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Back in the Saddle…Again

A Re-Imagining of Masculinity in the

Post 9/11 Western

By

Jason Beaumont

Contents

Illustrations

Introduction

Wanted Dead or Alive

President Bush's remarks at the Pentagon, September 17th:

> Reporter: Are you saying you want him [Bin Laden] dead or alive, sir? Can I interpret…
>
> BUSH: I just remember, all I'm doing is remembering when I was a kid I remember that they used to put out there in the Old West, a wanted poster. It said: "Wanted, Dead or Alive." All I want and America wants him brought to justice. That's what we want.
>
> (*US Response Homepage*, 2001)

On 17 September 2001, with less than a week elapsed by since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, President Bush's rhetoric seemed to re-invoke and epitomise a certain cowboy mystique. The President's speech was filled with frontier language in which he described a war which would serve to encapsulate forever his presidency.

During this speech Bush described his exoneration for America's mobilization of troops for the so-called 'War on Terror' by resurrecting a Wild West 'wanted' poster, remembered from his childhood that read 'Wanted Dead or Alive'. In this way, Western themes were evoked as a means, firstly of representing what had happened, and, secondly, forging the American response. From the ashes of 9/11 there arose the cowboy virtues and the Old West style. Bush issued such remarks as "We'll smoke them out" and "Wanted Dead or Alive" and framing his attackers as "folks" and "Hunt them down" and branded Saddam Hussein's Iraq "An outlaw regime", (McGee, 2007), all of which clearly crystallise the idea of frontier justice and retribution and evoke the deep influence of Western mythology on the political culture of the United States in the twenty first century.

Illustration 2

In January 2006, some five years after the events of 9/11 President George W Bush agreed to answer unscreened questions from students at Kansas State University. The student asked the President:

> Student: ''You're a rancher. A lot of us in Kansas are ranchers.
> I was just wanting to get your opinion on 'Brokeback Mountain,'
> if you've seen it yet''
>
> BUSH: ''I haven't seen it . . . I'd be glad to talk about ranching, but I
> haven't seen the movie.'
> *The New York Tim*es, 24th Jan. (2006)

The student's question proves significant, not in the sense that he was trying to probe the President's stance on homosexuality but that Bush was signified as a rancher and therefore identified with other ranchers. The student, like other Americans and global citizens, strongly identified President Bush with cowboys and frontier/western ideology. But how did a man who was born in Connecticut, attended prestigious universities such as Yale and Harvard and failed miserably in the Oil industry, convince a nation, to associate him with the traditional cowboy character's like John Wayne, Wyatt Earp and the Lone

Ranger? (McGee, 2007) In this dissertation I aim to interrogate some of these questions, by exploring how Bush became so dependent on the media, to galvanise the image of the Western cowboy. More importantly, this dissertation will focus on the impact 9/11 had on cinema, and continues to have.

Bush's continuous use of the word "remember" evokes the past and is tinged with a sense of reminiscing and nostalgia. The President released a barrage of quotes, that resonated with audiences and filmmakers accustomed to a century of Westerns and Bush's response cemented the Western/cowboy mystique; "were going to smoke them out." (McGee, 2007). With Bush's rhetoric about the West as a way of framing contemporary political climate, the Western film genre's prominence returned.

In the wake of 9/11, there seemed to be a renewed audience appetite for narratives of conflict, good versus evil and one psychological impact of 9/11 on film was the renewed resonance of revenge films, such as *Kill Bill* (2004) *Quentin Tarantino, The Punisher* (2002),*Jonathan Hensleigh, Man on Fire* (2003), *Tony Scott, A History of Violence,* (2005), *David Cronenberg,* films that, in some contradictory ways, turn violent retribution into a punch-the-air affirmation of right and virility.

It's no surprise then that the Western film genre has emerged from the critical wilderness in recent years. Indeed, in the years since 9/11 the Western has had something of a renaissance, both critically and commercially. The popular and commercial success of films such as *Brokeback Mountain* (2006) *Ang Lee, Open Range,* (2004), *Kevin Costner, 3:10 to Yuma* (2007), *James Mangold, The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Bob Ford*,(2007), *Andrew Dominik, A History of Violence* and the HBO production *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee,* (2007), *Yves Simoneau* and *Deadwood*, (2004), suggest that recent Western cinema and television is worthy of serious interest and writing. The aim of this dissertation is to explore how and why the Western film genre became so popular after the events of 9/11,

focusing in particularly on the role of the cowboy and the representation of masculinity within these Westerns.

Justice and the Return of the Cowboy

The attacks of September 11 unleashed waves of media representations that fixated on restoring an 'invincible' manhood; America wanted a John Wayne type hero and the media evoked Western themes and iconography and a return to good old American frontier values. Susan Faludi identifies a powerful resurgence in traditional sex roles and a glorification of he-man virility, helping the damsel's in-distress, emerge. (Cited in the *New York Times*, 2007), the Western was riding back into town. What better then that most American of film genres, the Western, which regularly invokes indicators against which masculine behavior is judged, to keep up the American public's morale. And what could be more reassuring than the western? Imbued with a staunch morality, the genre revels in American folklore. The Western offered the American public hope in the form of triumphs of American tradition over previous encounters with an external, alien force. This reaction seems to belong to a traditional American pattern of response to an enemy, one that America has been perfecting since America's wilderness era.

Evoking the myth of the West went some way in cementing the President's role of a cowboy, as well as echoing America's historical consciousness, and served to galvanize a nation. According to Richard Slotkin, the cowboy is:

> The embodiment of American myths, a powerful figure whose
> foundations stretches from America's first explorers and
> Frontiersmen to twenty-first century popular culture and politics.
> He is a vital figure to American history and the cultural values
> Americans look to develop. (Slotkin, 1992, p.10)

This image of the Lone Ranger and evoking the myth of the Wild West meta-narrative provided contemporary events with a sense of familiarity and therefore protection, and also as a way of justifying a military retaliation

through the connection to a past where violence was righteous and redemptive. The repeated use of Western frontier language combined with various childhood reference points signifies nostalgia, innocence, progress and American triumph of civilisation over savagery.

According to Robert Moran:

> The lone hero motif employed in many classic westerns is a large part of what makes the genre so attractive to us. It hearkens back to an earlier period in American history when our icons were the great hunter-heroes of the plains and the mountains.
> (Moran, 2005)

Bush evoked the Western/frontier language, imagery and ideology to respond to the crisis and the Western meta-narrative was, for the most part, a readily galvanised response, just as it had been during the post WWII and Cold War era. Throughout the aftermath of 9/11, the Bush Administration, coupled with much of the media, attempted to position the assault on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon as a reprise of Pearl Harbor (Faludi, 2007). The aim being to reinvigorate a sense of national unity and sacrifice, whilst simultaneously begin a re-emergence and promotion of traditional masculinity, achieving John Wayne-like longevity and domination and containing largely demeaning, re-domesticated roles of femininity. The stark rhetoric of the Bush Administration's quest to eradicate "evil" finds a perfect correlation in the key symbols of the Western, amongst them, the heroic cowboy, the founding and reaffirmation of key ideals of the American nation and the existence of an "other" as the enemy.

Conventional wisdom about the events of September 11 is clear: 'America will never be the same again', observed Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein on the floor of the Senate, adding that 'the changes are visceral and they are real' (Feinstein, 2003)

Like Pearl Harbor and Vietnam, the events of September 11 could only be described as a tuning point in history, when America's myopic superpower status and confidence was forever lost. The collapse of the phallic symbol of America, the Twin Towers, could be re-configured as a symbol of the nation's emasculation. The trauma of 9/11 and the Bush regime's failing to protect and save its nation seem to have instilled a certain sense of shame and guilt and underlie the anxious commentaries about US impotence and weakness and a feminized society. (Cohen, 2007)

September 11 reinvigorated Bush's connection to cowboy mythology and as the cowboy rises to his mythical status through conflict, so too did Bush rise to the conflict. Renshon notes that: ''unlike his father, George W. obviously doesn't avoid conflict;'' (Renshon, p 585-614, 2005)

In fact, according to Senator Schumer, President Bush:

> ''is staking his entire presidency on whether he can succeed in his goal of wiping out terrorism'' Hollywood was enlisted in a symbolic war at home, a war to amend and reinvigorate a national myth. (Renshon, p589, 2005; Bruni, p248, 2006)

However, what's most interesting, and this dissertation will focus on this in great detail, is in light of the events of 9/11 and the media's reaction by hailing the return of John Wayne masculinity, where films and politicians were re-enacting Wild West dramas and spouting vigilante cowboy rhetoric. There has been a new kind of hero to emerge on the big screen, one that is reluctant to get involved. US culture seems to be embracing the 'mojo free man' in these post 9//11 times. It seems the alpha dog doesn't hunt anymore. The new role model is a beta male. These Westerns seem to critique the cowboy myth and representations of masculinity, whilst testifying to its appeal and power, both problematising and celebrating masculinity and the role of the hero.

Passive/Aggressive

Most of the heroes featured in Westerns post 9/11 can be seen to represent an American nation weary of conflict but aware of the existence of and the need to be prepared for new threats. The appearance of a new version of *The Alamo,* (2004)*, John Lee Hancock,* is particularly significant at this time, as, in the fallout of 9/11, it evokes the yearning for a time when war was simpler, where leaders drew a line in the sand and every man asked willing to defend their country, to cross the line. The film feature's the actor *Billy Bob Thornton* as easily the most complicated Davy Crockett in American movie history, which showcases Crockett's slow transformation from amiable fraud into resigned existential hero. Micheal Eisner, head of the Disney studio that produced *The Alamo* claimed the film would "capture the post-September 11 surge in patriotism." (Eisner, 2004; p 219). But the muted response to the movie indicated that this film's particular brand of triumphalism bypassed its audience.

In *Open Range* (2004) a triumphant return to the classical Western, Kevin Costner plays Charlie Waite, a character who has a dark, violent past, but these impulses seem to have stagnated since he met up with Robert Duvall's Boss Spearman, a crusty cowboy leader who stands for a traditional code of honour. But the evil land baron of the film, attempts to limit their personal freedom, which forces Charlie to take up the gun again. *Open Range* pays direct homage to John Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946) but reworks the narrative by allowing an opportunity for Charlie to open up, share his feelings and declare his love for Sue, the nurse, who triggers a change in his destiny and outlook on life. Unlike Henry Fonda in *My Darling Clementine* who departs from his lady at the end of that film, Charlie has a chance to settle down, vomit up the undigested violence of his past and becomes civilized and love Sue at the end. This is quite a subversion of the archetypal traditional Western format and challenges Jane Tompkins's expose of the Western being primarily a genre that teaches a generation of men not to reveal their feelings with their women. *Open Range* explores, and ultimately subverts, this old-fashioned image of the taciturn Westerner.

Among the key changes to the analysis of genre cinema in the mid-seventies and eighties were those associated with gender and spectatorship, particularly in the works of feminist critics interested in exploring the place of women. As this work developed, it explored melodrama and *film noir* rather than the genres of male action and it seems the Western was largely ignored. But by the 1980s, some film scholars began to examine the Western as a genre in which the crisis in masculinity explored in *film noir* and melodrama is also played out.

Steve Neale offered an insight into the presentation of the Western hero in terms of the gender debates instigated by Laura Mulvey and wrote of the Western's obsession with definitions of masculinity. But a more significant work to extend the terms of debate about the Western, focusing on gender and especially masculinity, is Jane Tompkins, who argues that Westerns are interesting because of their relation to gender and especially the way they create a template for men who came of age in the twentieth century. This is interesting, as the play on gender and new masculinities finds fresh expression in the post 9/11 Westerns.

