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# The New Deal Cowboy: Gene Autry and the Antimodern Resolution

Lynette Tan

Traditional film scholarship has tended to concentrate on the products and industrial context of the major studios, offering less detailed accounts of the histories of low-budget producers. This marginalisation of the independent and minor studios in the majority of histories of the film industry corresponds to an impetus of viewing history as a linear process – neglecting areas that pose questions of disruption, displacement and overdetermination. Accounts of history that incorporate such questions have been termed by Jean-Louis Comolli as 'materialist'.<sup>1</sup> Comolli pits materialist historical accounts against linear histories, the latter further developed by Thompson and Bordwell into a taxonomy of linear historical patterns: evolutionary, teleological and seriality.<sup>2</sup> For example, according to Paul Seale the teleological movement leads historians to equate marginal economic power with marginal historical status, resulting in an exaggeration of the limitations of studios other than the majors. Seale observes that these limitations are implicit in the language of critics: Douglas Gomery notes that where 90 per cent of the available profits were made by the majors in the studio era, others 'scrambled' for the remainder.<sup>3</sup> He also contends that such language 'translates the oligopolists' tendency toward stability into historical stasis, implicitly denying that the flux on the periphery might have effects on the dominant forces in the industry'.<sup>4</sup>

This essay attempts, among other things, to correct the historical bias towards the major studios. It seeks to demonstrate that the products of the minor producers did have repercussions on the decision making of their usually dominant counterparts, and were instrumental in the restoration of the frontier myth in the popular imagination. Such an argument is especially pertinent to the 1930s, and

with regard to a discussion about the production and reception of the Western genre in that period. Though for the most part Seale focuses on the Poverty Row Studios, he does make the comment that what is lacking in books taking the 'B' movie as their explicit subject is an attention to films that follow less canonic lines. Thus he praises the accomplished economic analysis of the 'B' film and low budget production in Paul Kerr's 'Out of What Past: Notes on the B Film Noir', but objects to his preference for the more 'stylistically quirky' products of Edgar G. Ulmer and Val Lewton.<sup>5</sup> Instead, Seale advocates research on the movies of Joseph Kane, with his copious record of Westerns produced for Republic.<sup>6</sup> Kane's work is also noticeably absent from Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn's *Kings of the Bs: Working Within the Hollywood System*. The Westerns produced by Joseph Kane and starring Gene Autry will be utilised to illustrate the argument of this paper.<sup>7</sup>

The choice of Gene Autry stems from his appropriation of the Cowboy persona and frontier values as answers to the heightened crisis of the Depression years. In providing those answers Autry's Westerns reinvent frontier mythology in a new site outside the boundaries of the 'Old' West. In replacing the 'Old' West for a 'New' West setting, the Western genre acquires a new sense of mythological resonance that meets the requirements pertaining to cultural verisimilitude in the 1930s. The next section

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establishes the industrial context of Republic Studios and the Double Bill.

### **The B Studio and The Western**

In 1928, *Variety* noted that Paramount, Universal, First National, Fox, FBO, and Pathé (major companies and larger independents) were the chief producers of Westerns.<sup>8</sup> Such formidable competition was enough reason for the smaller independents to avoid the genre. In a review of 1928 entitled 'Pictures' Most Sensational Year,' however, *Variety* claimed that the Western genre was at its end:

#### PASSING OF THE WESTERNS

Recalling the past year, outside of the sound phase, a subject which must be narrated by itself, 1928 began making picture history in mid-January when it signalled the passing of westerns and their familiar shooty-up thesis. If the theory of cycles proves true, it will be seven years before these wild riding and gun play stories feel the call of revival. The present tenor of the time reveals nothing to refute the edict that the western has passed, at least, for this year.<sup>9</sup>

While the majors continued to make Westerns on a smaller scale, the decrease in production gave Poverty Row producers the opportunity to meet the ongoing demand for the Western product. This continued demand in the face of a shrinking supply was apparent in February 1929 when *Variety* claimed: 'Although the bottom has fallen out of Westerns it appears that there is still enough of a demand for the cowboy operas and suddenly almost no supply to meet the market.'<sup>10</sup> The request for more Westerns specifically arose from small town audiences, and was mainly for low-budget programmers and serials.<sup>11</sup> In September of the same year, *Variety* recorded the conclusions reached by a mass meeting of Texas Motion Picture Theatre Owners, that while the small towns of Texas 'crave at least one good Western a week' only one major producer had Westerns to offer for the coming season.<sup>12</sup> By October 1929 the majors were booking the Westerns of the independents for their own exhibition, and by April 1930 when Universal stopped its production of the genre, Poverty Row producers had mastered the problem of sound expenses.

When the National Recovery Administration prevented the major studios from banning the double bill in 1934, this further increased the demand for

the low-budget Western. The origin of the double feature can be traced back to 1927, where its prevalence was noted in *The Film Yearbook 1928*.<sup>13</sup> The greatest impact, however, appears to have occurred in 1935 when double billing became standard practice on a nation-wide basis. In this year all the majors opened B units that were deliberately calculated to satisfy the exhibitor demand cheaply, via low-cost films intended for the second half of double bills. Major studio 'B's had budgets that ranged from \$30,000 to \$300,000, and were made on schedules that averaged three weeks, by studios including Warners, Fox, MGM, Universal, Columbia and Paramount.<sup>14</sup> However, this strategy failed to meet the demand for the low-budget film, especially during the 1934–1936 seasons, when the exhibitor demand for 'B' movies to fill double bills and Saturday matinees escalated. This resulted in a proliferation of the products of various smaller companies, but by 1937 increased production of the 'B' films had resulted in a glut that together with the dominance of the major studio 'B's, led marginal companies to shut down. Another outcome in response to threatened closure was the merger of minor studios.<sup>15</sup> A significant step towards this coming consolidation was an amalgamation of the independent front that occurred in March 1935, which led to the birth of Republic Pictures.

