

THE POTENTIAL FOR REWRITING MYTH: FINDING “KINDNESS” ON THE
FRONTIER

By

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This thesis is dedicated to my family and friends and to the love of my life, Anna.

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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This thesis explores the possibility of applying the humanities to practical issues, specifically to policy formation. To do so, it attempts to understand how values inform policy through myths. It suggests how that understanding may lead to reorienting societal values and to revising cultural myths. By examining how film and policy-makers utilize prominent myths, such as the Frontier Myth, to make decisions, this thesis argues that this process can be repeated and attempts to perform a revision by locating a value not normally emphasized by the Frontier Myth, “kindness.” Using the fields of semiotics and myth study, film history and theory, and rhetoric as guides, this thesis explores how myths function in order to learn how to duplicate the process of mythmaking. A first step in inventing new myths, this thesis intends to provide the necessary tools for invention.

INTRODUCTION

After Vietnam, U.S. policy-makers faced a crisis which continues to haunt us today. Not entirely a failure of intelligence, that crisis concerns how we make decisions. Since many values determine political decision-making, no single approach can address it. This project will attempt to learn what the humanities can offer. If we look beyond the attempt to treat policy-making as a science, emphasizing efficiency, then we need to consider alternatives. In *The Power of Public Ideas*, Robert Reich argues that policies arise less from the public's rational self-interest, than from its values. He provides examples to prove that rational self-interest cannot explain the 20th century's most important policy initiatives, most notably civil rights legislation. By attempting to decipher the values that inform policy approaches, we can begin to formulate a new approach to decision-making.

By studying the stories we tell about the past and ourselves, the humanities may help us to detect the values that inform our decisions and project possible outcomes. Such projections can issue from studying our past for situations addressing similar problems. Myth provides the key element for this process. The myths we generate from history enable us both to retain knowledge about our past and to maintain an ongoing relationship with it. Each version of a myth emphasizes culturally important values that can be revised according to new circumstances. Thus, one potential avenue for the humanities involves applying the knowledge generated about the values of our stories towards their revision.

In the humanities, two intellectual traditions connect cultural products to the world at large: ideological critique and myth study. While they share objects of study, these approaches diverge in their motivation. While ideological what bourgeois culture conceals (its ideology), myth study attempts to reveal a text's underlying contradictions. While both approaches have their merits, the study of myth provides a better framework for invention. Since an ideological response would stop at condemning the influence of entertainment on policy, I would proceed otherwise by salvaging the inevitable influence of myth on policy by *rewriting myths*. I do not intend simply to expose the underlying ideology of mythic articulations but to recognize the deficiencies in the way we formulate policy, while developing an approach to supplement that deficiency. In *Gunfighter Nation*, Richard Slotkin suggests just such a deficiency in our cultural mythology.

To generate more adequate myths, we must first realize that recurring myths inform entertainment and policy discourse. I intend to learn how to rewrite myths in order to create new avenues for formulating policy initiatives. By applying a humanities approach to policy to improve our decision-making, we will determine our ability to judge our own present situation. I intend to discuss the possibility of inventing new myths more suitable for addressing political problems. To begin the process of invention, we must first look at how myths circulate in a society, from the stories we tell about our origins to the decisions using these stories. By learning how myths inform policy decisions, we can begin to write new myths to fill the gap in our cultural thinking. This gap cannot be filled by crafting a myth with no discernable relation to our past and our values. We must use what we already "know" to be true, the values that have somehow not been applied to policy-making, and persuade ourselves that these values will help

provide a more sustainable approach. Here, I look to rhetoric as well as myth. Rhetoric teaches us that to persuade; we must use values that the public will recognize as its own. Myth uses the rhetoric of the enthymeme by withholding knowledge presumed understood; myth, therefore, persuades through an appeal to public reasoning, the *endoxa*.

Gunfighter Nation

By studying the origin and expansion of the Frontier Myth in American Society, *Gunfighter Nation* provides the frame for my project. In this book, Richard Slotkin examines the twentieth-century connection between entertainment and policy discourse. By documenting how the film industry and foreign policy-makers shared the tradition of the Myth of the Frontier, Slotkin argues that this foundational myth provided both entertainment and policy discourse with a scenario to think through current problems. In the entertainment industry, the Frontier Myth manifested itself most literally in the film western; in foreign policy, it shapes the language and thought-processes of political and military strategists. The results led to a problematic approach to foreign policy and showed that the policymakers misunderstood the nature of the Vietnamese conflict. By systematically revealing this connection between the filmmaking approaches of Hollywood and the policy-making approaches of Washington, Slotkin suggests that the myth no longer matches up with our problems or values. This discrepancy opens the door for an invention that would demonstrate how the humanities can help policy-making.

This project attempts to approach policy formation by addressing society's need to dramatize its underlying values through entertainment and myth. Yet policy failure does not result merely from entertainment's influence. While entertainment may contribute to

such failure by continuing to evoke outmoded conceptions, its ability to circulate myth demands that we recognize the power of its influence. Only by doing so, can we generate new conceptions of our past that may help us address our problems.

Scenarios

In *Gunfighter Nation*, Slotkin proposes that filmmakers and policymakers both work by formulating scenarios. In addressing America's standing in the world after World War II, both utilized the fundamental scenario of the Frontier Myth, the "savage-war," to think about the problems presented by foreign political engagement. By using the scenario as a "thought-experiment," both film and policymakers attempted to envision a new approach to dealing with threats posed by new circumstances. The films and the policies mirrored each other, providing similar answers to the problem of engagement. By relying on a scenario that called for the extermination of the "other," a foreign policy based on the Frontier Myth had predetermined its outcome, a deadly combination of superior technology and an underestimation of the opponent.