Feminising the Wilderness

Some, if not all, of the post 9/11 Westerns oppose the ideological framework within which the Western has had to work and the Western *Brokeback Mountain*, shifts this framework markedly since John Ford's high water mark in the 1940s onwards. In particular, the central figure of the hero, confident in his masculinity and physical prowess, the man who knows what a man's gotta do, now seems threatened by an alliance of forces. Of all the peculiar responses that American culture manifested post 9/11, perhaps none was more incongruous than the desire to rein in a liberated female population. In this way, women's independence had become implicated in the nation's failure to protect itself and that women's liberation had "feminized" the men and in doing so left the nation vulnerable to attacks. Brooks (2001)

With a plethora of media commentaries about the notions of emasculisation and weakness in light of the terrorists attacks on America and America defaulting back to frontier values, *Brokeback Mountain* probably feels like a slap in the face as its take on the most sacred of American genres, the Western and in the words of B. Ruby Rich "and queered it." (Rich, 2005)

Illustration 3

Most Westerns are dominated by the fantasies of white men. Westerns link masculinity with outdoor living, activity, adventure, mobility, emotional restraint and public power and femininity in *Brokeback Mountain* is represented as a threat to masculine independence and interrupts male fun and the Wyoming landscape signifies a space of homosexual desire and fulfillment. The film can also be seen as a melodrama: its dramatic core, like that of romantic fiction and the woman's picture, concerns desire, male desire in this case, and its vicissitudes and the conflict between individual desire and social responsibility. There are several scenes where traditional modes of masculinity in the Western are resisted, such as when the two main cowboys revealing their true feelings and consummate their love for each other.

But haven't cowboy flicks always had a tradition of gay subtexts, about men getting it on or squabbling with other men? Think of Montgomery Clift in *Red River* (1948) *Howard Hawks* and the emerging "feminisation" of male cultures

through fashion and body style, not to mention a new generation of male Method actors whose performance style centered on qualities of emotionality and intensity, such as James Dean and Marlon Brando.

Illustration 4

Think of the classic Western film *Shane* (1950), George Stevens which features a scene where the two main protagonists, Shane and Joe Starrett have to remove a tree stump at twilight. The scene emphasises the back-aching physicality of the action. Shane and Starrett heave against the stump, with their rippling muscles gleaming and on show, whilst the music further elevates the passage with surging strings and brass, conveying triumph, rejoicing and male bonding.

Chapter one will provide, if some what briefly, insights into topics ranging from the reception of post 9/11 American cinema, focusing on the Western and films that evoked Western themes. The feeling among moviegoers, it seemed, was that in the fearful days following 9/11, the kinds of movies people wanted to see were the uplifting, rousing, heroic kinds. Audiences

were glad to have big screen escapism on offer with *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* series of films in November 2001. However the success of such films as *Collateral Damage* (2001) *Andrew Davies, Black Hawk Down,* (2001), *Ridley Scott* and the popular television series *24* have all benefited from a growing audience appetite for war, regenerative violence, revenge and action films in the post 9/11 period of the campaign against al-Qaida and the Taliban. An ideal American equation emerged: patriotism equals profit. Indeed, the success of *Black Hawk Down*, *Collateral Damage*, *Kill Bill, The Punisher, A History of Violence* and other films, is also suggestive; ideologically they seem to both indulge in an almost reductive 'us-versus-them' absolutism, which was befitting of the mood of at least some of the populace. In monitoring the immediate post-9/11 media closely, you find them dominated by enthusiastic reports of a mass retreat by women into feminine domesticity, and a wholesale revival of John Wayne manliness.

The first chapter also aims to track and interrogate the Western as a narrative that resonates with the evolving political culture of the United States, from the pivotal 1890s, through the post WWII and the Cold War, through to the impact of 9/11 and the War on Terror. Just as the Western as myth had been evoked in previous times of wars, crisis and fear, so it would be called up again in the wake of 9/11. With Bush being identified with cowboys and western/frontier ideology as a way of framing the events of 9/11, the Western film genre took on an importance and resurgence that had not been as prominent since post WW II and the Cold War. But a closer inspection reveals that many of these Westerns and the films that evoke Western themes oppose the ideological framework within which the Western has had to work and offer a displaced and oppositional representation and commentary on the idea of masculinity and the events consuming American politics.

Chapter one will also explore the notion that the Western has often been described as a conservative film genre, one that stresses heightened versions of masculinity and individualism and that is certainly one of the inspirations for the cowboy mentality evoked by the Reagan White House and in particular the second Bush Family White House. Westerns are of interest because they

occupied a prioritised position in relation to twentieth century constructions of masculinity. However, the comments and ideas raised in chapter one will also pivot around the exposition of the contradictions in the Westerns constructions of masculinity, post 9/11. Just as such films as *The Searchers*, and working with Jimmy Stewart and later Gary Cooper, Anthony Mann created a magnificent view of the West, tempered by the bitterness of his leading characters, in movies such as *Bend of the River*, *The Naked Spur*, *The Man From Laramie*, and *Man of the West*, so to were there seated faults in the bedrock of American society, which were causing cracks to appear in the previously impregnable carapace of the male hero.

Chapter one will also provide a detailed analysis of David Cronenberg's *A History of Violence* (2005). The film center's on the character Tom Stall, (Viggo Mortensen), a humble small town diner owner and happily married to Edie, a small town lawyer and father to two kids. This domestic idyll is shattered when two violent thugs turn up and, in self-defence, Stall disposes of them with quick efficiency. Soon after, his heroic antics attract the attention of gangsters who are hell-bent on killing Tom and anyone who gets in their way. Suddenly we are presented with this mild mannered Tom Destry, or Ransom Stoddard, figure, (characters played by James Stewart and who both try to civilize the West via the use of Far East ideals, such as chivalry, etiquette, education and the law, but find that they can only tame the West through deception and violence) putting on his guns and blows away the villains with a cowboys ease and agility. The movie seems to demonstrate not merely that there is a point at which a man will fight but that he is a better man for it, a real man at last.

A United States, in a period of strange contradiction, of being a superpower and yet existing in a state of vulnerability, is reflected in this film. Those immortal lines from classic Westerns "he doesn't look so tough" from *The Gunfighter (1950)* and "You don't look like no rootin', tootin' son of a bitch and cold-blooded assassin" from Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven (1992)* spring to mind and reflect the fact that America is unable to shape the course of crucial events. However, *A History of Violence*, not to mention several other post

9/11 Westerns, mirrors the sense that America has had to embrace the possibility of violence to defend that which it cherishes. *A History of Violence* becomes "one man's existential crisis, as a disconcerting analysis of the nature of identity, or as an allegory for America's psychic identification with the myth of regenerative violence." (Fuller, 2005, p14)

Chapter Two will explore the notion that, although the Western has often been in some sense about masculinity, founded on the male point of view and fantasies of White, male power and Western heroes have been regularly invoked as markers against which masculine behaviour should be judged, there has always been another side to the Western, another shadow that it casts. Chapter Two will provide a detailed analysis of the Western *Brokeback Mountain* and will explore how in the symbolic universe of the Western, there as always been an absolute and value-laded division between the male and female spheres. Masculinity is often linked with outdoor living, activity, adventure, emotional restraint and public power. However, in *Brokeback Mountain*, a process of feminizing the hero is evident and championed. It seems our cowboy protagonists are marked as too closely linked to the feminine sphere, as they are incapable of forceful action, lack combat skills, are domesticated and are willing to express emotion, love between two men, but above all are idealistic and committed to romance.

It seems that the Western has always centered on the importance of the relationship between men and has had constantly to negotiate a complexly orchestrated set of homophobic and homosocial anxieties. Westerns are clearly male melodramas, disturbed and disturbing, at times hysterical in their character studies and fevered in their crisis of male identity.

Chapter 1

The Cowboys of Yesterday

According to Richard Harvey and Jill Poppy, "beyond anything else the Western was America's most significant contribution to the cinema. More than any other Hollywood genre, the Western offered a potent mythology, retold by succeeding generations." (Harvey & Poppy, 2006). The Western is a unique American narrative genre that has developed over more than two centuries and is now recognized and consumed worldwide.

The Western's most distinctive expressions can be traced in literature, popular fiction, paintings, photography, music, sport, advertising, television and film. Commentators on the Western and its themes often have remarked that the genre is tinged with a strong sense of melancholy and nostalgia. It evokes the lost world of the old frontier, a time and place when many think men had more of the freedom and independence that Americans believe makes a man a man. As Tuska (1985) states, the Western offers an ideology of frontier values, firmly founded on the male point of view and fantasies of White male power and Western heroes, whether in the form of cowboys, gunfighters, marshals, cavalry officers, scouts or drifters, have been regularly invoked as indicators of masculine behaviour. The language, imagery and values of the frontier are central to American cinema, indeed to American culture. Westerns occupied a prioritised position in relation to twentieth century constructions of masculinity. (McGee, 2007)

As Eric Patterson put it:

> Heroic Western narratives have served to justify transformation
> and often destruction of indigenous peoples and ecosystems, to
> rationalize the supposedly superior economic and social order
> organized by European Americans, and particularly to depict and
> enforce the dominant culture's ideals of competitive masculine
> individualism. (E, Patterson, 2008)

The Western and Political Culture

This signifies nothing less than "the creation of national narratives." But this myth did not appear organically or naturally. Rather, the mythology started long before the cinema came along to exploit it and was deliberately constructed to serve a purpose.

The origin of the myth is bound up in the upheavals of the 1890s, a transitional decade that saw Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893) become the blueprint for the study of the West for much of the twentieth century. Turner writes:

> The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and
> the advance of American settlement Westward, explain American
> development…This fluidity of American life, this expansion
> Westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the
> simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating
> American character…In this advance the frontier is…the meeting
> point between savagery and civilisation.
> (Turner, 1996: pp 1-3)

Turner strongly asserts that values such as democracy, individualism and nationalism, are the very values that have came to underpin American society and are firmly rooted in the traditions of the Western frontier. In this sense the

American frontier became the embodiment of all that was good about America, bestowing it with qualities associated with tradition, inspiration, progress and heroism and the repository of these values, which could heal America's ills in contemporary times. In this way, the Western has become entwined with being part of the American Dream and has remained relevant to aspirations and anxieties of an ever-changing America. The Western myth and its ideals have become synonymous with the social, cultural and political fabric of American society and nowhere is this more evident than in the Westerns and films that evoke Western themes produced during the anxieties of the "War on Terror" and the events of 9/11.

In the above quotation Turner reprises the historical conflict from which the Western movie extracts one of its main reference points.   The Bush Administration's quest to eradicate "evil", and "punish the aggressor" with a "need for retaliation" against a faceless enemy, replaces the international threat and fear of the spread and contamination of Communism and the savagery of the 'Indian.'

During the 1850s the European settlers who were advancing westward to monopolize the rich resources of the land increasingly began to perceive the Indians as a disruption to their manifest destiny and moved toward eliminating them from their path. The European Americans who travelled to the plains had little comprehension, sympathy or respect for the culture of the "savage." The "evil" character of Islamic militants and radicalized terrorists resembles these earlier evildoers in the saga of Western civilization against savagery, notably the eradication of the "other", the Indian. (McVeigh, 2007)

Illustration 5

Kathryn Westcott notes that American presidents have affiliated themselves with cowboys for nearly a century because:

> ''the cowboy represents a popular point of reference in
> American culture. Such presidents as Teddy Roosevelt,
> Johnson, Carter, Reagan, and even Clinton, who, although
> not easily associated with the Western or the cowboy
> mystique, asserted that his favourite film is *High Noon*
> (1951) and claims to have seen it seventeen times,
> which speaks volumes about the Western being perhaps
> the most recognisable and influential of American cultural forms.''

