From the American Myth to the American Dream:

Alternative Worlds in Recent Hollywood Westerns

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'This is the West... When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.'

(Newspaper publisher Dutton Peabody in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, 1962)

Abstract: This chapter analyzes two recent popular Westerns, Andrew Dominik's *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007) and Tommy Lee Jones's *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005). In these films, the Western myth is replaced by a new myth, the 'American Dream', in which the lone legend is re-cast as family man and breadwinner. The old American frontier, as well, assumes a new dimension, moving from a utopian 'frontier' understood as the symbol of discovery, exploration, and Manifest Destiny, to a dystopian and defensive vision of a national border that must be protected against 'illegals'. The chapter argues that Westerns, in offering themselves as alternative worlds to

American modernity, show that myths are difficult to let go of, particularly if the myth that replaces them is as inexpressibly dreary as the American Dream.

Classic Westerns are America's most enduring mythical genre. Like all good myths, they show us an alternative world, 'a heroically decent America,'[1] a world whose cowboys and gunslingers, sheriffs and bandits, prospectors and ranchers inhabit 'a masculine world where men were men and women—on the rare occasions they appeared—seemed to like it that way.'[2] Common consensus has declared this world to be either one of the past--a time of lawlessness, chaos, racism and the genocide of native Americans[3]—or mythical fiction—the time of Manifest Destiny, rugged individualism, romantic rides into stunning sunsets, and apolitical fireside chats.[4] Neither its association with the past nor its reputation for peddling sentimental myths have particularly endeared the Western to scholars and critics. In fact, the Western has become saddled, as it were, with a reputation for being the most backward, traditional and un-modern of all film genres. For over 30 years now, scholars have agreed that the Western is a genre in decline, one that can only survive as self-parody or in 'revisionist' form,[5] and one unable to compete in terms of quality with more sophisticated genres. Several critics have pointed out that very few Westerns have ever won

Academy Awards.[6] Even Western-scholarship itself has come in for its share of attack, described by some of its own practitioners as 'a field that is intellectually conservative and, what is worse, unimaginative […]. [W]estern literature isn't exactly the most theorized field in the world. It's an un-p.c. region where people know more about fur coats than Foucault.'[7]

Yet a case can be made that the Western has never been content to be relegated to America's mythical past, that in fact it has arranged itself, albeit uncomfortably, within a modernist America defined by rapid technological change and greater emphasis on nationalism rather than individualism. This is the exact time—beginning in the late 1880s and continuing right through the twentieth century—when one might have expected the Western to be relegated to the rubbish heap of useless myths and fictions. And yet, this is also the time when Westerns have insisted on validating the stories they tell as representations of an alternative America.

One way in which Westerns achieve this is through the (con)fusion of reality and myth, of actor and character. From the first years of the genre's inception, it became commonplace for the last surviving Western heroes to participate in the creation of their own legends. Wyatt Earp, Wild Bill Hickok and Buffalo Bill

Cody all played themselves in dramas or films. Henry McCarty, better known as Billy the Kid, was himself the originator of his '21-dead list,' which contributed, after his death at the age of 21, considerably to his legend ('one murder for each year of his life'), although only three or four killings on the Kid's list could be substantiated.[8] Emmett Dalton, the last surviving member of the Dalton gang, specialists in train robberies, played himself in the 1918 film *Beyond the Law* and wrote a book entitled *When the Daltons Rode* in 1931.[9] Jesse James, an expert in self-glamourisation, mined Jacobean tragedies for ideas on self-representation (Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns* 192). And his son, Jesse James Jr., played his father in the 1921 film *Jesse James under the Black Flag.*[10] The conflation of actor and character has continued throughout the twentieth century; it is, in fact, one of the defining aspects of the Western as a cinematic genre, where the Western hero continues to function as 'a symbol of the real or desired courage, independence and triumph of the ordinary American.'[11] Actors who have portrayed this archetype often enough to be identified with it—most notably, of course, John Wayne—are viewed, like their characters, as the 'iconic American' (Baur and Bitterli, *Brave Lonesome Cowboy,* 10), 'professional American'[12] or 'quintessential American' (Kitses, *Horizons West,* 13-14). In playing him over and over, John Wayne has become the American Everyman; Clint Eastwood has

turned into the Man with No Name, and 'a good-guy reputation established in Western films helped Ronald Reagan become one of the most popular politicians in US history' (Lenthan, 'Westbound,' 121). Film viewers would probably not confuse Tom Cruise with a secret agent, Russell Crowe with a gladiator from ancient Rome, or Kevin Spacey with a serial murderer, but where the real world collides with an alternative mythical world, distinctions become difficult.