Thesis

In his conclusion to *Gunfighter Nation*, Slotkin calls for a new national myth to replace the frontier myth, yet he does not provide an apparatus for invention. Arguing that we cannot dismantle the process by which myth informs policy, he merely suggests that we replace one "bad" myth with another. If the frontier myth has led to poor decisions, we must choose one that will provide more amenable solutions. But to replace one myth with another, or even modify an old one by emphasizing different elements, we need to know how that myth operates at the level of language. Only then can we begin to write as myth does and open up avenues for a new myth, more suited to our current crisis.

To write with myth, we need to combine two separate traditions of the humanities: semiotics and rhetoric. By drawing the connection between entertainment and policy discourse, Slotkin highlights the link between the semiotic study of mass culture and the rhetoric of persuasion. Myths use the enthymematic, or incomplete, syllogism to persuade the public to follow a certain course of action. In *The New Public*, Leon Mayhew suggests that rhetoric is a necessary tool for building solidarity. To invent new, persuasive myths, we must understand this aspect of rhetoric.

I intend to use the semiotic possibility of rewriting myths as a rhetorical tool, applying the connection between these traditions to rectify our mythical deficiency. A democracy that recognizes a particular disposition's inability to further our values must reform its tools. The promise of rhetoric remains that a "free public can settle divisive issues through mutual persuasion" (Mayhew 12). Relying on outmoded mythical structures threatens this promise. We need to learn how to write myths consistent with our values.

Hypothetical Example

In *Gunfighter Nation's* concluding chapter, Slotkin calls for us to remythologize the Frontier Myth in order "to recognize and incorporate a new set of memories that more accurately reflect the material changes that have transformed American society, culture and politics" (656). This thesis aims to provide the tools for this task. By understanding how a myth circulates through a culture, how it works at the level of meaning, functions both as rhetoric and entertainment, we will learn how to write a myth that may perpetuate itself. Slotkin not only calls for new myths to be written, he also suggests a possible path for writing them. While probably not adequate for a full revision of the Frontier Myth, his ideas may prove useful for organizing my thinking. Slotkin suggests that "we must

learn to consider *kindness*” in the “enlarged sense of mortal kinship” (657) to supplement the Frontier Myth’s deficiency. Throughout my thesis, I will refer to this possibility. I look at this project as generating the instructions I will need to write an altogether different myth.

CHAPTER 2 THE FRONTIER MYTH AND THE “SAVAGE WAR” SCENARIO

In *Gunfighter Nation*, Slotkin argues that myths circulate in society from entertainment to policy discourse. Drawn from history, myths demonstrate the power to symbolize the ideology and dramatize the moral consciousness of a culture, providing fodder for the institutions of both entertainment and politics (Slotkin 11). With each successive iteration, a myth builds a reservoir of knowledge about our past that navigates us through crises. When policy-makers face problems without ready answers, they use knowledge provided by myths to decide on a course of action.

A specific scenario is central to the Frontier myth. The myth uses the scenario of the “savage war.” Found “in each stage of its development, the Myth of the Frontier relates the achievement of “progress” to a particular form or scenario of violent action” (11). Conflict between the European settlers and indigenous people featured centrally and peculiarly in the process. “As a result, the ‘savage war’ became a characteristic episode of each phase of westward expansion,” whereby ineluctable political and social differences—rooted in some combination of “blood” and culture—make coexistence between primitive natives and civilized Europeans impossible on any basis other than that of subjugation (Slotkin 11). This scenario provides the premises for both the Western and U.S. policy toward third world revolution. “The Myth represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or ‘natural’ state, and *regeneration*

through violence” (Slotkin 12). At the core of that scenario is the symbol of “savage war,” which became both a mythic trope and an operative category of military doctrine.

Instead of directly affecting policy-making decisions, films “think through” the same scenario that policy-makers use to craft policy, tapping into the same reservoir of knowledge. As Slotkin “trace[s] the development of the system of mythic and ideological formulations that constitute the myth of the Frontier” in the 20th century, he concludes that according to the Frontier myth, American culture can only be redeemed by “playing through the scenario established by the symbol of the ‘savage war’” (4). Therefore, each Western reenacts the mythical origin of our country by dramatizing the ongoing fight against savagery.

Just as the Western genre relies on the “savage war” scenario, political decision making employs it to think through problems, especially those concerning foreign policy. Slotkin argues that the “savage-war” scenario guided policy in Vietnam. Ultimately, policymakers saw our entry into Vietnam as another battle for the future of civilization. Seeing the North Vietnamese communists as savage insurgents, the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations justified the war through an appeal to the mythic explanation of Vietnam as a “savage war.”

As the dominant myth-producing entertainment in 20th-century America, film presents the scenario of savage war, reinforcing its values. Because its unique formal properties make it especially efficient for communicating myth, film represents a particularly valuable form of entertainment for communicating public thought. The “interdependence of setting and story” is “unique to cinema in that it places the viewer in the visible world, unifying the picture with idea/feeling” with at times alarming clarity

(Slotkin 233). One particular film from 1954, *Vera Cruz*, offers an example that will help clarify how filmmakers and policymakers reach the same conclusions about a course of action. Both film and policymakers conclude: counterinsurgency.