(Westcott, *BBC News Online,* 2003)

As I discussed in the introduction, within less than a week of the aftermath of 9/11 President Bush's speeches were filled with Western frontier language with such remarks as "We'll smoke them out" and "Wanted Dead or Alive", all of which clearly crystallised the idea of frontier justice and retribution and evoke the deep influence of Western mythology on the political culture of the United States in the twenty-first century. The American hero *par excellence* is the cowboy, who rides and shoots and stands between the opposing forces, the quintessential American figure of action and heroism, embodying notions

of masculinity, strength and individualism. Evoking the myth of the West went some way in cementing the President's role as a cowboy, as well as echoing America's historical consciousness and served to galvanize a nation. This image of the Lone Ranger evoked the myth of the Wild West meta-narrative and provided contemporary events with a sense of familiarity and protection. Thus, the Western offered the American people hope in the form of victories of American tradition over previous encounters with an external, alien force. It was as John Cawelti, claims that the "Western allows male aggressions that are rooted in a modern industrial society to be assuaged through identification with the hero's legitimized killing of opponents." (Cawelti, J, 1990, pp 422)

Thus it cannot be a coincidence that there has been a resurgence in American cinema in the last few years particularly with the return of the Western film genre and its themes. It is relatively easy to look back and project onto John Ford's high-water mark of the 1950s – 70s Westerns, social concerns of the time, the Cold War, McCarthyism, Vietnam and so on, but a close look at their modern reincarnations also reveals desperate attempts to wrestle with social anxieties and this chapter will attempt to discuss and, hopefully, reveal how the ideologies found in those films since 9/11 are markedly different from those prior.

Throughout the aftermath of 9/11, the Bush Administration, coupled with the media, attempted to position the attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon as a reprise of Pearl Harbor. The aim, it seemed, was to reinvigorate a sense of national unity and sacrifice, by promoting a re-emergence of traditional masculinity. John Wayne-like longevity and domination was achieved. While some contemporary films offer escapism, the majority of Hollywood's output since 9/11, seem centred on a desire to replicate the idea of the "just war" and the myth of regenerative violence and revenge. As Silberstein observes, "As the War on Terrorism was formulated, familiar images and themes contributed to the consolidation of support [for the prosecution] of a war on Afghanistan" (Silberstein 2002, p XII). Even as the European press lambasted these Wild West frontier attitudes to the atrocities, it seemed Americans endorsed this line of action, maybe because it offered a

sense of familiar security to the national psyche. Just as a large number of films in the 80s demonstrated and championed a certain gung-ho, red blooded Americanism, with muscle men like Sylvester Stallone, Chuck Norris and Arnold Schwarzenegger flaunting their torso's. Such films as *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), *George P Cosmatos* and *Red Dawn* (1984), *John Milius* did nothing less than revisit the Vietnam War to show that the US could win. These films become an exercise in inchoate rage, a rampage of killing enemies and Communists, whilst also demonstrating a disturbing expression of its audiences' blood lust.

Borne of Repression

Like *Unforgiven* (1992), *Clint Eastwood, Ballad of Little Jo* (1993), *Maggie Greenwald, Dead Man*(1995), *Jim Jarmusch* and the *Hi-Lo Country,*(1998), *Stephen Frears, A History of Violence* (2005) is an adventurous post-modern Western, critiquing the cowboy myth and representations of masculinity, whilst testifying to its power, both problematising and celebrating masculinity and the role of the hero. The stark rhetoric of the Bush Administration's quest to eradicate "evil" finds a perfect correlation in the key symbols of the Western, particularly in *A History of Violence,* where the heroic cowboy/gunfighter (Tom Stall), confident in his masculinity and physical prowess, the man who knows what a man's gotta do, purges the small American town from a world of violence and bad men. In a Western, there lies dormant a strain of cruelty in the idyllic frontier town and this must be cleansed by the stalwart hero.

A History of Violence opens with one of the most familiar of Western openings: the preamble introduces two drifters who ride into a small pastoral town in their Ford Mustang on a hot, bright morning, lazily reflecting about their tiresome journey and boredom in this small town. The shot extends into one long, fixed, languid take and by the time you ascertain that there has been no cut or departure, a Hitchcockian unease manifests itself, that these strangers mean trouble. The opening credit sequence almost parodies the three men waiting for a train of *High Noon* (1951) and not unlike the beginning

of *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), *Sergio Leone,* where the camera in this film lingers interminably on a fly on one man's face, water dripping onto another man's head and the loud knuckle cracking of a third man to suggest the idea of three bored men waiting for a train. One of the drifters, dressed in black from head to toe, decides to settle their motel bill. Meanwhile the camera tracks the other drifter who rustles up their trusty stead, a Ford Mustang, to the front door. And even when the film is not explicitly a Western, cowboy/frontier elements can be discerned, *A History of Violence* can be read as a modern western.

Just as the director, begins to inflect, adapt and subvert the iconic motifs and conventions of the genre with this opening scene, he also subjects us to a most ghastly scene. The two drifters have brutally killed the motel owners and unbeknownst to them a whimpering pre-schooler emerges from an adjoining door, and one of the men calmly draws his gun and shoots her. Suddenly the ideological framework within which the Western has had to work is reinstated, the film drawing strength from the roots of the genre, the accreted meanings of character and convention and we are back in familiar Western territory, with our knowledge of evil rolling into a quiet town, destined to cause pain, suffering and inevitably death for the locals.

Illustration 6

With no time to recover, Cronenberg transports the viewer to the quaint mid-western town of Millbrook, where angelic Sarah Stall, (Heidi Hayes) the same age as the slain girl, wakes from a nightmare about "shadow monsters." Her doting father, mother and older brother keep vigil at her bed side, the father, Tom Stall, re-assures her that there are no such things as monsters.

We are then given a tour of this idyllic small town and its bland 'folks', Millbrook is a town so cosily Rockwellian, where there really could be no depravity lurking beneath the community. Tom Stall is a humble but highly respected small local diner owner and his wife, Edie, a small-town lawyer, both pillars of this blissful community. The myth of the family unit almost seems like a parody. The film lays it on so thick the notion that bad things don't really happen in Millbrook. But the myths of suburbia, and the small town idyll and normality are torn asunder with fissures of chaos, disorder and violence as the two drifters try to hold up Tom's diner and in the process kill some of the towns residents.

By evoking and revising the Western, Cronenberg might be seen to fine-tune Bush's cowboy diplomacy, where genre trademarks – bin Laden wanted "dead or alive" – permeate into foreign policy. Conventional wisdom about the events of September 11 is clear: 'America will never be the same again', observed Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein on the floor of the Senate. Just like in *A History of Violence*, the attacks from 9/11 were unimaginable and nothing like this had ever happened before, the experience was difficult to assimilate. As Susan Faludi states the "cacophony of chanted verities induced a kind of cultural hypnosis; Americans seemed to slip into a somnambulistic state." (Faludi, S, 2007, p2) Like Pearl Harbor, the events of 9/11 could only be described as a tuning point in history, when America's myopic superpower status and confidence was forever lost.

One of the strongest constructs of the Western is that of the gunfighter and this hero *par excellence* was evoked in countless films post 9/11. The cowboy/gunfighter was more than a hero; he was a symbol of the most basic qualities that made America great. The ruggedness, the tough independence,

the sense of personal conviction and courage, reflected the best of the American national character. *A History of Violence* in this way is a "war on terror" Western that is a Western that is concerned with and readily illustrative of the nature of existence under a looming threat, only vaguely glimpsed at.

With this film, Cronenberg examines the desire stirring beneath the reticent men who were expected to be masculine and heroes, but also how that desire manifests itself through physical violence. On the surface Tom Stall represents the nice, hardworking family man, but when push comes to shove, has the capacity and willingness to respond to a situation that is as ruthless and deadly as his adversaries. As the pair of bad strangers decide to muscle in by taking over Tom's diner and when the lives of his work colleagues, friends and local residents are threatened, Tom suddenly leaps into action, putting on his guns and blows away the villains with a cowboy's ease and agility and getting wounded in the process. It's an exhilarating moment, as abrupt and exciting as Alan Ladd, the archetypal passive resister, first firing his gun in *Shane* (1953) or Gary Cooper who yields to his long-held-in-check violent nature in order to do his brutal kin in, in *Man of the West* (1958) *Anthony Mann*.

A History of Violence evokes and recounts, as Westerns do time and again, the courage of the cowboy who must fight against hostiles who would dispute the advance of civilisation and who must stand up against outlawry and make the streets safe for women and children. What seems so paradoxically about this set up is the transformation of this diligent, caring father and husband into an efficient and violent killer, a movement that comes easy for Tom it seems. It's as if the knife that pierced through Tom's foot begins to infect him and in turn brings about the return of the repressed, or in the nature of identity, the return of the phallus.

In the classic narrative, law and order can only be imposed by a strong man who is prepared to pit his masculinity against other men. But strength comes at a price. The hero suffers stress, anxiety, doubts and setbacks. Masculinity is tested to the limit and sometimes beyond. One set-back for Tom is that,

having eliminated the bad guys the TV media frames him as a hero and Tom tries to dilute his new found status, but to no avail as in the process the media coverage give him unwanted publicity. The attention attracts the notice of shady, evil figures from Tom's past, in the form of one-eyed villain Carl Fogarty (Ed Harris) and his band of henchmen.

The association between masculinity and violence is at the heart of the Western. Prowess with a gun and the willingness to use it in the cause of right are the signs of manliness, an association given reinforcement in the character of Tom Stall. It soon becomes clear there is a shadow monster that Sarah Stall dreamt about, particularly in Tom's life, which soon manifests itself when he turns before out very eyes into the cold blooded killing machine he once was. The film shows that Tom's wildness still churns beneath his placid exterior. Like Alan Ladd in *Shane,* Gary Cooper in *Man of the West* and Clint Eastwood in *Unforgiven*, Tom Stall wants to lay aside the violence of his past, but like the Greek heroes, to which he is akin, fate will not allow him to alter what is destined for him. This is a classic Western plot: the narrative of the reformed gunfighter starting a new life and then being confronted by his past and the dark side of his personality.

Illustration 7

Soon after the head villain, Fogaty, confronts Tom at his diner and scornfully addresses Tom as Joey Cusack from Philadelphia. Is this a case of mistaken identity or is Tom really Cusack? As his wife Edie asks him "are you, like, some multiple personality schizoid?" And if so, has he changed his ways and found redemption? Under pressure from this seemingly Hitchcockian "wrong man" story and constantly hounded by his past, Tom's idyllic life begins to disintegrate. *A History of Violence* goes some way in emphasising the hero's initial unwillingness to get involved in the situation that confronts him. His life has been changed by renouncing and escaping from his past and been changed by the love of a good woman and a doting family. He has left violence behind him. Of course it's not just Cronenberg who has employed this structure. In his book *Sixguns and Society*, Will Wright (1975) identifies the hero's reluctance to get involved as a key constituent of the classical Western plot. Although he conspicuously tries to avoid the kind of confrontations he is best prepared to face, he suffers humiliation, notions of inadequacy and near death.

In this way Tom Stall can be seen to represent an American nation weary of conflict but aware of the existence of and the need for readiness and willingness against new threats. America finds itself in a state of strange contradiction: of administering huge power while existing in a state of vulnerability. This is reflected in Stall's reluctance to take a stand and yet he is the "top gun of the West", which also echoes America's politically dominant position, yet he cannot prevent confrontations, just as America is unable to shape the course of crucial events.

The Western is generally steeped in a moralistic machismo, where "a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do." And yet, in keeping with the notion that the hero is unwilling to get involved or pick up the metaphorical gauntlet of the hero, James Mangold's remake of the Delmer Daves Western *3:10 to Yuma* (1957) confirms this notion, even more strongly than any other post 9/11 Western. Mangold's film is about the little man as hero – the rancher Dan Evans (Christian Bale) who is hired to put outlaw Ben Wade (Russell Crowe) on the train that will take him to prison. There is a certain degree of

biblical-ness to Dan's plight, his leg injury, the drought that is destroying his livelihood, the land barons who demand repayment and the wife and sons who've almost lost faith in him, all these forces seem to conspire against Dan and hamper him in fulfilling any kind of active role or where he can make a decision and stand up to these forces. It's almost like his heroism lies in the way he refuses to accept his plight. In this western tale, Evans and his family live in impoverished circumstances created by difficult conditions and unfair social practices. These things eat away at the guilt-ridden psychology of a man who can no longer provide for his family. Dan's personal crisis manifests into a dangerous conflict with Wade that reveals the heavy burden men carry for their masculine identities and illustrates the steep price they pay for their social duties.