Republic Pictures belonged to the better category of Poverty Row studios, distinguished from the quickies of producers like the Weiss Brothers by their longer shooting schedules and bigger budgets but lacking the quality and resources of the majors. Other studios in that category included Monogram, Grand National, Mascot, Tiffany, Ambassador-Conn, Chesterfield, Invincible, Liberty, Majestic, Sono Art, Educational and World-Wide. Their budgets seldom went beyond \$100,000, but the quality of their products nearly approximated the 'B's of the majors. Republic Pictures grew out of Monogram and Mascot, a union that would exploit Monogram's national distribution organisation of exchanges to 39 cities, and Mascot's studio that had specialised firstly in serials and then features in 1933. Herbert J. Yates offered to join forces with Nat Levine, the founder of Mascot, in a move that guaranteed an improvement in quantity and quality: optimum usage of Mascot's studio and Monogram's controlled distribution.<sup>16</sup> Republic thus began in a strong financial position that enabled the production of higher-grade 'B' movies.



**Fig. 1.** In the updated iconography of Gene Autry's westerns, radio broadcasting, airplanes, and heavy trucks signal the impact of modern times on frontier society. [All illustrations courtesy of Jerry Ohlinger's.]

According to McCarthy and Flynn, Republic epitomised the classical Hollywood 'B' studio, being the largest and most stable organisation, releasing 66 serials within 22 years.<sup>17</sup> Republic's 'B' Westerns, many directed by Joseph Kane, are of particular interest due to their variation of the Western formula,

genre and frontier mythology – in their utilisation of a singing protagonist (Gene Autry), their modern setting (the New West), and the corresponding acclamation of frontier values in a space dislocated from the frontier in terms of distance and time. Though most 'B' Westerns were aimed at minor

houses attracting Saturday matinee and juvenile audiences, especially in the small town and rural markets, Republic's higher-grade 'B' Westerns occasionally premiered at theatres on Hollywood Boulevard, finding an audience beyond the rural and small town boundary. Republic's 'B' Westerns were made on modest budgets, but its profits were not insignificant: Autry's first starring vehicle *Tumbling Tumbleweeds* (1935) cost \$18,000 to make, but ultimately grossed over \$1 million.<sup>18</sup> The following attempts to derive an understanding of the ideological function of the singing Western with a resource base of seven Autry Westerns, chosen for their thematic concerns of industrialisation and its effects. An appropriate point to begin with relates to the reconstruction of frontier mythology as a response not to Indian hostility but to advances in technology, a process relevant to the landscape of these films – the New West.

### **The New West and the Frontier Myth**

In his analysis of *Witness*, Wayne J. McMullen compares and contrasts films set in the Old West and the New West:

A common theme in both the Old West and the New West is a protagonist hero's attempts to protect a people from the evil forces against which they are largely defenseless. Furthermore, both the New West and the Old West exist in a dominatable [sic], exploitable, land-based sphere that calls for the hero to direct his energies outwardly.

Unlike the Old West, however, the inhabitants of the New West attempt to keep the past alive in the present. The imperiled land in the New West is an enclave of past ways of living within a technologically advanced present-day society. Whereas in the Old West the land was to be conquered, the land in the New West now offers a refuge for a society tired of the ills wrought by technology. In the scenic change from Old West to the New West, the action shifts from conquest to preservation. Within this preserve, the New West offers a retreat from the complexities of modern living to a simpler way of being.<sup>19</sup>

McMullen does not offer any explicit definitions for the 'Old' West mentioned in the above, only a vague statement that 'The physical reality of the

American West...has been its closing as a frontier', with the New West occurring after the 'demise of the Old West'. It is interesting that historical definitions of the 'Old' American West and the 'Old' West of the popular imagination are not confined within similar time and spatial boundaries. Richard White's definition of the historical American West is the period of American expansion beginning with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, continuing through the acquisition of Texas, the Oregon Territory and the Mexican Cession in the 1840s, ending with the 1853 Gadsden Purchase of the lands between the Gila River and the present Mexican boundary.<sup>20</sup> A definition of the Old West from the perspective of popular culture, derived from Cawelti in *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, is more graphic but less specific:

The symbolic landscape of the western formula is a field of action that centers upon the point of encounter between civilisation and wilderness, East and West, settled society and lawless openness. The frontier settlement or group is a point both in space and time. Geographically, it represents a group of civilisers or pioneers on the edge of the wilderness, tenuously linked to the civilised society behind them in the East by the thinnest lines of communication. These links are constantly in danger of being cut by the savages – Indians or outlaws – who roam the wilderness. Historically, the western represents a moment when the forces of civilisation and wilderness life are in balance, the epic moment at which the old life and the new confront each other and individual actions may tip the balance one way or another, thus shaping the future history of the whole settlement.<sup>21</sup>