Westerns may be myths, but they are not a thing of the past. It is, in fact, their mythical status that has enabled them to function as a glimpse of a *present-day* alternative world. The conflation of actor and character—whether initiated by the actor himself or thrust upon him by his audience—and the identity of both as the quintessential American is the most visible sign of the extent to which the Western offers itself as an alternative to present-day reality. In the pre-war period, the Western pitted heroic individualism against community life and the power of the state; the simple life against rapid technologisation and urbanisation; personal enrichment (through ranching, gold mining, gambling or bank robberies) against universal impoverishment during the Great Depression; the individual fastest-draw-wins-fair fight against the universal slaughter and devastation of the First World War. Following America's triumph over Evil in

the Second World War and its emergence as a new global superpower, a new myth arose that has defined every aspect of post-war American life. Now commonly known as the 'American Dream,'[13] this new vision of America comprises a political-economic mélange of 'freedom,' free-markets and competition, meritocracy, prosperity, and success. Its manifestations are middle-class wealth, homeownership, practically unlimited consumerism, and a particular type of family life that has entered public discourse in America under the moniker 'Family Values': the 'family' being portrayed as the harmonious togetherness of two parents of opposite gender, 2-3 children (on average: 2.2,[14] comprising at least one of each gender), assorted pets, and a crime-free life in a leafy suburb, with the breadwinner-role assigned to the husband/father and the wife and mother fulfilling these two functions on a full-time and unpaid basis.[15]

In what follows, I would like to examine the transition from the nineteenth-century American myth of Manifest Destiny (symbolised by the lone legend) to the twentieth-century American Dream of middle-class wealth (symbolised by the breadwinner and family father) in two recent Westerns, one a historical Western showing the transition itself, the second a modern Western depicting the American Dream as lived reality.

The Assassination of an American Myth

In Andrew Dominik's *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007),[16] Jesse James (Brad Pitt), retired at 34, has fashioned for himself an underground existence as a family man, 'Thomas Howard,' a cattleman and commodities investor. '*He was growing into middle age and was living then in a bungalow … He installed himself in a rocking chair and smoked a cigar down in the evening as his wife wiped her pink hands on an apron and reported happily on their two children.*'[17] He meets his greatest fan and ultimate betrayer and assassin, then nineteen-year-old Bob Ford (Casey Affleck), on the occasion of the James Gang's last train robbery at Blue Cut. Bob, raised on the legend of the James Boys, attempts to wheedle and cajole his way into the gang, his greatest fear being that the myth of the James gang could end. Devastated by the unequivocal statement that the Blue Cut robbery will be their last, he offers his services as a mythmaker. Chummily ensconced with Jesse on the porch and smoking a cigar that makes him sick, he reads him the following excerpt of the legend of Jesse James:

Bob: Jesse James, the youngest, has a face as smooth and innocent as a schoolgirl. The blue eyes, very clear and penetrating, are never at rest. His form is tall and graceful and capable of great endurance and great effort. Jesse is light-hearted, reckless, and devil-may-care. There is always a smile on his lips…

Jesse: All right, all right, all right, all right, all right. […]

Bob: You know what I got right next to my bed? It's *The Train Robbers, or, A Story of the James Boys*, by R. W. Stevens. I mean, many's the night I stayed up with my mouth open and my eyes open, just reading about your escapades in the Wide Awake Library.

Jesse, smiling: They're all lies, you know.

Bob, clearly disappointed: Yeah, of course they are.

Jesse does not respond well to his own mythification; in fact, he seems rather downcast by it, perhaps guessing that it implies his death.

Jesse's final months (the action begins in September 1881, seven months before the assassination of the historical Jesse James on 3 April 1882) are blighted by his increasing fear of being betrayed for the reward money. His paranoia is expressed aesthetically through two distinct aspects. One is the constant presence of a narrative voice,[18] which gives lyrical expression to Jesse's terror. '*Jesse was sick, with rheums, and aches, and lung congestions. Insomnia stained his eye sockets like soot. He read auguries in the snarled intestines of chickens or the blow of cat hair released to the wind. And the omens promised bad luck, which moated and dungeoned him.*' The second aesthetic reminder of Jesse's fear is the recurring use of pinhole photography, showing us a clear image in the centre of the screen (an area that steadily diminishes as the film progresses) surrounded by ever-increasing blurry edges. Camera angles force the character's paranoid perspective onto the viewer. Frequently, for example, camera angles mimic someone sneaking up behind a character without the audience being able to discern who it is. The implication that it would be easy to shoot whoever-it-is in the back is ever-present.

The relationship between Jesse and Bob is an uneasy one from the start, characterised by the all-too-extreme contrast between Bob's obvious besottedness and Jesse's casual indifference—as uneasy as any relationship between star and stalker. Unable to give either friendship or trust, Jesse stands

distant from those who compete for his attention: Bob and his older brother Charley (Sam Rockwell), former gang members Ed Miller (Garret Dillahunt) and Dick Liddil (Paul Schneider), and Jesse's cousin Wood Hite (Jeremy Renner). Nobody, except perhaps Jesse's wife and children (who hardly ever appear on screen) has a normal relationship with Jesse. Everyone else is either smitten with or scared to death of him, and for good reason, since Jesse, seeing traitors everywhere, has systematically begun to kill everyone involved in the Blue Cut robbery. All feelings—Jesse's fear and mistrust, Bob's adoration—are presented as thoroughly dysfunctional. Bob, portrayed as a mixture between sidekick and stalker, has moved into the Howard house and follows his hero everywhere. '*If Jesse palavered with another person, Bob secretaried their dialogue, getting each inflection, reading every gesture and tic, as if he wanted to compose a biography of the outlaw, or as if he were preparing an impersonation*.' Bob's move from imitation and identification to impersonation is significant, since an impersonation implies the removal of the original. Jesse himself seems to note this in his question to Bob: 'I can't figure it out. Do you wanna be like me or do you wanna be me?' 'Being' Jesse James, impersonating (replacing) him, is, in the waning days of the James Boys-legend, the only way for Bob to become what he has always wanted to be: a mythical hero. If you can't join him, kill him.