Example: *Vera Cruz*

During the Cold War, the United States needed to craft a policy toward Third-World Revolution. Such a policy was seen as crucial to battling the “Communist threat.” But “before the American government could formulate a policy toward revolution in emerging nations, it would be necessary to *imagine* a scenario of the normal causes, composition, and course of such a revolution and the kinds of party and leader it might produce.” This scenario must “project a role for the United States to play in determining” the outcome of such revolutions (Slotkin 407). Slotkin asserts that

the policy-makers faced an imaginative task analogous to that of a screenwriting team which has been given a setting and a situation and is asked to turn them into a narrative that can be acted out. For the movie scenarists, the problem could be resolved by canvassing the conventions of genre, in which mythic narratives are encoded as a set of standard models for heroic action. Imaginative work of this kind involves both the interpretation of “hard data” according to “objective standards” and the speculative canvassing and deployment of the full range of available interpretive procedures. (407)

Since “mythic symbols encode paradigms or programs of real-world action, drawn from past experience or historical memory, which are projected as hypotheses about the outcomes of prospective action,” policymakers “canvassed their repertoire of historical cases in search of a usable paradigm of decolonialization.” In a meeting to discuss an Eisenhower speech which considered the role that the United States should play in addressing Third-World communists, Eisenhower “invoked the Mexican Revolution of 1920-1934 and found in it a metaphor of the present situation. A peasant revolution had

developed there in response to the Diaz dictatorship's abuses of power and immiserated condition of the countryside" (408).

At the same time that Eisenhower's administration developed a scenario for American engagement in the Third World, Hollywood invented the scenario for a new kind of Western whose plot and setting would address the same ideological concerns. Hollywood also remembered the Mexican Revolution and found it especially apt as a setting to address timely questions through the Western's traditional symbolism. This development created a Western genre subtype in which a group of American gunfighters crosses the Mexican border to help the peasants defeat an oppressive ruler, warlord, or bandit. In the process, they transform "Mexican" society, which subjects American values to a searching test and critical revision. The plot-premise of the "Mexico Western" mirrors the concrete themes and problematics of American engagement in the Third World, and its reflexivity mirrors the transformation of our domestic ideology and institutions in response to the exigencies of Cold War power politics (Slotkin 410). The elements that came to constitute the "Mexico western" formula began to appear in the late 40s and early 50s. But they were brought together completely in the production of *Vera Cruz* (1954)—the same year that the Eisenhower administration formulated the doctrine of counterinsurgency and covert operations, defining future policy toward revolution in the Third World. As the "Mexico Western" evolved, it proceeded in step with the attempt to develop an American policy that would struggle for hearts and minds in the Third World, a struggle that became most visible during the Vietnam War (Slotkin 410).

Vera Cruz (1954) tells the story of a team of American gunfighters, ex-soldiers, and outlaws who initially go to Mexico to advise and assist the Mexican government in suppressing a radical revolution, yet eventually decide to join the side of the peasant revolution—a fictional adventure that mirrors the administration’s contemporaneous decision to launch a counterinsurgency mission in Southeast Asia. *Vera Cruz* transfers the problem of the “revolutionary impasse” or the “Zapata problem” to the familiar terrain of the Western and translates the problem of defining an American role in Third World revolutions into a question about the nature of Western movie heroism (Slotkin 433).

The Mexico Western, especially *Vera Cruz*, may be likened to a “thought-experiment,” similar to the hypothetical scenario-projection that characterizes the conceptual phase of policy-making. Although it merely approximated the empirical reality of counterinsurgency warfare, as a thought-experiment it nonetheless highlighted contradictory elements in that policy and anticipated their destructive effect on its practice (Slotkin 410). During this 1950-57 period, the dilemmas and contradictions of the new Cold War informs the parallel response of two different ideology-producing communities. The policy scenarios of counterinsurgency and the generic scenarios of the Mexico Western developed in parallel, deriving their features from their manufacturers’ shared common knowledge of recent history, common set of social and political concerns, and common language of myth and ideology (Slotkin 411).

Hollywood’s answer to the question posed by the Zapata thought-experiment was to “propose” sending American specialists to aid the “Zapatistas” in overcoming both their enemies and their own self-destructive tendencies (Slotkin 426). Since Western genre

actors typically embody heroic traits, the “savage war” scenario traditionally carries with its own particular vision of heroic style. To defeat a savage enemy who will not fight by civilized rules or limit his ferocity to “legitimate” objectives, civilization must discover and empower “the man who know Indians”—an agent of “White” civilization who is so intimate with the enemy’s way of thinking that he can destroy that enemy with his own weapons. During the Cold War, and the clandestine struggle against the Soviet Union, this scenario required American secret agents who mirrored their Communist counterparts in professional skill, ruthlessness, and willingness to engage in espionage, subversion, sabotage, subordination, and betrayal. In the counterinsurgency warfare that would characterize operations in the Third World, the scenario required the development of an American counterguerilla capable of matching the enemy in jungle warfare and in the use of force, terror, and civic action to transform Asian peasants into partisans. As shown in the Western version of this scenario of heroic action, a necessary part of the “mirroring” process might be the (presumably temporary) abandonment of such traditional American notions as “fair play,” “democracy,” or “government by the consent of the governed” (Slotkin 431).