Will Wright's description of the Western's American West provides some dates for this historical 'moment':

The crucial period of settlement in which most Westerns take place lasted only about thirty years, from 1860 to 1890. In 1861 the Indian wars began as the Cheyenne found the Colorado gold miners invading their lands, and in 1862 the Homestead Act was passed. By 1890 all the American Indians had been either exterminated or placed in reservations; in 1889 the last unoccupied region in the West, the Oklahoma territory, was opened to homesteaders

with a massive land rush. Between these events, the major Indian wars were fought, and cattle empires blossomed and withered. The great Texas cattle drives to the Kansas cow towns, the inspiration for much of the Western myth, lasted only from 1866–1885. Even if we include the period of the California gold rush and the first wagon trains to Oregon, the entire period of western settlement lasted less than fifty years.<sup>22</sup>

The New West of the Western, then, is a historical period occurring after 1889 where all the regions in the West have been occupied (by settlers other than the Native American Indians), and also a state of mind, where the balance of old and new is not one between the wilderness and civilisation, but between rural civilisation and the encroachment of technology.

In the Autry Westerns, it is the state of mind – the ‘symbolic’ West – that is instrumental. The response to technology that features strongly in his Westerns is coupled with the problems of the 1930s: Brian Taves observes that the key social theme of the ‘B’ Western was the loss of farms to foreclosure during economic hard times.<sup>23</sup> In Autry’s New West, the threat of foreclosure stems from a naïveté that places the rural farmers at a disadvantage in their attempts at modernisation (via mechanisation).

Technology and the values of urban civilisation, sub-categories of the Modern, are pitted against the values of the frontier (qualities associated with the cowboy heroes of the Old West). A clear and frequent example of this juxtaposition is the use of the automobile and tractor as replacements for the horse. The balance of Old and New in Autry’s Westerns is thus more complex than the urban and rural; it is the confrontation between the urban and frontier protagonist in a move to protect the members of rural civilisation. Gene Autry and his group are always shown to be distinct from rural civilisation – an obvious marker of this is in their contempt for dairy cows (in the Westerns discussed the remark is twice made that those who tend to such cows are ‘playing milkmaid’). They are never seen in a domestic abode but are always on the move, some of the time, as in *The Old Barn Dance* (1938), necessitated by their trading of horses from town to town. All the seven Westerns discussed here feature this confrontation of urban and frontier values. Three of them – *The Old Corral* (1936), *Public Cowboy No. 1* (1937), and *Colorado*

*Sunset* (1939) – however, are also interesting for their use of the gangster protagonist as an embodiment of urban values. Gene Autry, his sidekick Frog Millhouse (Smiley Burnette) and the cowboys that ride with them uphold frontier values that in the confrontation equate with the antimodern. This confrontation is the means via which values of frontier mythology are asserted. Discourses of the frontier also have a firm presence in the musical numbers, where the song narratives evoke nostalgia for the Old West. McMullen’s description of the New West as a ‘land-based sphere that calls for the hero to direct his energies outwardly’ would suggest the reinstatement of outward expansion, a central tenet of the Frontier Myth.

### Gangsters in the New West

In *Public Cowboy No. 1* (a title that immediately brings Al Capone to mind) Autry has to contend with cattle rustlers who use refrigerator trucks, planes and two-way radios to purloin, slaughter, and send cattle off to market in a quick operation. The cattle rustlers are linked to the urban and modern not only via the tools of their trade but also the company to which they belong: the ‘Chicago and Western Packing Co.’ The first sequence of the film has these cattle rustlers carrying out their unlawful activities in Box Canyon, stealing a herd of cattle and murdering an innocent witness in the process. Gene Autry, Frog and their companions (on horseback) arrive on the scene and fail to catch up with the refrigerator trucks – actualising the rustler’s claim that their ‘modern method of cattle ranching sure is making simpletons out of these ranchers’. This is followed by a montage of newspaper headlines that further undermine the values that were upheld in the Old West (relating to the superiority of the horse and cowboy) in a style reminiscent of the Gangster film: ‘Reign of Terror Sweeps Prairie County’, ‘Sheriff Doniphon no match for Modern Rustlers’. The language in later scenes also alludes to the crime film – when one of the rustlers shoots the Sheriff he describes it as having ‘plugged him’, and when he is later captured and found murdered in jail, Autry remarks that he was ‘killed by someone who was afraid he would talk’. The second set of headlines publicises the killing, and the demands for the Sheriff’s resignation. The headlines question the capabilities of Sheriff Doniphon (played by William Farnum, who would be recognised by audiences of the Western as a representative of the Old West) who admits that an ‘old fashioned sheriff’

**Fig. 2.** Autry takes the microphone to welcome eastern detective Eustace P. Quackenbush (James C. Morton), while newspaper editor Helen Morgan (Ann Rutherford) looks on with mixed emotions. *Public Cowboy No. 1* (Republic, 1937).



and 'a new fashioned rustler' can only mean that 'enforcing the law belongs to the past'. His sentiments are echoed by Autry, who acknowledges the need for modern equipment to get results, noting the obvious imbalance of 'airplane and truck versus horse and buggy'. The rest of the film proceeds to dispel this negativism and to prove the cowboy and his horse's ascendancy over the forces of modernity. This is achieved in two ways, through spectacle, and through the narrative of the songs.

