robert Cox, "The Second Death of Perón?" *The New York Review of Books* (December 8, 1983), 18-22. For the religious overtones in the death

of the Westerner cf., e.g., the title of the book by Vine Deloria, jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

40. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (above, note 1).

41. On this see Nagy, pp. 175-76 and 184-85.

42. Peckinpah's statements are from Ernest Callenbach, "A Conversation with Sam Peckinpah," *Film Quarterly*, 17, no. 2 (Winter 1963-64), 8 (quoted from Seydor, p. 237), and from an interview in *Film World* (1970), p. 89, quoted from Seydor, p. 239.

43. Seydor, pp. 202-4; Garner Simmons, *Peckinpah: A Portrait in Montage* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), pp. 183-84.

44. A still photograph of this scene is found in Place (above, note 28), p. 29. Biblical overtones in the Western are examined by Michael T. Marsden, "Savior in the Saddle: The Sagebrush Testament," in *Focus on the Western* (above, note 18), pp. 93-100.

45. On *High Plains Drifter* and *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* see William Park, "The Losing of the West," *The Velvet Light Trap*, 12 (1974), 5.

46. Raymond W. Thorp and Robert Bunker, *Crow Killer: The Saga of Liver-Eating Johnson* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1958), which, together with Vardis Fisher's novel, *Mountain Man* (New York: Morrow, 1965), served as the basis for the film's screenplay. On the film see Patricia Erens, "Jeremiah Johnson: The Mountain Man as Modern Hero," *The Velvet Light Trap*, 12 (1974), 37-39.

47. Throughout the film the narrator chants, rather than speaks, to simple musical accompaniment. This is a remarkable, although probably wholly accidental, parallel to the way in which archaic Greek epic was recited: in a sing-song with accompaniment on the lyre; cf. the rhapsode Demodocus, mentioned earlier, in the *Odyssey*.

48. Ronnie Dugger, *The Politician: The Life and Times of Lyndon Johnson — The Drive for Power, from the Frontier to Master of the Senate* (New York and London: Norton, 1982); the quotation is from p. 32. Dugger, pp. 25-46, examines Johnson's Western heritage and its influence on his politics; see especially pp. 28-35 ("From the Alamo to Khe San") and 35-42 ("Indians and Communists").

49. French (above, note 26), p. 104; and see Nachbar, "Introduction" to *Focus on the Western* (above, note 18), pp. 2-3.

50. See Nachbar, p. 2. Wayne had played the parts of Captain Kirby York and Colonel Kirby Yorke [sic] in two Ford Westerns (*Fort Apache* [on which see above], *Rio Grande* [1950]). The similarities between his rank and name in *The Green Berets* with those in Ford's Westerns are at least noteworthy. No comparison between the Ford films and *The Green Berets* on artistic grounds is implied.

51. The Western has on several occasions made political statements: *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943), based on Walter van Tilburg-Clark's novel, examines the perils of fascism at home while America was fighting fascists abroad; see the author's afterword to the novel, quoted in Jenni Calder, *There Must Be a Lone Ranger* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974), p. 122. *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here* (1969), written and directed by Abraham Polonsky, one of the Hollywood Ten, is a recollection of McCarthyism, just as *High Noon* (1952) also consciously reflects the politics of its time. *Soldier Blue* (1970), however questionable as cinematic art, is a reaction to My Lai and, on a commercial level, to *The Wild Bunch*. On the subject in general see John H. Lenihan, *Showdown: Confronting Modern America in the Western Film* (Urbana, Ill., Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

52. In analogy to Samuel Colt's "Peacemaker," Reagan's MX missile system has been christened "Peacekeeper," and his proposed space-descent system of nuclear weapons is commonly referred to as "Star Wars." Cf. the report by The Union of Concerned Scientists on "Space-Based Missile Defense," rpt. in excerpts as "Reagan's Star Wars," *The New York Review of Books* (April 26, 1984), 47-52.

53. Cf. Philip Durham, *Down These Mean Streets a Man Must Go* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1963).

54. Alexander Walker, *Stanley Kubrick Directs* (expanded ed. New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p. 263; the film is analyzed in detail *ibid.*, pp. 241-67. See also the analyses in Thomas Allen Nelson, *Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist's Maze* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp. 99-132, and in Michel Ciment, *Kubrick*, tr. Gilbert Adair (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1983), pp. 126-34.

55. I am indebted to Frederick Ahl and William Kennedy for their joint invitation to read an earlier version of this paper at Cornell University in April, 1984.