Hypothetical Example: *Kindness*

If our culture is to be responsive to the conditions in which we live, we will need a myth that allows us to see our history as an ecological system: not a false pastoral of pure harmony, but a system bound together by patterns of struggle and accommodation within and among its constituent populations, in which every American victory is also necessarily an American defeat. (Slotkin 658)

Before we begin to see how to write myths, we need the understanding that Slotkin has provided us: myths present a scenario we use to think through the decisions we face. At every level, especially when policy-makers face a difficult problem, they use their reservoir of cultural knowledge to determine an apparently reasonable solution. Slotkin

describes a problem with the way this process has functioned. What had seemed reasonable, that “civilization” can resolve its problems through violence in a savage war, has now become an impractical way of settling international disputes. Thus, he calls for a myth that will encompass both the gains and losses of the frontier period, suggesting the need for an altogether different scenario. With the hope of reconstituting an already recognizable value prominent within the culture, we proceed to replace the “savage-war” scenario with one which attests to a value of “kindness,” acknowledging both the destructive and regenerative aspects of the Frontier. To do so, we must locate and emphasize the value of kindness within a scenario present in the Frontier mythology.

Slotkin’s argument points to a discrepancy between the values which shape our entertainment and policy discourse, and the difficulties of crafting foreign policy by relying on them. If the Frontier myth’s projection of the world does not adequately apply to our current standing in the world, how can we begin to rectify that inadequacy? As Slotkin suggests in his conclusion, the Frontier myth eventually acted as a poor guide for action in Vietnam. By employing it as a scenario, we blinded ourselves to the true conflict between the North and South Vietnamese and to the right promotion of democracy and capitalism without engaging our military inextricably. We will need, therefore, a guiding scenario that will account for a more nuanced perception of international conflict.

CHAPTER 3 SEMIOTICS AND MYTH

Now that we see how the mythic scenario contributes to film and policy thinking, we need a broader understanding of how myth works as a language. From there we can grasp how to construct myths at the level of language before employing it as a form of rhetoric. To begin with, I will look to Claude Lévi-Strauss's contribution to myth study. He contends that myths reveal a society's underlying and irresolvable contradictions. In revealing these contradictions, they attempt to resolve an impossible situation at the root of policymaking dilemmas. While myths can "resolve the dilemma at another level, or to somehow attenuate its force," (Eckert 416) in reality an adequate solution would involve choosing against prevailing values. He provides the rationale of why cultures rely on myths, to help them resolve underlying contradictions. Second, I will discuss how Roland Barthes defines myth as a metalanguage, a second order signifying system. By understanding the semiotic components of myth, we can learn to write new ones. As Slotkin suggests, "when we understand the history and structure of our mythic language, we acquire the power to innovate and invent in that language—to alter the *practice* of the myth and thereby, (potentially) to initiate an adaptation of its basic structure" (656). While semiotics may have seemed limited analytically (Barthes even suggests as much), by recognizing it not as an analytical tool but as a generative one, we can apply it to writing new myths.

Lévi-Strauss

In his anthropological research on native cultures, Lévi-Strauss focuses on myth's structure and meaning in native cultures and, by extension, our own. Arguing that myths exist as "the means by which a culture organizes its experience of the world," (Ray 15) providing "reservoirs of articulate thought on the level of the collective" (Burrige 92), he concludes that myths represent "transformations of basic dilemmas or contradictions that in reality cannot be solved." Myths, therefore, can be considered as "a social machine for resolving contradictions" (Ulmer 110). Myths not only perform this resolution, but work pedagogically to teach us how to approach our own lives, suggesting that we attempt to resolve our own contradictions. While not considering the articulations of myth as fact, we recognize the powerful allure of their solutions. The particular articulation of the Western, by representing the savage war scenario, both communicates a central contradiction of our society, and presents its potential resolution.

The cinematic articulations of myth resolve society's seemingly irresolvable contradictions, and so provide models for addressing real political problems. The real problem communicated by the Western and the central contradiction of the Frontier Myth structures how we engaged the Third-World and the fight against Communism after World War II. By using the "savage war" scenario to determine our plan of action in Vietnam, we attempted to map a mythic understanding of our past onto a situation where the terms did not fit. Perhaps we thought of Vietnam as simply another version of the "savage war" scenario manifested both in real battles and on screen. But as Slotkin concludes, the mythic paradigm of the Frontier, and its gunfighter hero, no longer provides an acceptable understanding of the world. While it may still resonate with our

national ideology, as a model for international action the myth's ability to suggest viable answers has proven misguided.

Barthes

To address Bourgeois culture's tendency to naturalize its ideology, Roland Barthes, in "Myth Today," provides a semiotics of myth, constituting it as a historically based language system. Barthes argues that, as a "system of communication," myth's "mode of signification" is "not defined by the object of its message, but by the way it utters this message" (109). Myth's expression (Frontier), whether in a particular film (Western) or advertisement (Marlboro man), presents itself at the primary level (Cowboy vs. Indian), yet refers to the myth at a secondary level (Savage War). So while we see a particular battle of cowboys vs. Indians, we read it as a mythological struggle for the future of our entire civilization, encapsulated in the savage war scenario.

This process of referral constitutes myth's relationship to the rhetorical structure of the enthymeme. Through the structure of the enthymeme, myth communicates on two separate levels. Suppressing its major premise, it assumes a common cultural understanding of the world. As a semiological system, this assumption informs an innumerable variety of forms, emptying them of their particular meaning. Thus, myth can easily transfer its meaning to forms which do not automatically refer to it. The detective story for example, becomes associated with the Frontier myth through thematic similarity. By operating at the level of the understood, myths, especially one as central as the Frontier Myth, can employ any form, despite its literal meaning.