The replacement for the Sheriff is a clear (to exaggerated proportions) representative of modernity and the urban – a criminal expert from the East, specialising in 'Scientific Criminology', named 'Quackenbush' and with a foreboding reputation of being 'bad news for bad men'. His appearance in the town is applauded, but this is immediately followed by Frog's rendition of 'The Defective Detective from Brooklyn', a song that humorously subverts Quackenbush's authority (or what remains of the authority of anyone in possession of such a name). His Eastern origins are also ridiculed when Frog

appears in a Charlie Chan disguise for part of the song. Frog's performance is immediately followed by Autry's rendition of 'Old Buckaroo, Goodbye', which, in contrast, is sung in a sombre mode. Autry's song is in honour of the Sheriff, in a sentimental style that celebrates the Sheriff's efforts at upholding the law, but now being 'weary and tired', he is asked to 'dream of the days on the prairie', and to 'dream of a new heavenly reign'. The Old West that intrudes onto the new landscape does so through the vehicle of dream, a motif that will recur to a great extent in most of the song narratives. The Old West of Autry's Westerns is an idealised and mythical dreamscape, often perceived as superior to a New West that has been tainted due to the changes wrought by industrialisation. The juxtaposition of the two songs and their differing effects curbs any support for the modern that may have surfaced with the anticipation that the lawful agents of modernity will effectively deal with the cattle rustlers. Any remaining faith in the agents of modernity is extinguished in the climax of the film, in the scene where the camera focuses on

the mopeds and motorbikes of the police stuck in the mud, while Autry and his cowboys capture the rustlers on horseback.

The gangster makes a more definitive presence in *The Old Corral*, in the person and name of Mike Scarlotti. The film begins when Scarlotti murders Tony Pearl, a nightclub owner in gang-infested Chicago. The murder is witnessed by Eleanor Spenser (a blues singer), who escapes to the West for safety. The plot is an exemplification of the New West as a 'refuge for a society tired of the ills wrought by technology'. The bus that Eleanor travels on encounters Autry and company on a horse-drawn buggy, and in a scene that is repeated in the other 'B' Westerns, the unfamiliar sounding of the bus's horn frightens the horses and they veer off into a fence. The bus is later ambushed by some men on horseback (the O'Keefe boys), though any sense of real danger or evil is dispelled by a middle-aged passenger who expresses her enjoyment at this 'real Wild West hold-up' and her sincere request for their autographs (which is light-heartedly denied). The 'highway robbers' are also subject to less condemnation because of their ability to sing well, and their earnest attempts to get on the radio. This is followed by a sequence where the camera is in long shot and we see the O'Keefe boys riding along the grassy plains, and hear them singing 'Down Along the Sleepy Rio Grande'.

Meanwhile the plot sets out to establish its definition and focus of criminality – Martin Simms, a nightclub owner, notices Eleanor's picture in a newspaper and tries to get her to perform in the 'Blue Moon'. His ulterior motive is to contact Scarlotti and to negotiate a ransom, but to gain her trust Simms lies to Eleanor that he will protect her from the gangster. The sequence that occurs prior to this liaison declares the ascendancy of a rural lifestyle in subverting the criticism of rustic indolence in comparison with urban industriousness: Simms's attempts to get his automobile filled at a petrol station are frustrated by the attendants, who are playing a game of chess. Ignoring the desperate horns of the vehicle outside, they concentrate on a game in which the execution of a single move requires the length of a whole day. When they finally emerge, they register their contempt for the impatience of the 'damn city boys' who in their opinion are always getting lost.

What follows at the Blue Moon nightclub is a self-reflexive analysis and commentary about the popularity of Autry's Westerns, and the nature of his

audience: Eleanor's operatic rendition of 'With all My Heart I Long For You' fails to procure any esteem from her audience, who are clearly of a rural, working-class origin. Conversely, they think that the quality of her singing is 'pretty bad'. Autry comes to her rescue and assures her of her 'beautiful voice', explaining that her poor reception lies with her audience, who are 'not educated to that type of music'. Autry and Eleanor then sing 'In the Heart of the West' in duet, and their performance is received with a rousing applause. The lyrics of the song, as with 'Old Buckaroo, Goodbye' in *Public Cowboy No. 1*, present an idealised image of the Old West and its inevitable link to dreaming: it is 'in the heart of the West' that 'the best' kind of happiness is to be found, where 'dreams come true' and where that 'something you've always longed for' can finally be realised.

'Silent Trails', the song performed by the O'Keefe boys is more like 'Old Buckaroo, Goodbye' in its inherent nostalgia for the passing of the Old West. The trails are personified in this song, lonely and 'pining for the return of the pioneers, and for the empire still a'burning' with the cowboys and the spirits of 'the redskins'.

The nostalgia continues with Autry's singing of 'Old Pinto'. Concurrent to this idealisation of and nostalgia for the Old West is a deprecation of urban values – Simms finally makes contact with Scarlotti and the latter betrays any notion of fair dealing (in a manner more extreme than Simms's duplicity with Eleanor), offering only to spare Simms's life in exchange for information about her whereabouts. In a scene that almost mirrors the ending of *Public Cowboy No. 1*, *The Old Corral* reaches its climax with a shot that proclaims the superiority of horse and cattle over their mechanised counterparts – Autry and the O'Keefe boys pursue the gangsters (in their automobiles) on horseback, and utilise the ingenious scheme of raising a cattle stampede to disable the latter.