However, Dan's efforts are almost always tinged with a certain degree of pathos and failure, as all Dan can do when trying to escort the bad Ben Wade, is buy time. The money he will earn, if he makes it (and there are several men who bail out feeling the odds are too great) will keep his ranch going for a certain degree of time, but nothing sustainable for the distant future. Dan makes a plea for more money; in return he will make the sacrifice of transporting Ben to the train single handed. Underlying this choice, we discover, is the chance to embrace a life worthy of retelling, particularly to his sons, so he could "be the only man to walk Ben Wade to the train when no one else would." The film portrays this strange masculine desire for dramatic heroism as a powerful trope that illustrates the close kinship between living as a historical being and the desire to be a part of living history. (Ryan, 2008, pp 68)

Steven Spielberg's so-called 9/11 film *War of the Worlds* (2006), which very much evokes Western style themes, demonstrates the recurring theme of the reluctant hero to get involved. Throughout the film, Tom Cruise is plagued with evidence of his unmanly ineptitude: his ex-wife holds him in contempt and has lost faith in his skills as a father and husband and she won't even trust him carrying the children's luggage; his own son thinks he's a coward and he can't even control his own car. As Faludi states in movies like the

2005 *War of the Worlds*, you have Tom Cruise as a "deadbeat divorced dad emasculated by his wife, reclaiming his manhood by saving their little girl." (Faludi, 2007). In construction, the ending of *War of the Worlds* echoes the pivotal ending to *The Searchers* (1958) *John Ford* where John Wayne, left to

Illustration 8

pursue his search for his niece who has been kidnapped by Indians, finds and rescues the girl and carries the young girl home back to safety. "It's some bizarre, weirdly out-of-proportion fixation," Ms. Faludi (2007) said, "an exaltation of American masculinity in an intergalactic crisis." Faludi's comments seem to resonate with the idea of the frontiersman or cowboy and their guilt ridden failure to protect their women and children from Indian attacks.

Identity Crisis

The tragic events of 9/11 shattered the protective myth surrounding America and the notion that America was impregnable and that families and communities were safe in the arms of their men began to crumble. The

events of that morning made it clear that America couldn't rely on its protectors, even with the White House having been pre-warned of imminent terrorist attacks. In short, the entire edifice of American security had failed to provide a shield. Suddenly media and political commentaries evoked ideas of impotence and weakness and the suspicion that the nation and its men had gone soft, and that America was lacking in masculine fortitude. The collapse of the phallic symbol of America, the Twin Towers, could be re-configured as a symbol of the nation's emasculation. (Faludi, 2007)

Of all the strange responses that manifested post 9/11, perhaps none was more incongruous than the desire to rein in a liberated female population. In some strange occurrence, women's independence and liberation had become implicated in America's failure to protect itself.

That charge was made most famously by Rev. Jerry Falwell.

> "I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen, the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle. By altering traditional gender roles, feminists and their fellow travellers had caused God to lift the veil of protection which has allowed no one to attack America on our own soil since 1812."
> (Falwell, 2001, cited in *Falwell Apologizes to Gays, Feminists, Lesbians, CNN.com, 2001)*)

These allegations soon became entangled with the notion that women's liberation had feminized American men and, in doing so, left the nation vulnerable to attack. "Well, you see, there is a very serious problem in this country," Camille Paglia asserted to CNN host Paula Zahn a few weeks after 9/11. Thanks to feminism, Paglia said, "men and women are virtually in distinguishable in the workplace. Indeed the man has become like a woman." (Paglia, 2001, p23). Numerous press articles fixated on the idea that Americans were "soft and weak."

The feminist influence that had allegedly turned the American nation into a "nanny state" finds a perfect correlation in the representation of the main action hero in *A History of Violence.* Tom Stall has an emaciated look, the skin stretched tight on his face and the thinning hair greying and wispy. The film goes to some length to empathise just how un-heroic he is. Western heroes don't usually have children, not Gary Cooper in High Noon nor Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* nor the hero of *Shane.* Kids tie you down, even more than a wife. Tom Stall has renounced his past as an outlaw and gunfighter and is reluctant to get involved in any action.

Right from the very beginning of the film, Tom Stall's role as the head of the house, who can assert his masculinity, is undermined and under severe scrutiny. When his daughter Sarah wakes from having a nightmare, her father tries to reassure her, but its actually his son and wife who comfort her and take charge of the situation. Tom is pushed aside, his role and function restricted and he appears quite aloof to the situation. The next day, Tom is trying to prepare breakfast for his son and daughter, affectionately opening the box of cereal for his son, only to have the son snatch the box away and make breakfast for himself and the daughter, suggesting that he doesn't need his father's help. Tom comes across as a little coy and childish when asking Edie, his wife and parental figure, for a lift to work. Having given Tom a lift she asserts her authority by ensuring that Tom is ready when he finishes work so that she can pick him, echoing a typical parent and child relationship. Also, it is Edie herself who represents the law, as she is a lawyer, whereas Tom runs a small town diner. Edie is represented as the confident, authoritarian figure and flaunts her superior position when she initiates the sex scenes with Tom. It is Edie's idea to dress up as a naughty cheer leader and disguise her persona as loving wife and mother and she is very much at ease, taking charge by gaining the dominant position by being on top of Tom. Her efforts are greeted by a certain degree of shyness and perplexion from Tom. Although Tom and Edie seem to have a happy marriage, the fact that he's aroused by her in a cheerleader outfit connotes that he can't relate to her as a strong woman, both mother figure and lawyer.

Soon more strangers arrive in town: Carl Fogarty turns up with two hard men in his employ. Tom Stall has transformed himself so completely into a small town family man that maybe there were years when he believed the story himself. The arrival of Fogarty makes the illusion impossible to sustain and more confrontations and a face off ensues. During a confrontation between Carl and Tom, Tom demonstrates his prowess with a gun and swiftly disposes of Carl's two henchmen with grisly ingenuity. However it is Jack who rescues his father by dishing out a savage, but decisive, decision by ruthlessly blowing the main villain apart with a shotgun. His action comes faster than you expect and it's unsettling. The resulting expression that Tom bestows upon his newly initiated son is restrained but truly unnerving. Within a few brief moments, Tom is able to subtly convey a startling array of emotions, which speak volumes, such as regret, approval, respect, but also concern at his son's actions. Tom's expression evokes feelings of contempt and possibly hostility, as he is usurped from the heroic centre of the film and his son, Jack, now represents a threat to his own patriarchal position. From this point, it's difficult to pin point what Jack's feelings are in light of what he's done. We are not sure, having won by violence, whether he is glad to have won, whether he is sickened and disgusted at the choice forced upon him. It seems that Jack, just like his father experiences no shock or horror at what he has done but only a new self assurance and pleasure, as this incident spurs him on to inflict a heavy beating on his bullying tormenter at school. Is Jack the real hero of the film and Tom the real monster or villain?

There have always been 'Kid' figures in the Western film from earliest times and who are invariably delinquents, who are always in need of instruction from their elders and betters. In *The Searchers* Jeffrey Hunter as Martin is the butt of a series of heavy-handed put downs from Ethan (John wayne) and in Howard Hawks Westerns a succession of youths – Montgomery Clift in *Red River*, Ricky Nelson in *Rio Bravo* (1959) *Howard Hawks* and James Caan in *El Dorado* (1966) are almost crushed by the immense weight of John Wayne's authority. But in *A History of Violence,* because of his dad, Tom/Joey, Jack makes a discovery about himself that he might not have ever needed (or wanted) to make. Throughout the film there are frequent occurrences of

characters immersed in role-playing, most significant being Tom and his struggle to hide his natural tendencies. Additionally, we also witness Jack discover his physical abilities. What's interesting about this particular scene is that it seems to be setting Jack up as the real hero of the film.

Though Tom is diligent, a caring husband and father, the kind of guy everybody likes, it seems that he is aware of the fact that he hasn't made much of himself in life and it transpires that he harbours a growing resentment towards his older gangster brother, who considers him a mug and a failure. This resentment, coupled with his authority and masculinity denied at every opportunity, begins to eat away at him and blossoms into flamboyant fantasy. After trying to comfort and reassure his daughter, could it be that Tom then falls a sleep and dreams the rest of the movie, or even tries to evade his humdrum small town existence by escaping, Walter Mitty-like, into a realm of fantasy. Tom's fantasy world, born from repression, correlates him with other movie dreamers, such as Walter Mitty and Billy Liar, whose fantasies of themselves as all conquering heroes are reminiscent of a crippling neurosis, even impotence. Its only when Tom fantasises himself as a protector, possessing a prowess with a gun and willingness to use it in the cause of right, signs of manliness that he reclaims his masculinity. But as the fantasy intensifies, so that by the time he carries out more slaughters he has become Joey, his alter ego. (Fuller, 2005)

There are strained moments in the household as Edie worries about a seismic shift in Tom's mood and temperament and angrily confronts him about his split personality tendencies and his proneness to physical violence within a blink of the eye. This newfound propensity for violence manifests itself when he fucks her savagely on the staircase. Frustrated that Edie ignores and won't accept him, a heated argument ensues, escalating in Tom ruthlessly grabbing at her, pursuing her up the stairs, before overwhelming her on the stairs. However, what is preconceived as a sexual assault is momentarily subdued when Tom restrains from his apparent repulsive behaviour, withdrawn and disgusted with his actions. Shockingly, it is Edie, who initiates the virtual rape. Tom's new persona as the violent virile leading man, prone

to violence, turns Edie on and as she attempts to acquaint herself with Joey, inviting an aggressive response, the two collide on the stairs violently pummelling each other. The sexual assault concludes with Edie discarding a fragile Tom like some used tissue, confusion, coupled with a sense of realisation sets in, as she conveys a sense of repulsion. But the question that emerges is who she is repulsed at, Tom or Joey? Is it her violent attacker or her weak husband, or maybe herself? The sexual assault goes some way to reinforce the notion that she's asking for it, begging for it and that deep down she wants to be made submissive. It gets at the roots of the fantasises that men carry from earliest childhood and confirms their secret fears and prejudices that women respect only brutes. The movie taps a sexual sadism that violence is erotic because a man's prowess is in fighting and loving and its intent it seems is to demonstrate that not merely that there is a point at which a man will fight but that he is a better man for it, a real man at last.

Way of the Gun

What is a gun but, of course, the ultimate signifier of masculinity and law? The role of the gun as a symbol of masculine power and authority has long been a staple of the movies, particularly the Western. Its relationship to male sexuality is obvious in its role as the ultimate phallic symbol. But what does it mean to show the empowerment of a gun? It means at one level that the film is enacting the ways in which we live in society that equates weapons with physical and transformative power. The gun has played a central role in American mythology as an instrument of self-actualisation. Yet the film is also addressing the question of what happens when people get guns and use them, not only to defend themselves but to also use them in anger, as men can do. It is traditional, of course, for the pleasure of watching the gunslinger to be tempered by our understanding that within the framework of Hollywood Westerns they must be punished or vanquished in some way. The re-sexualising of Tom finds a perfect correlation with that of Sean Penn's character's, whose wife loses confidence in him for not taking a stand and seeking retribution for the kidnapping and murder of their young daughter, in

Mystic River (2004), *Clint Eastwood.* Having inflicted his own lethal style of vigilante justice, in the same way as town, Sean Penn's character becomes almost re-sexualised and his wife, turned on by his actions, allows him back in the bedroom. Even the town sheriff in *A History of Violence* likens Tom to Dirty Harry.