Barthes argues that "mythical speech is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication" (109). Specifically, it uses recognizable symbols that connote an unspoken meaning. The Western works as myth by

using generic symbols within our cultural discourse and reworks them according to our changing relationship to our past. As Slotkin suggests, the Western's resonant symbols, most notably the landscape itself, immediately convey consistent generic themes. Since myth is "meaning and form at the same time—full on one side and empty on the other," the weight of generic history forces the symbols to take on the myth's meaning. In one of Barthes's most famous examples, he suggests that the photo of a black French soldier saluting the French flag gives its mythic expression an extra power: "the form of myth is not a symbol: the Negro who salutes is not the symbol of the French Empire: he has too much presence, he appears as a rich, fully experienced, spontaneous, innocent indisputable image" (*Mythologies* 119). The same process occurs in the Western expression of the Frontier Myth. Western generic actors, such as John Wayne, do not appear as symbols of the Frontier Myth; they are made the transparent accomplice of its meaning. Since the concept of the Frontier is "tied to the totality of the world, it is less reality than a certain knowledge of reality," yet the symbols it employs refer to both reality and our knowledge of it (*Mythologies* 119).

By endlessly repeating the same meaning through varying forms, movies have provided us with an extensive catalogue of the Frontier myth. Yet Barthes suggests that myths do not exist eternally, since current events cause us to reconsider our relationship to our past. He argues that "there is no fixity in mythical concepts; precisely because they are historical and that history can very easily suppress them" (120). Since "myth is a value" and represents only our relationship to the truth, "truth is no guarantee for it" (123). Any semiological system, however, is a system of values; we need rhetoric to persuasively shape those values. As rhetoric, Myth persuades by communicating through

a recognizable form, without revealing its underlying meaning, which remains understood.

Experimental Mythography: *Kindness*

In discussing myth's control over bourgeois ideology, making what is historical natural, Barthes suggests that we could combat this process by "robbing" myth (140). My attempt to reconfigure the frontier myth requires stealing recognizable generic symbols and making them differently. First, I need to find examples of kindness already within our national discourse. Slotkin already provides us with two examples. The first is from a Robert Frost poem "America Is Hard to See" (1962):

The light of American historical experience has exposed a fatal flaw in the original myth: in its intent focus on the "high purpose" of a single type of hero, an exclusive system of value and belief, the visions of Columbus (and his metaphorical successors) have made the reality of America and American history "hard to see." Against the delusory vision of America as an escape from history and from the limitations of our human and social condition, the poet sets a capsule version of our experience of history:

But all he [Columbus] did was spread the room
Of our enacting out the doom
Of being in each other's way,
And so put off the weary day
When we would have to put our mind
On how to crowd but still be kind.

The second example that Slotkin gives occurs as he describes his meaning of kindness. He says that "we must learn to consider *kindness*, not as the charity of the privileged to the disadvantaged, but as an enlarged sense of mortal kinship—the kindness invoked by Melville in *Moby-Dick* when Ishmael, weary of Ahab's apocalyptic quest, imagines the fatal divisions among people dissolved 'into the very milk and sperm of kindness'" (658). But Slotkin also gives us an example that can be taken out of context and reworked. In his introduction, he states that "seventeenth-century Puritans

envisioned this struggle [between Europeans and Indians] in Biblical terms—“Two Nations [are in] the Womb and will be striving” (11). While the Puritans “urged their soldiers to exterminate the Wampanoags,” we could emphasize the common kindred, and reread history as a loss as much as a gain.

By using what we can find already in the discourse, our myth rewrite may work rhetorically to persuade the public that it already holds these values. It is important to remember what Joseph Campbell considers the function of myth: conveying the wisdom we need to navigate through the transitions life mandates, in a form that we will welcome rather than belligerently reject (Kaplan 7). Using already formulated examples, we can persuade by engaging a recognizable public language and presenting kindness through alternative generic symbols.

Rewriting this myth also requires an alternate scenario that encompasses other irresolvable contradictions. By emphasizing "kindness," we reveal contradictions inherent in a country that has been home to both “underground railroads” and “manifest destiny.” Our common history encompasses these contradictions, yet an alternative myth needs to address both the conquered and conquerors. Barthes shows how myth works semiotically; it employs complete signs as its forms, emptying them out and filling them with its meaning. A serious attempt to rewrite the Frontier Myth would have to find many more repeated scenarios of kindness, perhaps emphasizing metaphors of common birth. But I have shown how “stealing” from myth would occur, locating those particular spots with the myth discourse, emphasizing and repeating them, working with what a culture knows already, or, as Barthes says, *what-goes-without-saying*.

CHAPTER 4 *THE NEW PUBLIC: POLITICAL PERSUASION OF MYTH*

In *The New Public*, Leon Mayhew suggests that rhetoric affects political discourse through entertainment. He links the rhetorical forms of political advertising to the development of a "new public." In attempt to redefine the public theorized by Habermas, he looks to language's rhetorical nature in the writing of Kenneth Burke and the influence studies of Talcott Parsons. He asserts that the forms of mass media now use rhetoric to build solidarity and influences public formation by incorporating tools unused by rational argument.