The shot that parallels the motorbikes caught in the mud is one of an empty automobile, unable to function because of its being surrounded by cattle. It is significant that the O'Keefe boys are exonerated from any form of disapprobation, such that the image of the cowboy is not sullied – Autry explains to Frog that the boys are vindicated on three counts, firstly because they 'returned the loot', secondly because they 'saved Eleanor from Scarlotti', and lastly (here Autry's commercial agenda surfaces

more directly) because they 'pulled the holdup to get publicity' for a radio job. The definition of evil in this moral drama is placed squarely on Scarlotti and his aides, representatives of modernity, urbanisation and technology.

The gangster motif recurs in *Colorado Sunset*, where milk is substituted for beer in Autry's exposing of a protection racket. This later film is also marked by an explicit increase in production values – the cast boasts the addition of Patsy Montana and the CBS KMBC Texas Rangers, and the opening sequence presents sophisticated camera techniques that make fluid transitions between close-ups of each of the cowboys as they sing their solo pieces on horseback, and panning backwards to a long shot when the group sings in unison. The rationale that is constructed for Autry's participation in the dairy business is tenuous, but not entirely inconceivable – Frog thinks that he has bought (with the pooled financial resources of Autry, a group of cowboys, and himself) a cattle ranch, but it turns out to be a herd of dairy cows. An expression of disgust is clear in their reaction to this turn of events, and to the notion that they might soon be 'playing nursemaid to some cows'. The frequent distinction between cattle ranching and dairy farming is important, associating Autry and his group with a notion of masculinity that excludes the domestic, overcompensating to the extreme that even the animals they deal with cannot be female. The preference (almost a requisite) for ranching and not farming also establishes a separation from civilisation with its attendant sense of rootedness, raising the function of cattle in Autry's Westerns to a level that is more complex than is suggested by Jane Tompkins:

Economically cattle are the basis of the way of life that Westerns represent, but if anything they are even more invisible than horses are, in the sense of not being seen for themselves, or as they would see themselves. With few exceptions (usually scenes of branding or rescuing of calves), they are seen only from the viewpoint of their utility for humans; as factors in an economic scheme, as physical obstacles to be contended with in an heroic undertaking, or as the contested prize in an economic struggle.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to their crucial role in defining the cowboy's masculinity, cattle in Autry's Westerns also possess a utility that exists outside of a mere eco-

nomie scheme – the capture of Scarlotti and his gang in *The Old Corral*, for example, placed the animals as unwitting active agents in the fight between good and evil. Tompkins's pedagogical statement that in Westerns 'cattle exist, from a human point of view, in order to die and become meat, and it's hard for people to look at that fact very closely' is countered in the song 'Poor Little Dogie'. In this song Autry looks reasonably closely (albeit in a whimsical manner – enabling to a large extent Tompkins's curious request for the cattle's perspective, and also alleviating the somber nature of her pronouncements on the topic) at the fact that cattle exist not just in order to become meat, but a gourmet dish.

Autry sings of how 'modern inventions' are changing the lives of cattle and causing remorse; the cattle are robbed of the happiness and contentment that came from roaming on the range and grazing on 'the grain of the land'. Instead their lives are 'a wreck' – they are artificially fed 'out of a can' and put on 'a diet' of 'tenderised hay' and 'vitamin A'. The implication at the end is that in spite of the crippling domestication that technology is forcing on to the animals, they will ultimately still attain the goal of ending up as robust and manly fare: 'porterhouse steak' to be exact.

The above lyrics are marked by a strong nostalgia that disparages modern methods (the 'modern inventions') of rearing cattle in causing the animals' discomfort. This function of nostalgia in relation to cattle, and more particularly horses, is also noted by Tompkins: '... horses fulfill a longing for a different *kind* of existence. Antimodern, antiurban, and antitechnological, they stand for an existence without cars and telephones and electricity.'<sup>25</sup> 'Poor little Dogie' is preceded by Patsy Montana's energetic rendition of 'I want to be a Cowboy's Sweetheart' (a thousand miles from the city life), which has lyrics reminiscent of the more sentimentally performed 'In the Heart of the West'.

Montana sings of the life that she loves best – riding over the plains, the desert, and the great divide, and hearing 'coyotes howling' while in the background 'the sun sinks in the West'.

As with all of the songs discussed previously, 'I want to be a Cowboy's Sweetheart' consolidates a position that idealises the past of the Old West.

The purchase of the dairy cows proves, however, to be irreversible, and the acquisition of a dairy business leads Autry and his group into an entanglement with Dr. Rodney Blair's 'protective association'.

Dr. Blair poses as a veterinary for the dairy association and surreptitiously heads a version of bootlegging, where dairy farmers are coerced into paying exorbitant rates for the transport of milk (via the trucking company 'Crescent City') into town. When the farmers attempt to bypass the company, their wagons are wrecked, and their containers of milk overturned. When Autry and Frog succeed in eluding the system, Blair swears revenge ('I'm going to control every gallon of milk in Barton County and name my own price for it and no smart aleck cowboys are going to stop me either') and we see his outfit in operation – he uses Carol Haines, a radio presenter, to broadcast veterinary advice about cows, but a secret code hidden in the broadcast alerts his team of 'hoodlums' to enact their willful destruction of Autry and Frog's property and milk supplies. The use of the radio is significant here; in *Colorado Sunset* and the following singing Westerns discussed, this is the only form of technology that is sacrosanct, but perpetrators of 'bad radio etiquette' who abuse its powers are always exposed. This also occurs to a lesser extent in *The Old Corral*, where the efforts of the O'Keefe boys to get on the radio are a crucial element in their absolution. The repercussions on Autry's singing career and radio sponsorship are obvious inducements to such representation.