However, *A History of Violence*, not to mention several other post 9/11 'Westerns', mirrors the sense that America has had to embrace the possibility of violence to defend that which it cherishes. *A History of Violence* becomes one man's existential crisis, as a disconcerting analysis of the nature of identity, or as an allegory for America's psychic identification with the myth of regenerative violence. This idea of the myth of regenerative violence is echoed in other post 9/11 Westerns. *Open Range* (2004) could be taken as a timely commentary on America's incumbent cowboy leader and his aggressive and vengeful policies.

Why Shane Always Comes Back?

Of all the American genres, the Western is arguably the most durable. The Western has tended to document not the history of the West but those cultural values that have become cherished foundations of our national identity. The Western legitimises our ideals of individualism, initiative, independence, persistence and dignity. *A History of Violence* in many ways tries to encapsulate the cultural ethos of the Western, in particular, using the Western film *Shane* as a model. Embodying, as it does, the look and feel of the Western, *Shane* becomes an essential rarity; it not only preserves but also honours the beliefs in America's heritage. Tom's image and style is in some ways reflected in the character of Shane. The two men embody strength and courage in the face of crisis and as such are almost incorruptible articulations of American heroism. *Shane* rides down from the wilderness and into the live of a settlement in need of his special talents. A stranger who doesn't belong and can never be accepted, he is a man with a past and without a future. He

exists only for the moment of confrontation; and once that moment has passed, he has no place in the community.

An initial point of reference for *A History of Violence's* deconstruction of the Western genre is the hero's arrival: traditionally, the character comes from nowhere, has no history, and no name. However what is so startling is that this shadow monster and this violence is inherit in the town from the very beginning of the film, almost repressed, and lays dormant as Tom's first violent reaction in the diner at the beginning of the film is not the first moment of Tom's transformation. In most Westerns, the hero/cowboy's journey would move him through a world of violence until the bad elements were purged from the community. This would suggest that Tom begins the story as an innocent, instead his violent tendencies remain hidden and this evil element is very much part of the fabric of this small town. In a Western, the idyllic frontier town hides a stain of evil that must be eradicated by the stalwart hero; it's the bad men who are the nonconformists. But, as with Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) in *The Searchers*, the real depravity lurking beneath the community is Tom. As in *Shane,* you would think that in order for the small town and its community to grow and prosper, it must do so without Tom. Tom's clinical dispatch of the various 'bad men' is shocking and as the body count stacks up, the violent images become more disturbing; the images of scars and bruises on Edie's body after Tom has raped her on the stairs, one of the drifters in the diner has his head blown apart and the film has lingering shots of the gaping wound throbbing, all very much hallmarks of David Cronenberg's films. What's more disturbing is the fact that most of these grotesque images result from the actions of our main hero. Any sense of the cowboy's chivalric code has no place in this re-incarnation of the West and its heroes.

Like *Shane* and also Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*, Tom is the generic loner who belongs to no one and no place. He possesses capability, integrity, and restraint; yet there is a sense of despair and tragedy about him. His past and profession place him on the periphery of law and society. The same skills as a warrior that make him essential to the survival of the community also

make him suspect and even dangerous to that same community and yet as the local town's sheriff says to Tom, "we take care of our own", which implies a certain degree of acceptance and complacency with Tom's actions or past, he's accepted back into the bosom of the community and treated as a hero. The ending of the film indicates that the capacity for violence is merely held in check, not renounced forever. Tom's wildness still churns beneath his placid exterior.

The civilisation that the hero is fighting for is founded on a certain conception of the family: it is for the women and children that the Western hero seeks to 'keep the streets safe.' Civilisation is located in a place of refuge for the defenceless, and this is the realm of women, whose role is essentially a nurturing one. The hero, who often lacks a home himself, recognises that civilisation can only be established by the use of violence. The woman, because of her role, is unable to advocate this necessity for violence, even if she is eventually forced to recognise it. Women in the Western always seem to be advising against violence: as Grace Kelly says to Gary Cooper in *High Noon*, "there's got to be a better way." Edie goes against the grain of the Western's representation of women, in that she actively encourages and incites violence and sexual assault, which both become elements of arousal for her.

If nothing else, the film demonstrates the extent to which issues of traditional female demeanour are central to the film's retooling of the Western film, as Edie is transformed through the series of events in the film, switching without hesitation from devoted sweetheart wife who can cater to her husband's sexual needs and fantasy, to indifferent combative wife able to match her husbands aggression. Indeed, the film goes in some ways to subvert the archetypal family unit, a symbol of stability and traditional values the Western so consistently promotes and presents quite a perverse family – avenging and repressed father, confident, authorative wife who can indulge a specifically American erotic fantasy and incite sexually assault, and the son, a superhero who sheds his secret identity. One reading of the film might suggest that this concern with family, as often championed by Bush and the Western in

general, offers a version of America that is in chaos, a place where traditional roles, whether they be gender roles or heroic models, are no longer stable.

Shadow Monsters

It seems *A History of Violence* runs counter to the traditional ideological drift of the genre, in particular with regard to its stance towards violence, which it strips of its glamour. Tom's motivation to kill all the 'bad men' at the end is no longer justice for a wronged woman or man, or to protect is family, but revenge is inflicted as Tom has got a taste for this and unleashes hell on the man (his brother) who has belittled him all his life and reclaim his masculinity. If it's really an anti-violence picture, we ought to at this point feel that Tom is letting himself down and that the final bout of killing is a betrayal of his new persona that he has invested 15 years in. In fact it's almost impossible to respond to the film in that way. We do not view him dispassionately through the prism of our awakened feelings of anti-violence. Instead, we are implicated in the infliction of violence, as we are on his side, cheering single-handed he takes on a whole mansion full of opponents and kills them all. Does this suggest that we were never really convinced by Tom's reformation? Perhaps it is more that it indicates that Tom's capacity for violence was merely held in check and not renounced forever.

If Bush's heroic presidency was indebted to the conventions and personality of the cowboy/Western mythology, the mythology of the unheralded hero who will emerge and, through a combination of wisdom, skill and violence, triumphs over evil and threat to security, then in the wake of the 'weapons of mass destruction' scandal, there are posed some serious questions for this type of Western mythology. If Bush is evoking the Western era that concerns itself with nostalgia and a vague awareness of political issues, as a way of justifying a military retaliation through the connection to a past where violence was righteous and redemptive and increasingly after the 'weapons of mass destruction' paranoia and deception, traditional patterns in *A History of Violence* are warped and changed. Thus, the "War on Terror", then,

represents a significant fault-line in American culture. As Hellman states, "the pursuit of lost or damaged frontier ideals in a sick contemporary American society." (Hellman, 1999, p 217). The film in some ways speaks of an America that has lost its innocence and has realised it is corrupt, reacting to events such as Guantamano Bay, hostage brutality, weapons of mass destruction fiasco. The Western mythology in *A History of Violence* is subverted, its innocent values lost, along with the possibility of heroic leadership and all of this compounded by American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Chapter 2

Lonesome Cowboys

The commercial and critical success of Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) is an interesting and unpredictable marvel. *Brokeback Mountain* is a landmark American film because of its unique representation of masculinity and male sexual desire between two male cowboys in love and consummating their love for each other.

The cowboys in *Brokeback Mountain* are, of course, light years away from the John Wayne/Clint Eastwood figure of the movies. Whereas the classic cowboys were men of action, confident in their physical prowess and showed little emotion, the cowpokes in *Brokeback Mountain* are predominantly passive victims.

With a plethora of media commentaries about the notions of emasculisation and weakness in light of the terrorists attacks on America and America defaulting back to frontier values, *Brokeback Mountain* probably feels like a slap in the face as its take on the most sacred of American genres, the Western and in the words of B. Ruby Rich "and queered it." Most Westerns are dominated by the fantasies for White men. Westerns link masculinity with outdoor living, activity, adventure, mobility, emotional restraint and public power and femininity in *Brokeback Mountain* is represented as a threat to masculine independence and interrupts male fun and the Wyoming landscape signifies a space of homosexual desire and fulfillment. The film can also be seen as a melodrama: its dramatic core, like that of romantic fiction and the woman's picture, concerns desire, male desire in this case and its vicissitudes and the conflict between individual desire and social responsibility.

It is generally accepted that the Western's representation of women is also hugely skewed. In its heyday (say 1939 to 1959) the Western had too much invested in masculinity and its discontents to spend much time on what

women want. But *Brokeback Mountain* seems to go against the grain of the genre as the film affords its female characters a rich texture and the two female characters provides some of the films most startling and affecting moments.

What's interesting about *Brokeback Mountain*, is that, in the hands of a lesser film director, the female characters may well have been drawn as nags or harpies but Ang Lee allows Ennis's wife Alma (Michelle Williams) a great deal of poignancy, and goes to great lengths to portray the pain and anguish Ennis's infidelity causes her as well as her children. The main staple of the women's suffering is the men's betrayal and homosexuality. The women are fully aware of what their men are up to and yet seem to tolerate it and to some degree offer an undercurrent of understanding. Maybe this understanding stems from the ugly and unsympathetic embodiment of masculinity that pervades the film, and equally suffers alongside their men because the men have been repressed by society to undertake roles that were not right for them.   Some how the wife's don't blame their men for their infidelities but societies heteronormativity is to blame.

But no one would claim *Brokeback Mountain* for feminism as the women still conform to the Western idea of women as binding and restrictive. The two women are still represented as trying to trap their men in domesticity and the film represents fears about the co modification of leisure, with the washing machine and the television as the major scapegoats. The women are defined in terms of conventional notions of marriage and domesticity while also finding space for alternative definitions of femininity, affirming as well as undermining difference.

There are several scenes where traditional modes of masculinity in the Western are resisted, such as the two main cowboys revealing their true feelings and consummate their love for each other. The film's story is shy of the many trappings of the traditional Western – for instance, the film features no gunfights or chases and no Lone Ranger figures or final showdowns, which, as Tompkins (1992) states, have become the most iconic Western

conventions. *Brokeback Mountain* occupies an ambiguous position in relation to the Western genre and offers a complex representation of the Western conventions, particularly with regards to landscape, space and masculinity and heroes.

The most iconic ingredient shared by all Westerns is its setting. Settings have a special resonance in the Western; the great dusty plains and heaving flanks of cattle, and the freedom of the wilderness forms a complex relationship with its central male characters to the landscape. But the Western landscape has a certain tinge of melancholy, isolation, that line between civilization and wilderness, the point at which the struggle between the two is still in progress. One thinks of the rugged mountains, canyons and deserts evoked by John Ford in his favoured use of the Monument Valley landscape, although erupting with raw beauty, sets the stage for the drama of the Western with their sense of death and ubiquitous desolation. (Stewart, 2008)

The story and title, after all, begins in Wyoming and centers on the crucial site of Brokeback Mountain where our two central characters Jack and Ennis first begin a passionate love affair that spans twenty years. *Brokeback Mountain* tells the story of Jack Twist (Jake Gylenhall) and Ennis Delmar (Heath Ledger), two young cowpokes who get jobs tending sheep on a namesake of the film.

Ennis is a boy of so few words and can barely mange to construct a sentence, never mind a conversation, his body language and dead expression signify a guarded exterior coupled with a sense of fearfulness before he even knew what he feared. Jack is more outgoing and the more pro-active partner. After several days have passed on the mountain, tending to the sheep (again this is not in keeping with the traditional cattle ranch and run, and sheep herding has certain connotations of its own) and after much whiskey has been consumed, the cold night sets in and the two characters find themselves violently having sex. Some years pass. Both men get married and settle into the routines of domestication, punctuated less often than Jack would like by "fishing trips."