Also, he asserts that the rhetoric of solidarity functions through myths of origin. He states that "in discourse about the good society myths of origin are rhetorical terms for social cohesion. [They] represent, in rhetorical forms, ideas about universal and ever present sources of social solidarity" (Mayhew 22). As Slotkin's theory of myth suggests, the articulations of myth build on these sources of solidarity in order to argue for particular courses of action. By providing solidarity, myths address problems on a mass level. As myths, films also work as rhetoric to act in a culturally innovative capacity, to provide a familiar framework for people decipher latent meanings (13). Since rhetoric depends on recognizable cultural symbols, it helps to delineate values, especially when statements cannot be conclusively demonstrated. Like myths, rhetorical arguments do not demonstrate truth, but persuade by appealing to an audience that shares the speaker's values and presuppositions. Using symbols, or tokens, rhetoric depends on common, understood meanings to fill in the blanks of the argument (13).

Limitations of Reason in Rhetorical Discourse

Policy on a mass level must consider cherished public values. Yet values informing policy decisions are generally left unstated, conveyed most potently through the enthymematic structure of myth. By acknowledging that the "new public" relies on rhetoric, not just rational argument, Mayhew contends that entertainment influences policy-making. In building solidarity, "rhetoric blends reason and four other elements in persuasive action: norms, solidarity, coercion and eloquence." Articulations of myth invoke all of these elements of rhetoric, since "concrete persuasive efforts employ mixed, composite appeals and only an analytical scheme can separate the strands" (Mayhew 38).

The persistence of political rhetoric proves that Habermas's conception of the public does not apply to the formation of the "new public." Instead of building solidarity through logical argumentation alone, and aspiring to notions of pure rationality, modern "differentiated" solidarity relies on the processes of mass communication. These processes, especially those of entertainment, work through rhetorical forms, such as the enthymeme, to communicate public values. Entertainment undeniably affects public formation, which has entered a phase altogether different from Habermas's theorization.

Distinguished between reason and coercion, rhetoric acts as public persuasion whenever culture is created or contested. Here we see the ambiguous relationship between persuasion and reason. While the ideal form of rhetoric set before us by Plato remains "true words inscribed in the hearer in the spirit of love," persuasive rhetoric does not necessarily aspire to "the good" or to truth but to effectiveness (Mayhew 11). Genre films rely on appeals to social norms, on ties of solidarity, and on the cultural strength of eloquence; in short, they also "persuade." In addition to appealing to norms and solidarity, the cinematic studio system embodies the "rationalization of [eloquence]."

While the studio system used rational methods of work to efficiently reproduce films to garner mass audiences, they persuaded through their ability to eloquently appeal to cultural values, often encapsulating mythical dilemmas in melodramatic form.

Enthymeme

In his essay “The Old Rhetoric: an aide-mémoire,” Roland Barthes articulates two separate but related definitions of the enthymeme, the first based on its contents, the second based on its form. According to Barthes, Aristotle’s originally defines the enthymeme as a public reasoning that persuades through the probable nature of its premises. “Starting from the probable, i.e., starting from what the public think; it is a deduction whose value is concrete, posited in view of a *presentation*” (Barthes, *Semiotic* 55). Following Quintillian, rhetoricians defined the enthymeme solely through the “elliptical character of its articulation, as an incomplete syllogism, whereby it suppresses a proposition whose reality seems incontestable” (*Semiotic* 55). Myth acts combines these separate conceptions. It is a public reasoning that hides its major premise. Relying on what Barthes calls *eikos*, or probability, it uses the opinion of the greatest number to decide when consequences cannot be determined, and it persuades by suppressing what is considered understood. Myth, therefore, employs the logic of the public, where it is “better [to] tell what the public believes possible, even if it is scientifically impossible, than tell what is really possible, if such possibility is rejected by the collective censorship of public opinion” (*Semiotic* 58).

Specifically, the mythic enthymeme works through the practical syllogism. Used to determine particular decisions, this syllogism employs a major premise (current maxim), a minor premise (situation), and concludes by a decision of conduct. Throughout the 20th-century, film and policy-makers have used the situation of the

“savage war” scenario to determine a course of action (counterinsurgency) by reasoning from what is understood, that we are the bearers of civilization. As rhetoric, myth is not only a method of public reasoning, but also thinks through new situations, persuading us that its course of action will lead to a desirable outcome.

Kindness

To understand how to write myths and persuade the public of what they already know, or *endoxal* knowledge, we must invoke Mayhew’s definition of the *New Public*. To build solidarity, precisely Slotkin’s aim in *Gunfighter Nation*'s conclusion, we must use rhetoric. Unlike in Habermas’s formulation of the public, rhetoric maintains a place in the political world. We cannot assume that the most rational argument will persuade the public. The enthymeme psychologically persuades by gratifying the audience, allowing it reason by moving from the presented to the already known. To employ the enthymeme's psychological effect, we must locate a value that the public already understands and emphasize it through a representative scenario. Convincing the public of its applicability to foreign policy may be difficult given our example of "kindness," but we can locate a kindred spirit between “settlers” and “Indians” in our folklore, Thanksgiving for example. By suppressing the major premise of kindness (that "we" includes both "conquerors" and "the conquered"), this scenario will persuade through numerous repetitions in cultural discourse. As persuasion, myth combines an understood idea with a new formulation of it. The minor premise is entirely replaceable; "kindness" can inform any generic articulation, given the right emphasis.