The portrayal of women in this Western places it outside of the boundary of what Douglas Pye states is the widespread 'massively skewed' representation of women in the genre. Pye quotes a section from Jacqueline Levitkin's feminist essay:

[Women] are the symbols, illustrations of the conflict that confronts the hero, and thus are the character types that have been pointed out by a number of critics. If they come from the East, they are school marm, minister's wife or pioneer woman. Identified with the West, they are the farmer's daughter, the Indian or Mexican woman and, at times, the prostitute ... if the woman character representing civilisation is defined positively, the woman representing wilderness, by contrast, is defined negatively, and vice versa. Generally, women characters are seen to be in conflict with one another because they define choices of the hero. The narrative revolves around his choice.<sup>26</sup>

First, Autry's women do not conform to the usual stereotypes named above: they are often conferred with professional status, as radio presenters,

running radio stations, and having careers as newspaper editors. The rising independence and aggression of women is the subject of the song 'The West Ain't what it used to be', in reference to a female editor in *Public Cowboy No. 1*.

In contrast to the West that was once 'wild and woolly and full of fleas', there is now a 'New Deal' in the West where women (or more accurately 'girls') have traded in their 'powder puffs' for 'rouge and stuff' (this is aptly rhymed with 'rough and tough'). Autry sings of a 'cowgirl editor' who will transform the West and make it 'safe and sane', turning all the cowboys 'troubadour'. Autry's own performance is, of course, a testament to this last claim.

The passing of the Old West in all of the other songs discussed is usually a subject that is treated with nostalgia and seriousness, idealising the past and reproachful of progress and modernisation. However, when the increasing liberation of women is what is being observed in the modern New West, an element of redemption breaks through the negativism. The facts of women 'using rouge and stuff' and being editors are not bemoaned but instead associated with the more neutral and even positive components of there being a 'New Deal in the West', and that the Cowboys have 'all turned troubadour'. This unusually progressive aspect in a genre steeped in conservatism may be comprehended in the light of Autry's female patronage. Peter Stanfield has noted the centrality of the female listener and film-goer in relation to Autry's recording, radio and film work, quoting Pamela Grundy's research findings on surveys of radio audiences:

Women made up a large and vocal segment of the hillbilly audience. Radio surveys of the 1930s showed that despite the stories of farmers hurrying from their fields to listen to noon-time shows, the major daytime audience comprised women and children. Women wrote more than two-thirds of the letters received by stations, sponsors, and performers in the period...Perhaps more important, however, was the role of women in arranging personal appearances for hillbilly groups. Personal appearances provided the lion's share of most musicians' income...local (women's) organisations played an essential role in the system; in most cases they were the ones who rented a space, provided publicity and handled the finances, dividing the profits

with the musicians at the end of the performance.<sup>27</sup>

In *Colorado Sunset*, the narrative also revolves not around the choices of the male hero, but the choices of the female protagonists. Autry is elected sheriff because the women actively coerce their husbands into voting for him – they rally support for Autry with inducements of maintaining noise control in the house, and threats of permanently residing mother-in-laws. David Haines's election speech culminates in a fight where the women, wielding surprisingly effective weapons of umbrellas and handbags physically overcome Autry's opposition.

The next four Westerns place Autry in a role where he mediates the changes wrought by industrialisation – it is significant that in fulfilling this role he is not at any one time an advocate of such changes (this point is explicitly and repeatedly made in the films). Instead he offers aid to those members of rural civilisation who are in need of protection from the owners of industrial assets who actively seek to exploit their naiveté financially. The forces of industrialisation that form the subjects of these Westerns are irrigation, electrical power, mechanisation and oil.

### **Industrial Sabotage in the New West**

In *Man of the Frontier* (1936), a drought forces the ranchers to invest in an irrigation project: the 'Red River Land and Irrigation Co.'. However, the project is fraught with mishaps where explosions along the constructed dam cause the deaths of five 'ditch riders'. Autry applies for the job and narrowly escapes two attempts on his life. Due to sabotage the dam builders fail to receive their payroll, and Autry is framed for the crime. A fist-fight develops into a gunfight at the dam, where the irate builders try to destroy the work for which they have not been paid, while the actual culprits (including a bank manager) hide-out in the control room. When the latter see Autry returning with the payroll and their accomplice, they open the floodgates of the dam in a third attempt on his life, but the female protagonist (Mary) intercedes and wins the builders over to Autry's side. The ending declares plans of making Red River Valley one of the richest farming lands. The ranchers are saved from bankruptcy, and the dam is completed with Autry's intervention.