Illustration 9

Brokeback Mountain, the place, stands at the epicenter of the film, a spatial locus that connotes a number of (often contradictory) meanings for the characters. The majestic mountain represents freedom, unbounded, pure and openness itself; but ultimately serves as an ironic teasing counterpoint to the conflicting relationship of the two main characters. They both dream and desire to as capacious and free as this landscape, but are often overshadowed by it. This paper attempts to unravel the complex layers of meanings surrounding the film's use of space, both the "wide open space" of the eponymous mountain (which both adheres to and subverts the conventional Western landscape, that is, a signifier of freedom from a crippling responsible society that tells them how a man must behave and what he must feel, as in *Stagecoach* (1939) or *The Searchers* (1956), but simultaneously queers the Western landscape and traditional American masculinity.

The film metaphorically blurs the division between inside and outside. Most Westerns generally begin in the outdoors, a lone figure riding through the landscape, heading towards a nameless frontier town and recounts time

and time again the courage of the lone hero who must fight against hostiles who would dispute the advancement of civilisation and make the streets safe for women and children. The violence that they deal out is justified, even though the man who administers it may not always, because of his albeit temporary disposition to a more primitive state, find a place for him within the community or town they have made safe.

Cowboy Junction

In *inside/Out*, Diana Fuss states that the hetro/homo division builds upon the distinction of inside/outside and that queer theory has begun to make clear that "sexual possibilities are no longer thinkable in terms of a simple inside/outside dialectic" (Fuss, 1991:1) The interest and value in *Brokeback Mountain* lies in the way it disrupts the seemingly stable borderlines and thus offer something challenging and oppositional to the binary logic that allegedly regulates sexuality. The landscape of *Brokeback Mountain* itself represents a complex series of multiple signifiers within the film, offering a range of sometimes contradictory meanings and significances. *Brokeback Mountain* is a slow moving post-modern Western, critiquing the cowboy myth, representations of masculinity, and the queering of the Western landscape, whilst testifying to its power, both problematising and celebrating audience's expectations about space, landscape and masculinity within the contexts of the Western genre and queer sexuality.

Lee seems to bring an existential seriousness to the film and offers up a life that is more like a living hell, "characters whose complete suppression of emotion is the unmistakable sign of being imprisoned in hostile, even fascistic environments." Vicari, 2010, cited in *Jump Cut*). Indeed, *Brokeback Mountain* deconstructs the very framework of the social landscape as a series of ugly, complicated face-offs of despair and intolerance. The film is surrounded by a thick air of malevolence, paranoia and violence. Jack's co-workers berate him behind his back. Husbands and wives argue in ways that suggest a lifetime of pent-up anger and murderous rage. Children recoil away

from adults as if they were confounding monsters. Straight men in cowboy bars turn deathlike with any form of look or smile, or sexual advance from another male. The moment of intercourse is always claustrophobic, strained, and even life-threatening.

Critics such as Martin Manalansan have stated that the landscape of *Brokeback Mountain* the film appears lush and highly romanticized. Director Ang Lee and the cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto transform the prose style of Annie Proulx's 1997 short story into expansive visual poetry. Avoiding the trap of clichéd postcard prettiness, the film is testament to the beauty and terror in nature that echo the vivid, torturous and sometimes violent relationship between the two cowpokes. Layers of blue mountains reach out into the distance, overlooked by menacing clouds, a hillside wriggles with sheep, an undisturbed lake stretches out before Jack as he condemns Ennis for not acting on his true feelings seems to signify the future the two men will never have together. A certain "backwardness" is imperative to *Brokeback Mountain's* perspective of the United States. In post 9/11 society, the U.S. West may not appreciate the way it's presented here as a polder of pathic defensiveness and murderous intolerance. This is encapsulated by a childhood memory Ennis is haunted by, of when two old guys shacked up together; they were the talk of the town, until one day they were beaten to death because of their sexual infidelities. Ennis' father made a point of making him witness this tragic and violent incident.

There does seem to be a perspective at work in *Brokeback Mountain.* The film doesn't stress, but appropriates the pain suffered by men like Ennis and Jack, with, what is and isn't permitted by entrenched social attitudes of intolerance and hate, which repress such men from achieving their bliss and butt's them into traditional arrangements.

Illustration 10

Their tragedy is universal. It is the story of a time and a place where two men are forced to deny the only great passion either one will ever feel, but it's also bordering on melodrama. But as Tompkins' has stated, "The Western *answers* the domestic novel. It is the antithesis of the cult of domesticity and romance that dominated American Victorian culture." (Tompkins, 1992, p12)

But surely cowboy flicks were always a tad queer, and even thought of as male melodramas? For good reasons, melodrama has been seen primarily as a woman's mode. In melodrama as a genre, the characters are generally female, among them suffering domestics, sacrificing love for duty and motherhood and seduced romantic heroines. But there is an obvious gender correlation between the conventions and themes of the melodrama genre with that of the film *Brokeback Mountain* and the Western itself. The Western genre has been seen as the site of male action, viewing the Western, especially *Brokeback Mountain*, as male melodrama resituates is as a genre that deals with problems of homosocial identity.

Ennis and Jack, begrudgingly, vow to keep their love hidden amidst the anti-gay hegemony of the West. The landscape of *Brokeback Mount*ain represents for its two main characters the unbridled freedom often connected with the West.

> In the film, the romance between Ennis and Jack is framed as
> 'private' business between two men…Literally and figuratively,
> Ennis and Jack are away from it all, from the turmoil of
> everyday life." (Manalansan, 2007, p97-100)

Thus *Brokeback Mountain* the place signifies as a liberation zone, their very own Eden and craggy cowboy paradise, in which the men escape to, a privileged space where Jack and Ennis love can exist openly. The film is not treading new ground here, as after all, Western landscapes have traditionally been constructed as representations of freedom, openness, redemption and reinvention, but what is interesting is that having a same sex relationship unfold within the American wilderness signifies that homosexuality is both naturalized and nationalized, which is remarkable for such a conservative genre.

Some thirty years before the release of *Brokeback Mountain*, Kites (1969) had configured the wilderness as a spatial location within the American Western genre where freedom and self expression are privileged, as opposed to civilization and the community, which inflicts restrictions, superstructures and social responsibilities on the Western hero. Thus *Brokeback Mountain* is, in many ways, establishing melodrama and queerness into what seems to be the familiar Western landscape.

Brokeback Mountain also compliments the traditional borderlines that set apart the liberating privacy of the Western wilderness from the oppressive, restrictive public space of the Western community. The film sets up the town and its societal ethos as petty, threatening, and demanding; a place where there is little escape or reprieve from hard work, routine, demanding and nagging wives and children. The two character's wives are represented as

trying to trap their men in domesticity and the film represents fears about the commodification of leisure, with the washing machine and the television as the major scapegoats. It's all these forces within the public sphere of the town and community that Jack and Ennis desire to escape from.

As Kites suggests,

> "the town is a world of *insides* in which enclosed spaces and
> cramped rooms mirror the psychological entrapment face by
> Ennis and Jack, who are cabined, cribbed and confined.
> They become impotent, repressed, oppressed" (Kites, 2007, p22-27)

This seems to be a theme that runs throughout many of the post 9/11 Westerns and other non-Western films that echo a certain frontier theme and values, that of the emasculated, impotent, repressed and oppressed male hero. As discussed in the last chapter, on the surface Tom Stall, in *A History of Violence,* represents the nice, hardworking family man, but when push comes to shove, has the capacity, ruthlessness and willingness to respond to a situation that is as deadly as his adversaries. What seems so paradoxical is the transformation of this diligent, caring father and husband into an efficient and violent killer, a movement that comes easy for Tom it seems. Tom is trying to find a place for himself within the idyllic cosily Rockwellian small town, trying to initiate himself into this peaceful but frankly humdrum existence, but this fantasy is shattered when killers cross paths with Tom and he turns before out very eyes into the cold-blooded killing machine he once was and always will be.

According to the conventions of the Western myth, most, if not all Westerns deal with a system of morality. The ruggedness, the tough independence, the sense of personal conviction and courage, reflected the best of the American Western hero. *Brokeback Mountain* departs quite radically from that of the traditional Western, in the sense that it questions the moral nature of the society surrounding the gay cowboys. According to the conventions of the traditional Western, the frontier mystique so favoured by the Bush

Administration, instils that the only course of action Ennis should take is not to hide his sexual identity; a true cowboy has the courage to stand alone and for his true feelings. Jack seems more inclined to take on the mantle of the traditional Western hero as he is able to accept a little more willingly that he is inescapably gay. This is clearly signified by two incidents within the film, one where Jack goes to Mexico one night and has sex with a male prostitute and another where he stands up to and beats up some bigoted red necks. However, Jack pays the price for his sexual digressions and is beaten up and killed towards the end of his film, thus diagetically, the film ultimately fails to apply the idea of a same sex relationship being sustained and lived out as Jack is killed for his conduct and thus continually demonstrates the traumatic effects of such boundary crossings rather than exploring its value or usefulness, conservatism wins out in the end. Jack is clearly marked out as the more proactive partner and Ennis the repressed homely sensible one.

The term "being in the closet" has long been used to explore a number of interconnected experiences faced by many people who do not conform to societies norms, that of gender and sexuality, for instance those whose sexualities are "queer." Jagose's metaphor to be "closeted" signifies to have masked one's queerness from the outside world, to have "placed it metaphorically within the confines of a private, often secret, enclosed space." (Jagose, 1996, p72-75) This notion of being "closeted" could also be closely affiliated with the idea of silence and its interesting that silence features heavily in *Brokeback Mountain*, where words frequently go unsaid, but this silence is deafening at the same time. Ennis and Jack both remain silent about their relationship and are unfortunately unable to publicly express their desire and love for each other.   Maybe the general public wasn't quite ready for a full blown queer cowboy pick as their desire and love for each other in the film remains an unfinished thought, trailing off into ambiguity.

If the metaphorical closet, then, signifies the inner sanctuary in which queer sexuality is so often stabilized and removed from the outside world, then *Brokeback Mountain* problematizes this idea by positioning "the closet" in the wilderness of the Western landscape. More often then not, representations of

queer sexuality are relegated and hidden inside an enclosed space, whereas *Brokeback Mountain* seems to extend the boundaries more in that it transports queer sexuality in the world *outside* that of enclosed spaces (that of the community) and frequently presents it within a setting of literal openness and expansiveness. One could be as bold as claiming this connotes a certain liberation on behalf of his characters, by transporting the site of forbidden love from the normal claustrophobic interior setting to a romantitized and poetic one. The film goes some way in promoting and championing *Brokeback Mountain* the place as more desirable and healthful than the world outside the closet. Jack and Ennis are allowed to retreat to Brokeback Mountain, the remaining characters remain trapped in the claustrophobic world of the oppressive symbolic order. (Jagose, 1996)

As I have already explored before, *Brokeback Mountain* leaves a trail of often ambiguous and contradictory meanings. The flip side to the closet metaphor is that the Western landscape itself has become a closet. If the boundaries of the closet space have been opened up into the expanisvessness of the outdoors, then in turn could imply that the Western landscape itself could signify a claustrophobic locale that threatens to close in on the protagonists. What this ultimately means is that, contrary to popular belief, by hiding themselves in the open, as it were, Jack and Ennis not only transform the closet into a pastoral free zone but also oppose the freedom of the Western landscape, becoming a site of confinement. The fact that the Western landscape lies outside of the world of the town may also be read in contradictory ways. (Jagose, 1996)

The mountain signifies a site of freedom and beauty, away from social norms and conventions and thus away from an oppressive social network. But couldn't also the sheer marginality of their relationship signify its "otherness" and deviance. They are not able to puncture the symbolic order and find a place within it and therefore need to be in their place, on the periphery of society.