CHAPTER 5 FILM PREMISES

Separated into two sections, this chapter first reiterates film's unique relationship to myth by trying to understand it as a public medium. As a mass medium, it represents the audience's relationship to crises (WWII, Cold War) shaping policy problems and reinforcing their values. By combining the contradictory values exposed by such crises into an individual character, movies celebrate an ideology that avoids choosing between these values. Not only operating at the level of meaning, films persuade by dramatizing society's fundamental contradictions, and conclude by resorting to common knowledge, or *doxa*. In this section, Robert Ray's seminal analysis of Hollywood Cinema, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema 1930-1980*, shows us how films function both formally and thematically to confirm the audience's relationship toward outside events. By connecting the ideology of the Frontier Myth, a staple of Hollywood's thematic paradigm, to Hollywood's formal system, Ray provides a vital step in the myth-making process, how to synthesize the form of expression with its meaning. The second section will suggest how a film's premise emphasizes values inherent in its expression. From a filmmaker's point of view, Bob Foss's *Filmmaking* presents how latent values through a premise and how they get "proven" by the following action.

Hollywood's Invisible Style and Thematic Paradigm

Films convey a vision of the public imagination; they think through various real dilemmas dramatically, presenting a series of options. The dominant form of the American cinema, however, privileges certain options over others. As Barthes suggests

of myth, Hollywood attempts to translate a system of values into a system of facts. By *naturalizing* its form to make it seem inevitable, or invisible, Hollywood films lend an air of objectivity to their expression, despite remaining heavily decision based.

These films convey both thematically and formally how the world "should" exist. To emphasize "objective" nature of its articulation, Hollywood developed a set of rules to ensure the primacy of the narrative, privileging its mythical content. With the force of their eloquent expression, these films provide persuasive solutions to the world's problems. The "natural" impression of Hollywood suggests that these problems—and the irreconcilable contradictions they contain—*can* be reconciled through decisive action. Established through repetition, Hollywood's continuity system depends on a prior set of understandings, most importantly, that the articulation of the film will not interfere with its content (Slotkin 232).

By far the most popular and inventive form of entertainment of the 20th century, Hollywood cinema not only reflects the audience's relationship to events, but it has also influenced how people regard national dilemmas. Classic Hollywood concealed their underlying values by enacting an invisible style that privileges a choice's inevitability rather than its particularity. In this way, the "artistic properties" of Hollywood films become the "formal equivalents of the myth" (Ray 16). Based on centering its *mise-en-scène*, 180-degree system, and shot/reverse-shot continuity editing, the continuity system represents a ratification of a particular world-view—the avoidance of choice as an inherent property of our national mythology (Ray 16). While centering suggests that important figures would always be emphasized by their placement in the center of the frame, shot/reverse-shot editing "isolate[s] for the viewer a seam of significance within a

potentially infinite visual field. The audience assume[s] that *this* space, at least for the duration of the shot-reverse shots, [is] the only important one” (Ray 39). These particular techniques hide the fact that, as a medium, film is intensely decision-based:

Each shot results from dozens of choices about such elements as camera placement, lighting, focus, casting, and framing (the components of *mise en scène*); editing adds the further possibilities inherent in every shot-to-shot articulation. Not only do things on the screen appear at the expense of others not shown, the manner in which they appear depends on a selection of one perspective that eliminates (at least temporarily) all others. The American Cinema’s formal paradigm, however, developed precisely as a means for concealing these choices. Its ability to do so turned on this style’s most basic procedure: the systematic subordination of every cinematic element to the interests of a movie’s narrative. (Ray 32)

By concealing the work of its decision-making, films consistently avoid making the audience choose between its contradictory values. Their power lies specifically in the ability to make such an avoidance of choice seem natural. Furthermore, “the invisible style’s continual judgments about the importance of persons, incidents, or activities were powerful precisely because their self-effacing form caused them to go unnoticed” (47). Hollywood's ability to conceal the manner of its expression, therefore, contributes powerfully to its underlying ideology.

Hollywood's thematic paradigm parallels its formal paradigm by collapsing a set of contradictory character traits into a single character. By emphasizing the consistent formulation of American problems through the reluctant outlaw-hero, Ray aligns the Frontier myth with the history of Hollywood in general, not just the Western. But rather than condemning Hollywood's tendency, he argues that “the source of this mythology becomes less enlightening than an understanding of the historical circumstances that sustain and modify its particular incarnations” (56). These historical circumstances are complex, including both internal and external influences on the subject matter and

filmmaking approaches, but Hollywood's consistent articulation of the Frontier Myth shows the audience's continual acceptance of its explanatory power.

The American Cinema's version of this traditional mythology rested on two factors. First, Hollywood's power (and need) to produce a steady flow of variations provided the myth with the repetitive elaborations that it required to become convincing. Second, the audience's sense of American exceptionalism (in part authentic, in part itself the product of the myth) encouraged acceptance of a mythology whose fundamental premise was optimistic. For to a large extent, American space, economic abundance and geographic isolation—and the fictions embroidered around these things—had long been unavailable to the European imagination. (Ray 56)

With the “ideological power of Classic Hollywood's procedure, even the most manufactured narratives came to seem spontaneous and ‘real.’ A spectator prevented from detecting style's role in a mythology's articulation could only accede to that mythology's ‘truth.’” Yet “when that mythology also denied the necessity for choice, the result was a doubling effect that made the American Cinema one of the most potent ideological tools ever constructed” (Ray 55).