*The Man from Music Mountain* (1938) begins with the completion of Boulder Dam, but this does

not liberate the rural populace from the tyranny of their urban counterparts. A group of real estate swindlers incite a 'back to the land movement', with promises that electricity from the Boulder Dam project will bring a town along the Gold River ('dead for twenty years') back to life. Busloads of people, heading for the town begin to pour in, and one of these buses startles the horses of George Harmon, who has bought \$2,000 worth of land at Gold River and is traveling there via stagecoach. Before Autry can stop the horses, George is dragged to his death, leaving Buddy, his grandson, in Autry's care. Autry tries to obtain a refund from Mr. Scandlon, the head manager, after discovering that the land development project is a hoax and that the proprietors of Boulder Dam have no intentions of bringing electricity to Gold River. His request is denied. Meanwhile Frog ('the sucker with the bankroll') is tricked into investing in the project and sets up an electrical shop, surrounded by the waffle parlors, beauty salons, barber shops and other signs of consumption that arise.

Autry's disapproval of Frog's new occupation is obvious, but Frog is adamant that he will not remain 'a cowhand all his life'. The former conceives of a strategy to trick Scandlon into buying back the land, but in the end gold is discovered in the nearby Betsy Lee mines, and Autry prevents the people from signing away their contracts. Electricity from the Boulder Dam project is conferred onto the town due to the presence of gold, and once again Autry overcomes the instruments of exploitation. Scandlon and his men, as with all those on the wrong side of morality in the previous Westerns, are dressed in business suits, distinguished from the rest who are clothed in rural, working class apparel: checked shirts, denim, and boots. Autry's costume deserves a mention – he stands apart from the other actors and actresses due to the elaborate detail of his attire – the fishbone embroidery and contrasting buttons on his shirts (particularly on his collar and sleeves) signal his persona as a country music performer, further establishing the link between that persona and his acting career. This link is made explicit in *The Old Barn Dance* (1938).

In this Western Autry is solicited for his singing talents by a woman who runs a radio station. He declines at first, explaining that he is a horse trader, and not a radio entertainer. She manages to persuade him later, but conceals the fact that he will be sponsored by 'Mammoth Tractor Co.'. Autry fails to



sell any of his horses in the town, as most of the farmers have invested in tractors, and he expresses his displeasure to Sally. The daily newspaper marks a tremendous increase in the sale of tractors, on account of the deception that Autry is endorsing the product: 'if Gene's singing for them they must be alright'. The tractor company repossesses the machines of the farmers who are slightly late with their monthly payments, and the farmers plan their revenge on Autry just as he is telling Sally that he would never broadcast for Mammoth Tractors because he thinks it would be 'wrong'. When the farmers arrive the truth is revealed and Sally admits that she has been lying: Autry gives the farmers his herd of horses so that they can continue with their harvesting. The film culminates with a fight at the radio station which has been taken over by Mammoth Tractor Company, with Autry enraged at their using his records to

deceive the public into thinking that he is endorsing their product. The station, and all of their records are destroyed, and the film ends when Autry saves Sally and her brother. The latter are pursued for their possession of a record which contains evidence that the Tractor company were involved in provoking a stampede on Autry's horses. The integrity of Autry's sponsors is a notion that is developed further in *Mexicali Rose* (1939), where Autry sets out to expose an oil company who has sponsored his singing on the radio, because he believes they are selling 'phony stocks': 'a lot of people bought stock in this outfit on my account and I'm going to make sure they get a fair deal'. The oil company is bringing oil to the derrick, without executing any actual drilling. As with *The Man From Music Mountain*, Autry manages to beguile the oil company into buying back their stocks. However when the official tests on the site

**Fig. 3.** Gene and his gang go on the air for a duplicitous tractor manufacturer. Advertising art from *The Old Barn Dance* (Republic, 1937).

support the probability of oil, Autry deceives the oil company yet again and purchases all the stock on behalf of his radio audience. In this Western Autry befriends a Mexican, who sacrifices his life to be remembered as a 'Robin Hood' character. The absence of hostility towards Indians or Mexicans, conventionally labeled as 'Other' in the Western genre, is unusual, but effectively directs animosity towards the purveyors of modernity.

### The New Deal Cowboy

Peter Stanfield notes that the popularity of Autry's Westerns in the thirties is documented in the trade press of the period, beginning with *In Old Santa Fe* (1934) where Autry makes his first appearance in a featured spot. The 'What the Picture Did For Me' column in *Motion Picture Herald* read:

*(In Old Santa Fe)* is one of the best Westerns I've ever run. I highly recommend it to any fellow exhibitor that uses Westerns. Good story, plenty of thrills, comedy and some good music and singing by Gene Autry and his band. This is the kind of Western that pleases my patrons.

Played 21–22 December 1934. Sammie Jackson, Jackson Theatre, Flomaton, Ala. Small town and rural patronage.<sup>28</sup>

Further reviews publicised that Autry's Westerns guaranteed healthy performances at the box office, and Autry's own rationale for his success (quoted at the beginning of this paper) furnishes a starting-point for understanding their popularity. The fears of economic dislocation that confronted the rural populace in the New West were dispelled by a hero who significantly embodied values that were linked to the Old West. The celebration of the Old West is also firmly imprinted onto the New West landscape through the narrative of song, which through the dream motif constructed a space in the popular imagination where symbols of the Old West could still be relevant. The methods expounded in Autry's Westerns for negotiating the economic crisis of the thirties were simply a celebration of the values of the Old West, through nostalgia and the ideologi-

cal message that the dangers of modernisation necessitated the agency of the cowboy, and the tools of his trade.