As John Howard states:

> By relegating Jack and Ennis's love affair to the beautiful remoteness
> of the mountain, the film privileges queerness by giving it the more lush
> and physically appealing space while simultaneously ghettoizing it by
> forcing it to remain away from any legitimizing social structures.
> (Howard, 2006, p 101)

Abjection

Brokeback Mountain continually blurs the lines between inside and outside,
this blurring of borders and crossroads manifests itself in subtler ways within
the plot and character development. The film continually offers up moments
where the boundary between inside and outside is ruptured. These instances
of ruptures constitute what defines as moments of abjection, a term used to
signify the meeting of inside and outside and continually register as traumatic
for the characters that experience them. What this suggests is that the
oppressive social order, the world of repression and control, somehow
regulates the crossroads of the inside/outside divide and the superstructure of
the social order, such as schools, homes, workplaces, church, the law,
monitor and maintain the division of borders through a neat split between
hetero and queer, civilization from wilderness, public self from private self.

What is interesting is that when faced with these moments of abjection, which
triggers a somewhat blurring or crossover of borders, the two main characters
generally react in violence, shock, disilliousement and physical anguish in an
attempt to reestablish such a border. Again this idea mirrors the sense that
these characters have to embrace the possibility of violence and mental
torture, in order to repress or succumb to their impulses and feelings.

The films first sexual interaction between Ennis and Jack triggers the first
moment of abjection. Jack takes on the mantle of the dominant sexual
partner, by instigating proceedings and enters Ennis body from behind.
Taking Ennis from behind, coupled with the violet intensity of the scene,
seems to overwhelm Ennis, and sets in motion a dichotomy of mixed

emotions, pleasure and shock, revulsion and bliss, fear and happiness. The scene goes some way in demonstrating Butler's interpretation of abjection in which bodily orifices serve as its primary sites, where the division of inner and outer almost merges.(Butler, 1990). However, the morning after and pretty much from then on in the film, Ennis appears nervous, fearful, unsettled, apparently haunted by this sexual encounter and his own feelings and acceptance of these feelings. His abjection almost firmly cemented when Ennis reverts to silence and avoids contact with Jack, seemingly repulsed by what he has done. It seems Ennis's abjection manifests itself later when he comes across the bloody carcass of a sheep; its insides have been ripped out by a wolf. This mutilated sight triggers a sense of horror in Ennis, as the sheep reminds him of the act he has committed, but also what it represents the fluidity of different boundaries previously though to have been impenetrable.

Ennis consistently reacts with violent emotion to moments of abjection in which the boundary between the two halves of his "double life" is in tact and throughout the film Ennis encounters an abject collision of divisions – between hetero and queer, dominant and passive, inside and outside, fear and desire, between his true self (which loves Jack and his outer persona (that of the traditionally straight cowboy). Again this seems to find a correlation with the notion of the split personality syndrome I discussed earlier in this chapter, where cowboys in these Post 9/11 Westerns appear to be in the middle of a mental crisis, where they are not quite sure who they are, who they are supposed to be, what they want and how to be true to one's own self.

Ennis is haunted by a childhood memory of when two old guys shacked up together; they were the talk of the town, until one day they were beaten to death because of their sexual infidelities. Ennis' father made a point of making him witness this tragic and violent incident. This childhood memory is always there, the ghost in the room. Ennis protests throughout the film that he's "not queer" and that it's Jack's fault why he his like he is. But the film makes it clear that it's not because of Jack. It's because they both love each other and he can find no way to deal with that. As the movie progresses,

Ennis, penniless, alone and disillusioned becomes a shadow of his former self, nurturing a lost dream. What is signified within a series of post 9/11 Westerns is the repression of one's true feelings and of one's self. Ennis tries desperately to lead a *normal* life, adhering to the codes as set out by the hegemonic West that homosexuals are not real men and tries to repress his true feelings. Whereas Tom Stall tries to lead a normal life and almost succeeds in keeping his violent tendencies in tact, but the arrival of the killers in the small town in turn brings about the return of the repressed, or in the nature of identity, the return of the phallus. These films go some way to suggest some kind of split personality syndrome is at work, where the male heroes suffer an extreme existential crisis. The heroes suffer stress, anxiety, doubts, loneliness, oppression, suffocation and set backs and offers a disconcerting analysis of the nature of identity. Masculinity is tested to the limit and sometimes beyond.

Masculinity and It's Discontents

Brokeback Mountain is that rare American film that subtly ruptures the divide between the political and the personal, the past and the present. Here, against the great American West landscape, that mythic territory of tough, rugged individualism, is a sparingly, but ultimately devastating look at masculinity in crisis and its discontents. When Jack and Ennis first meet, they are modern "cowboys" who live on violence, fighting, country music, beer, and hard work for low pay. Yet their masculinity is also not the hyper-masculinity of leather and Levi's. Jack and Ennis are not cowboys, they tend sheep, which perhaps, indicates a signal that we are bypassing the traditional cowhand aesthetic, but they are, in Ms. Annie Proulx's resonant words, "beguiled by the cowboy myth." It is a myth constructed as much by Hollywood as history, which is why Ennis, and strangely enough some of the other cowhands, have their Stetson's down-turned, obscuring their faces. In these shots, the cowboy hat, that symbol of American manhood, functions as a kind of disguise. The film seems to suggest that the wearers are hiding behind these hats, that Jack, but in particular, Ennis, are clinging to the myth

of the cowboy because it offers a freedom, a freedom often associated and constructed by the Hollywood Western, but that freedom is a chimera and only exists when they hold each other. In this sense, the heroes' identity becomes 'performative' and almost a masquerade. What previously were largely unquestioned characteristics of a confidently held identity have now become assertions which signal not confidence but insecurities, not stable but unstable identity and internal division. Much like the 'psychological Westerns' of the 50's, such as *The Searchers*, or the dark, foreboding Westerns of Anthony Mann, the central characters are victims of situations which test their ability to act confidently; in various ways, the central characters in *Brokeback Mountain* are torn between private, internalised emotional conflicts and public expressions of direct action.

Ennis gesture of obscuring his face with his cowboy hat recalls James Dean pushing down his Stetson in the epic Western, *Giant* (1956), George Stevens. Heath Ledger is transcendent in the role of Ennis, embodying the myth of the hard bitten cowboy and investing his performance with the stoic, reticent tenderness of Hollywood stars like James Dean and Montgomery Clift. He has internalised the predominant code of manliness and is quick to fight and inflict violence when he feels he is being disrespected. (Rhodes, 2006) Right from the outset, Ennis is the most reluctant of the pair, having learnt and internalised the penalty for contravening the social code of the West through the pronouncement of homosexuality is death. Where as Jack, by turning up the heat on the relationship, is the catalyst for the extravagant melodrama that counters it. The film simply, and convincingly, portrays how two men try to handle their struggle for identity, a struggle that seems to take a lifetime and ultimately engrosses all of their emotional and psychological energy. This deep dichotomy in Ennis and Jack is disturbing even to the point of seeming schizophrenic, something which is also evoked in the character of Tom Stall in *A History of Violence*.

Every straight male character in the film is not only unpleasant, but also unsympathetic precisely in the embodiment of masculinity. The films denunciation of masculinity and the cowboy mystique takes the form of deadly

homophobic violence, as epitomised by the harrowing incident reencountered from Ennis's childhood and his father's horrific intent to instil manly values in his son by making him witness to the sight of the victims. Similarly, Jack's overbearing father-in-law, whose unease for his grandson's developing masculinity causes him to interfere with Jack and his son's relationship, by undermining Jack's parental skills by insisting on the grandson watching a football game, to which Jack had previously turned off. "Want your boy to grow up to be a man, don't you?" This speaks volumes about how little the old man thinks of Jack's masculinity. Other examples include Jack's own unsurely disapproving father; the sheep baron of Brokeback, whose disrespect for Jack is both professional and homophobic, and even the truck driver who Ennis shockingly beats up in response to the former calling him an obscene name. (Shank, 2005)

Overall, *Brokeback Mountain* seems to represent an attack not just of heterosexism but of masculinity itself. It's a portrait of maleness in crisis, a crisis stretching not only Ennis and Jack, but also to the effectiveness of manhood as personified by every other male character in the film. It could well be the most intensely anti-western Western every made, not only post-modern, but post-heroic as well.

Conclusion

Like Pearl Harbor, the events of September 11 could only be described as a tuning point in history, when America's myopic superpower status and confidence was forever lost. The collapse of the phallic symbol of America, the Twin Towers, could be re-configured as a symbol of the nation's emasculation.

The trauma of 9/11 and the Bush regime's failings to protect and save its nation seemed to generate a sense of shame and guilt that underlay the anxious commentaries about US impotence and weakness and a feminized society.

The attacks of September 11 unleashed waves of media representations that centered on a affixation on restoring an invincible manhood, America wanted a John Wayne type hero and the media evoked Western themes and iconography and a return to good old American frontier values. The western was riding back into town. The Western offered the American public hope in the form of triumphs of American tradition over previous encounters with an external, alien force. This reaction seems to belong to a traditional American pattern of response to an enemy, but also leading to a stronger reemergence of the archetypal, immoveable John Wayne-like Western hero, one that America has been perfecting since America's wilderness era.

The USA roots stem from a fairytale of masculinity. The myth and construction of the young hero (George Washington) who rebels against his evil neighbours (England), challenges and destroys them, and in turn becomes the founding father of a new land. Myths of masculinity have always had a large role to play in American politics and culture. (McVeigh, 2007)

In her book *The Terror Dream – Fear and Fantasy in Post 9/11 America*, Susan Faludi describes American society as retreating back to its old myths of

male heroes and female victims following the terror attacks of 2001. Faludi claims that 9/11 hit American culture right in the solar plexus. The reactions were those one would expect of an American trauma going back to the nation's childhood. A trauma about women taken captive by the natives and male guilt at not having been able to prevent and protect them being carried off and thus the urgent need to repair and restore a national myth of invincibility. She cites articles with headlines like "as war looms, its ok to let boys be boys again", (Faludi, 2007), which suggests a certain post 9/11 lionization of masculinity. Thus what Faludi is suggesting is that what emerged from the aftermath of the World Trade Center was a primitive myth of masculinity and femininity. "Heroes were needed, so heroes were made," Bruce Springsteen retorts on his latest album at the time of 9/11. Like Faludi, Springsteen tries to come to terms with the American reaction to "9/11" and the way it distorted the event itself.

With a few exceptions, the finest Westerns of the 21st-century have focused on the world of male bonding: Viggo Mortensen and Ed Harris, Christian Bale and Russell Crowe, Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal. We are also seeing a softer, more caring American men then we are traditionally use to. Cowboys, in these post 9/11 Westerns showcase repressed feelings that increasingly become articulated. The films also emphasize the hero's initial unwillingness to get involved in the situation that confronts them and remain aloof and passive until their natural violent tendencies are reborn.

Again it is usually assumed that the Western, with its concern with masculinity, is not a film genre that may particularly interest women. Conversely, the Westerns traditional female roles have had little appeal for women. By the same token women have often been presented as a problem by the makers of Westerns, daughters to be disciplined, whores to be avoided, schoolmarm and frontier woman, seem to have little appeal, becoming no more than passive symbols in the active heroes dilemma of choice. But many of these post 9/11 Westerns break new ground here too. The women in *Brokeback Mounatin* are not entirely sympathetic, but they do seem more strongly drawn characters and the director, Ang Lee, gives them a

rich texture. Edie in *A History of Violence*, is represented as the confident, authoritarian figure and flaunts her superior position when she initiates the sex scenes with Tom.

Tom's new persona as the violent virile leading man, prone to violence, turns Edie on and as she attempts to acquaint herself with Joey, inviting an aggressive response, the two collide on the stairs violently pummeling each other. The films also go to some length to empathize just how un-heroic the male characters are.