Since “Hollywood's underlying thematic premise dictated the conversion of all political, sociological, and economic dilemmas into personal melodramas,” the Frontier Myth's oppositions often become expressed in individuals who comprise both contradictory traits. By raising, and then appearing to solve, problems associated with the troubling incompatibility of traditional American myths, “this reconciliatory pattern...increasingly became the self-perpetuating norm of the American Cinema. Movies that refused to resolve contradictory myths typically found themselves without the large audiences expected by the industry” (Ray 57). Hollywood strove for “a kind of inclusiveness” in a character “that would permit all decisions to be undertaken with the knowledge that the alternative was equally available. The movies traded on one opposition in particular, American culture's traditional dichotomy of individual and

community that had generated the most significant pair of competing myths: the outlaw hero and the official hero” (Ray 58). While “the outlaw hero stood for that part of the American imagination valuing self-determination and freedom from entanglements, the official hero represented the American belief in collective action, and the objective legal process that superseded private notions of right and wrong” (Ray 59). By opposing the outlaw and official heroes, the movies literalize the Frontier Myth and sustain the hero's status in the savage-war scenario. By allowing the outlaw hero to triumph while disregarding the ordinary rules of engagement, the movies reinforce a dangerous reliance on violent pragmatic action and collapse the outlaw/official hero into a single individual whose savage acts are justified by success in battle.

Consistently succeeding to resolve society's dilemmas, the frontier myth surpasses its normal functioning in one key way:

The American mythology's refusal to choose between its two heroes went beyond the normal reconciliatory function attributed to myth by Levi-Strauss. For the American tradition not only overcame binary oppositions; it systematically mythologized the certainty of being able to do so. Part of this process involved blurring the lines between the two sets of heroes. In this blurring process, Lincoln, a composite of opposing traits emerged as the great American figure. His status as president made him an *ex officio* official hero. But his western origins, melancholy solitude, and unaided decision-making all qualified him as a member of the other side. (Ray 64)

Thus Hollywood depended on “the mass audience” who expected resolution, whether the Frontier Myth provided an adequate explanation of reality or not. “Far from relying on historical accuracy for its popularity, Hollywood traded on (and helped to further)” the “existing ideological projection” of the Frontier Myth” which had “a life of its own” (Ray 67).

Thus, the reluctant hero story's inappropriateness as a solution for contemporary problems mattered far less than the enormous weight of the tradition promoting it. Indeed, the movies' commercial success derived from their ability to insert

themselves into the long chain of texts whose persistent articulation of American exceptionalism had portrayed final choices as unnecessary violations of the national spirit. (Ray 67)

Yet to construct the cinematic articulations of this myth, Hollywood filmmakers relied on what Bob Foss calls “premise construction.” He suggests that we can decipher a film's true values by recognizing the premise which both states the drama’s prior condition and projection its future consequences.

Premise Construction

As we have seen, filmmakers, just like policymakers, use myths to consider the nation's problems. By invoking a particular scenario, they select from a number of predetermined solutions when constructing a film. Screenwriters invent the dramatic means or justifications of these solutions. To do so, they rely on a premise. Bob Foss’s *Filmmaking* provides an analogue to Ray’s ideological analysis of Hollywood by offering a model for interpreting and constructing film scenarios. He suggests that film's form typically suppresses the major premise that informs its concrete actions. While “wilderness versus civilization as expressed through the savage war” provides the major premise of the Western and the frontier myth, this scenario is always elaborated through secondary themes, which actually reveal the film's values. These themes encompass the values that reveal the film's attitude towards the major premise (Foss 144). As Slotkin and Ray discuss, that attitude remained consistent throughout most of the twentieth century: in fact, we remain in support of the western hero, the gunfighter, because films rarely provide an alternative. Despite Hollywood's attempts to suppress the values that inform both formal and thematic choices, lending films an air of “objectivity,” the premise model provides access to their values and renders an account of them.

The premise becomes apparent through the action that substantially “proves” it. It has two constituent parts: a) preconditions and b) consequences. Foss describes how films employ a forward moving dramatic line, from condition X to consequence Y. This dynamic inheres to the action's development. While the action always becomes manifest in concrete terms, the initial premise gives direction but not circumstances. Foss’s model comes from the structuralist A. J. Greimas, and specifies “precisely those conditions that determine dramatic development and resolution” (Foss 148). His example comes from the film, *The Battle of Algiers*, where oppression (X) leads to revolt (Y). As we can see, the premise provides a starting point; it tells us where we are going to not the condition necessary to achieve the results we desire.

Conclusion

By perceiving how myth works as entertainment, we begin to see how semiotics, rhetoric, and dramatic structure coincide. Creating a style that meshes form with content, myths presents us with a model for invention. As Classic Hollywood shows, the avoidance of choice can be present in both the form and content. The kindness scenario, however, would have to emphasize, both formally and thematically, how our choices have real impact on our kindred Americans. This scenario will utilize an alternate premise, articulating that violence leads not just to regeneration, but to destruction. In doing so, we will have to place the “us,” or the subject, not on the side of “western civilization,” but on the side of the cultural “polyglot.” As Foss suggests, this process must function at the concrete level. We will need to find a scenario that allows for dramatic visualization in a myriad of forms, or find articulation that already have

successfully "proven" the effectiveness of kindness for solving problems. Only by dramatizing the kindness scenario, a covert value in our society, can we "prove" its truth.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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Most importantly, he will marry Anna Guest in the summer of 2005 and live happily ever after (or as close as he can on a grad student/academic's budget).