The ascendancy of this WASP hero with origins in and a masculinity defined by the Old West in this discourse of the frontier, was in the second half of the 1930s facilitated by the restored credibility of a WASP patriarchy led by Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt's contribution to this restoration, and thus the role he plays in the success of Autry's persona, is apparent in the latter's self-administered label of 'New Deal Cowboy', with the attendant claim that his solutions were like the president's (and being simpler and more direct, perhaps even better):

While my solutions were a little less complex than those offered by FDR, and my methods a bit more direct, I played a kind of New Deal Cowboy who never hesitated to tackle many of the same problems: the dust bowl, unemployment, or the harnessing of power. This may have contributed to my popularity with 1930s audiences.<sup>29</sup>

Gene Autry

The popularity of the Westerns produced by a minor studio anticipated what Slotkin has termed the 'renaissance' of the genre in 1939, where the percentage of feature Westerns doubled, inaugurating a thirty year period in which 'the Western movie became pre-eminent among American mass-culture genres as a field for the making of public myths and for the symbolisation of public ideology'.<sup>30</sup> Slotkin attributes the pressure for the revival of the Western to the popularity of historical costume dramas (with European subjects) and the renewed seriousness that critics and scholars treated American history and the frontier in the late 1930s, as well as Roosevelt's patriotic propaganda, and not to 'a clear market signal'. However, it is arguable that the box office successes of the low budget Westerns, and the explicit celebration of the Old West contained therein, sustained discourses of the frontier in popular culture – preserving the frontier in the popular imagination – until the myth once more became the dominant output of the major studios.■

## Notes

1. For Comolli's notions of linear history see 'Technique and ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field,' trans. Diana Matias, *Film Reader* (January 1997): 128–140, and 'Machines of the Visible,' *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980): 121–142.
2. Paul Seale, 'A Host of Others': Toward a Nonlinear History of Poverty Row and the Coming of Sound' *Wide Angle* (Vol. 13, No. 1, January 1991): 75
3. Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, pp. 8–9 in Seale 'A Host of Others', p. 77.
4. Seale, 'A Host of Others', p. 77.
5. Paul Kerr, 'Out of What Past: Notes on the B Film Noir,' in *The Hollywood Film Industry*, ed. Paul Kerr (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986)
6. Seale "A Host of Others", p. 98.
7. Joseph Kane has been credited with being one of the most prolific directors of series Westerns. His direct influence on the Westerns discussed in this paper is not established as yet, but is an issue worthy of further research. It is also befitting, at this juncture, to acknowledge the direction and expertise of Peter Stanfield, through whom I gained access to the Westerns and a considerable amount of the material referred to in this essay.
8. Seale "A Host of Others", p. 93.
9. 'Pictures' Most Sensational Year' *Variety* (2 January 1929): 5.
10. 'Inside Stuff – Pictures,' *Variety* (20 February 1929): 11, 28 in Seale "A Host of Others", p. 93.
11. In 1928, Pathe recognised the popularity of its western stars in the small towns, and when it had abandoned the genre, it continued to use these actors in serials catered for such audiences. 'Pathe's Former Western Names Now in Serials' *Variety* (24 October 1928): 5.
12. 'Westerns, Not Talkers, Wanted by Small Town Exhibs of Texas' *Variety* (11 September 1929): 5.
13. Seale, "A Host of Others", p. 75.
14. Brian Taves, 'The B Film: Hollywood's Other Half' in Tino Balio, *Grand Design*, (NY: Scribner's, 1993): 316, 318–319.
15. D.W.C., 'On the Leasing Lot,' *New York Times* (10 November 1935); 'Quickies Not So Hot,' *Hollywood Reporter* (7 November 1935): 1, in Taves, 'The B Film: Hollywood's Other Half', p. 321.
16. Taves, 'The B Film: Hollywood's Other Half', p. 322.
17. Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn, ed.s, *Kings of the Bs: Working Within the Hollywood System* (NY: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1975) 18,23,25.
18. Taves, 'The B Film: Hollywood's Other Half', p. 322.
19. Wayne J. McMullen, 'Reconstruction of the Frontier Myth in Witness', *Southern Communication Journal: Rhetoric, Culture and Community* (No. 1, Vol 62, Fall 1996): 32.
20. Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own': A New History of the American West* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991): 4.
21. John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1970): 193.
22. Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of The Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976): 5.
23. Taves, 'The B Film: Hollywood's Other Half', p. 335.
24. Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992): 113–114.
25. Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, p. 93.
26. Jacqueline Levitkin, *Film Reader* 5, 1982, p. 97 in Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye, eds. *The Movie Book of the Western* (London: Studio Vista, 1996): 13.
27. Pamela Grundy, "'We Always Tried to be Good People': Respectability, Crazy Water Crystals, and Hillbilly Music on the Air, 1933–1935' *Journal of American History*. (March 1995, Vol.81, #4): 1613 in Peter Stanfield, *Dixie Cowboys: Hollywood and the 1930s Western* (Forthcoming).
28. *Motion Picture Herald*, (5 January 1935): 60 in Stanfield, *Dixie Cowboys* (Forthcoming).
29. Gene Autry with M. Herskowitz, *Back in the Saddle Again* (New York: Doubleday & Co, 1978): 53, quoted in Peter Stanfield, *Dixie Cowboys*. (Forthcoming).
30. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992): 278.