Good Guys and Bad Guys

There seems to be a discernible shift in the characterisation, formal presentation and consequently the identity of heroism and villainy in the post 9/11 Westerns, particularly in the films *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford (2007) 3:10 to Yuma (2007)* and *Open Range (2004), Brokeback Mountain (2006)* and *A History of Violence (2005)*. It is a shift that connects to changes in representations of masculinity that are rooted in cultural and social developments of the time. The September 11th attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon have had a profound effect upon many sets of social relations, including those in which traditional notions of masculinity are tested and fractured.

Jesse James was, literally a legend in his own lifetime, but in the film *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, Brad Pitt plays him as a psychopath: charismatic and charming, certainly, but given to depression and sudden bouts of murderous hatred. His legacy has been romanticized, dissected and re-envisioned in novels, songs and, most especially, films and each generation has produced its own interpretation, depicting a Jesse to echo the times. From the cinematic transition from the bloodless death to the crimson ballets of the slow-motion bullet-fests of contemporary films, I have explored the notion that death is simply no longer about right and wrong, good triumphing over evil: in *No Country for Old Men*

(2007), it is spectacular, empty, nilhistic, with no supercharged cathartic climax. Part of the film's deep interest is due to the way it has tapped into anxieties about terrorism and the "axis of evil", the unknown enemy who can strike at any time.

Joe Penhall, screenwriter of *The Road* (2010), suggests that:

> The unimaginable horrors that Cormac McCarthy (Author of the book *The Road)*investigates in his writing are becoming more familiar to us by the day. Post 9/11 we are frighteningly aware of what man is capable of. We've seen the randomness, the overheatedness, the irrationality of people's vengefulness in Islamist terrorism, in American imperialism, in British foreign policy. (Penhall, 2010)

The success of *No Country For Old Men, The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Bob Younger, A History of Violence* and *Brokeback Mountain*, points to signs that audiences may be more accepting of explosive acts of brutal, dogmatic violence that go unpunished.

One of the main themes of the Western is that manhood is about having the courage to kill if necessary. What *A History of Violence* does is to dig deeper into the question of just what sort of manhood this is, what sort of people are willing to undertake this task. Realistically, in the classic Western the hero always had an element of the wilderness in him; in *A History of Violence* this wilderness is more extreme, bordering on savagery.

This is a film very much reflecting on the consequences of violence, the way in which there is no turning back the clock once one has killed, the remorse that comes from having acted impulsively with a gun. The title of the film refers both to the troubled past of its hero and to the role of violence in American society and popular culture. As we have seen, violence is

necessary to the establishment of civilisation. Savagery and outlawry cannot be defeated by reason and good example alone; otherwise Tom would have been killed in the diner at the beginning of the film. Yet the hero must not be seen to relish violence. That would put him on a par with the lawless, with those he must overcome. Men fight for families, for lovers, for friends and for property, but rarely in the Western for an abstract cause alone, such as with Tom and the return of the repressed and resurrection of his masculinity.

The masculinity that had been called into question by the Great Depression, the Cold War and Vietnam is not only re-invented but reinvigorated with something much more in excess of anything preceding it. In the new post 9/11 environment, the condition for an alliance between man and woman is the feminization of the man, like *Johnny Guitar* and *Shane* and Gary Cooper in *High Noon*, Heath Ledger, as does Christian Bale in the remake of *3:10 to Yuma* and Kevin Costner in *Open Range*, try to articulate new forms of masculinity. Westerns recount time and again the courage of the Lone Ranger figure that must fight against hostile forces, who would dispute the advancement of civilisation and whose bravery must stand up against outlaw elements and make the streets safe for women and children. The violence they dish out is sanctioned, however, the hero who administers it more often then not is not accepted into the fold of the community in which he helped save because they cannot leave their nomadic state behind. What's interesting with a number of post 9/11 Westerns and films that evoke Western themes is that the heroes at the end of the films have been welcomed into the bosom of the families and communities and thus been able to reinvent themselves. The family and community sanction their violence. *A History of Violence* is not the only post 9/11 film to evoke the Western theme of regenerative violence; there have been a succession of films that have overturned the certainties of the classical form of the genre and its themes. Upon reflection, it's quite obvious that the shadow monster of the film is in fact Tom. After confronting his past in the final reel, Tom easily demolished his enemies and it seems is welcomed back into the bosom of the family. However there is an undercurrent of uncertainty that things will never be the same again as Cronenberg segregates each member of the family with their

own close up, signifying their attachment within the family unit will now be severed in their new future and the father's shadow has surrounded young Jack. The community has been saved, but at what cost?

Another recurring theme that runs throughout many of the post 9/11 Westerns and films that evoke Western themes, is the hero's initial unwillingness to get involved and deal with the situation that confronts him. The characterization of the cowboys in *Brokeback Mountain* deviate somewhat from the traditional expectations of Westerners. The cowboy is the hero par excellence, who is strong, independent and above all able to control his fear. Throughout the film Ennis represses his true feelings and desires about his sexual identity. He pretty much acquiesces to his society's beliefs about gay men and refuses to accept and acknowledge what he is. The audience has become accustomed to seeing the cowboy/hero always fight for justice, but Ennis hasn't the courage to live his shame and is unwilling to be happy and fight for what he believes in. More often than not the cowboy wins at the end, in *Brokeback Mountain*, Ennis is all alone, and no happy ending of the couple being together forever, Jack having died at the hands of bigoted red necks. If traditional Westerns seek to define heroes, this film, as do several Post 9/11 Westerns wish to portray regular men, more humanistic than the archetypal Westerner.

So the dichotomy emerges then, how accepting the public is of these westerns that offer a displaced and oppositional representation and commentary on the idea of masculinity and the events consuming American politics. However, what happens when a film showcases cowboys less than the mythic heroes of a past culture, such as *Brokeback Mountain*, in particular. As we have seen in this dissertation, there has been a recent resurgence of the Western genre and its themes, new films and directors have draw strength from the roots of the genre, but inflecting them, adopting them, subverting them to refashion the genre into something viable for the modern age.

The ideological framework within which the Western has had to work has altered significantly since the 50s. Indeed, already by the mid 60's and 70's many of its values and trademarks were being usurped and challenged, as the politics of representation became more complex. In particular, the main central hero, confident in his masculinity and physical prowess, was threatened by an alliance of forces, of which feminism was only the most directly challenging. Even in the high water-mark of the 50s Westerns, deep-seated faults in the bedrock of American society were causing cracks to appear in the previously impregnable carapace of the male hero. The incredible series of Westerns directed by Anthony Mann and starring James Stewart, beginning with *Winchester 73* in 1950, portray a much harder, tougher Stewart than audiences were accustomed to. These Westerns often had more problematic heroes and more critical attitudes to American civilisation than had been common, and more interestingly exploring and problematising the identity of the familiar action hero and assumptions about traditional masculinity. This is particularly interesting, in the sense how little the Western has been discussed in this way. Other genres, notably melodrama and film noir, have become the focus of study, especially with regards to gender and representation, whilst the Western has been consigned to the critical back burner in recent years. By the 1970s, heroism itself seemed a troubled concept. Westerns were now filled with anti-heroes such as the comic figure of Jack Crabb in *Little Big Man* (1970), constantly evading confrontation and violence by changing sides. Mel Brooks irreverent satire *Blazing Saddles* (1974), sent up the entire genre and with Brooks at the helm, just as in the same way as Robert Altman's attempts at demythologizing the genre, nothing was sacred.

Would *Brokeback Mountain* and some of the other Westerns and non-Westerns that utilize its themes have emerged in light of the tragic events of 9/11? Did 9/11 have some bearing on the way films were directed, produced and consumed? With the lies and deceit the Bush Administration had concocted with regards to the weapons of mass destruction and the real reasons for an imperialist crusade revealed, it is uplifting and interesting to find a film such as *Brokeback Mountain* where truth, honesty and real feelings

can be articulated and that human value can be confidently communicated, even though the value is not explored fully.

The protocol of cowboy life and cowboys sleeping in the bunkhouse were socially created occurrences where gay identity could be invisible, but *Brokeback Mountain* surely seems to inaugurate the removal of this invisibility, in essence removing the sub, from the subtext.

Many of the post 9/11 filmmakers subvert Western genre traits to accentuate authenticity and their stories contain fuller, more complex portrayals of women and heroes. As part of a larger break-down of traditional narrative, the storytelling is much more complex, with more juxtaposed time frames, with a contradictory and almost hysterical representation of masculinity. This can be considerably disorientating to audiences accustomed to, and who presume their Western will be lean and linear and focus on the lone stranger arriving in town, restoring order, and then leaving.

Gender role has been a subject frequently explored through Hollywood since the birth of film. The shifting parameters of masculinity have afforded films with a dynamic central theme. The Western genre has been a prime player in the representation of strong masculine roles. All the films discussed in this dissertation offer a statement about gender role in the 21st century, discussing masculinity and questions its definition and characteristics. In *Brokeback Mountain*, the love that blossoms between Ennis and Jack probes the very essence of their masculinity, especially for Ennis. The film "brings to vivid cinematic life what is in essence a paean to masculinity" (Leavitt, 2008).

Ennis' battle between his involvement with Jack and his conventional masculinity provides the heart of the story. The rugged way in which he handles his relationship with Jacks offers a symbolization of his inner turmoil and this turmoil lends to his constant need to reaffirm his masculinity, a trait

that runs throughout many of the post 9/11 Westerns. Ennis' homosexual experiences are tinged with anger and violence, as epitomized by his frequent bouts of fighting and verbal fights. This show of aggression mirrors the sense that Ennis' has to embrace violence to defend that which he cherishes. Ennis' despair firmly stems from the conventional masculinity of the Western. "The generally accepted 'gold standard' for masculinity is someone who is heterosexual, fit, successful, aggressive, competitive, tough and physically violent" (Navratil, 2008).   Therefore this is a masculinity that rejects conventional feminine elements such as nurturing, compassion, and gentleness. There is some glimmer of hope though, as Jack's death at the end of the film seems to serve as a catalyst to finally allow Ennis to reconcile his masculinity conflict by allowing dynamic change to be made to his masculine code. He is able to welcome compassion and gentleness as part of his masculinity. The film almost calls for a renewed definition of masculinity, one that moves beyond labeling to one that embraces compassion and gentleness; a masculinity that is more unified than the traditional prideful aggressive masculine role.

Is it a case that it has long been recognised that the Western has been alive to the changing social milieu over the last 50 years and reflects and comments upon the society that creates and consumes it. The Western has been alert to the shifts of tone and perspective which have been forced upon the genre over the past third of a century, as a result of changes both with the cinema and without. Westerns have always had an uncanny aptitude to offer this kind of reflection and retrospective awareness through smuggling in hot-button political ideas and controversies through the trapdoor of allegory. The historical foundations of the genre came under systematic attack in the films of the 60s and 70s that debunked the real life figures that previous decades had so assiduously championed. Even the triumphalist version of Western history informed by the notion of manifest 'destiny', the idea that the white race had a God-given right to acquire land and country, which had been the preserve of native peoples, was being questioned in the 1970s. Possibly this was propelled by events in Vietnam, which undermined America's imperialist ambitions. Since the aftermath of 9/11, the Western did return politically and

culturally to the forefront of the American consciousness and its form resonated with the political culture of the United States.

It's almost ten years since the events of 9/11 and a new, democratic president as entered the White House. What's interesting, is that now, we are seeing a much more muted response to the gangster and Western genre, such as the poor box office and interest of Michael Mann's *Public Enemies (2009)*and dismal box office for *The Appaloosa (2009)* directed by Ed Harris with no indication of other Westerns in the pipeline. Both genres have firm foundations in a basic narrative about American identify and yet President Obama hasn't much time for these days. Has the audience lost their thirst for the epic battles that the Western genre relies on?

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