The day before the assassination of Jesse James, a Sunday, we see the 'Howard' family—Jesse, his wife Zee (Mary-Louise Parker) and his two children—strolling to church like good respectable citizens. The scene is shot in characteristic pin-point photography, with about 80% of the image blurred. Bob stays home, inventories Jesse's clothes, sips from his water glass, smells his pillowcase, lies down on his bed.[19] '*His fingers skittered over his ribs to construe the scars where Jesse was twice shot. […] He imagined himself at 34. He imagined himself in a coffin.*' Jesse's imminent murder is announced not only by the narratorial identification of bed and coffin, but also by the tremendous intimacy of Bob's impersonation.

Intimacy also defines Jesse's final moments: for the first time in the film, with the exception of one brief scene in which Jesse good-naturedly complains about his wife's cooking, he is presented as a family man. Indirectly, these scenes motivate his suicide. Unable to continue living with the perennial paranoia that a bounty hunter might kill him, Jesse makes an elaborate show of submitting to this very scenario. At the same time, the family scenes at the end show him living a private existence that his fame has prevented him from enjoying. Immediately before his death, he is shown horsing around with his son, playing with his little daughter Mary, trying to find her lost shoe, and this domestic

context—Mary playing in the yard, singing 'The Water is Wide'; sounds of Zee rummaging in the kitchen—frames his assassination. Jesse looks out of the living room window, his back to Bob, who, gun in hand, nerves himself up to use it; Charley is at the door, his gun also drawn. Through the window, Jesse sees the shoe Mary had lost earlier. With great deliberation, he takes off his guns: 'I guess I'll take my guns off, for fear the neighbors might spy them,' echoing Bob's earlier warning not to take his guns to church. He walks over to a picture—'Don't that picture look dusty'—, climbs on a chair and awaits execution. Peaceful piano music, underscoring the domestic ambiente, accompanies the scene until Bob shoots him in the back of the head, Charley simultaneously firing into the floor.

Jesse's death is cast immediately in two possible ways: as a betrayal, which Bob denies (Zee: 'Oh, Bob. Have you done this?' — Bob: 'I swear to God that I didn't') and as an act of heroism, which Bob claims. At the telegraph office, he and Charley compete for the honour of having shot the legendary bandit. Charley: 'Put my name.' — Bob: 'Why, what'd you do? I shot him.' The telegram he sends to the Governor reads: 'Have killed Jesse James. Bob Ford'; as he hands this to the telegraph officer, he advises him: 'You might wanna keep that.' But his hope to place himself at the centre of a new myth that might rival that of

Jesse James is bitterly disappointed; the Jesse James legend continues to eclipse his own. Jesse's body, placed on ice, is on public display, hundreds crowding around it to be photographed, with the prints selling for $2 apiece (we are shown the photograph of his body on ice, the entire screen blurred, the pin-point centre of clarity dwindled to nothing). '*And it was this shot that was most available in sundries stores and apothecaries to be viewed in a stereoscope alongside the sphinx, the Taj Mahal, and the Catacombs of Rome*.' For a myth, this is the ultimate career: Jesse James, a legend in life, achieves the status of one of the Seven Wonders of the World in death. Simultaneously, Jesse's photograph serves as a rather self-referential reminder of the celebrity theme: the myth created by the camera ('*this shot*') is at least as lethal as a shot fired from a gun.

And what of the new legend, Bob Ford, the man who killed Jesse James? He does not get to be a legend, but at least he gets to play one in the theatre. Together with his brother Charley—Charley playing Jesse and Bob playing himself—they re-enact the assassination in New York theatres. '*By his own approximation, Bob assassinated Jesse James over 800 times. He suspected no one in history had ever so often or so publicly recapitulated an act of betrayal*.' Bob, who is the hero and the narrator of the piece, plays his role in utter seriousness, whereas Charley offers a farcical performance, slouching, muttering and idiotically dusting the

picture in pendulum-style, drawing a laugh every time he delivers the line: 'That picture's awful dusty.' The reviews—'*It was widely felt that Bob possessed some acting talent and Charley not a jot*'—indicate clearly which of them is the more accomplished traitor. Over hundreds of performances,

> *Something began to change in Charley's stage portrayal of Jesse. His gait seemed more practiced. His voice was spookily similar to the man's. His newly suggested dialogue was analogous to a script Jesse might have originated. He began to look at his younger brother with spite, as if he suspected that in some future performance he might present himself to a live cartridge in Robert Ford's gun.*

This is one of the main ways in which Bob's project fails: Charley turns into Jesse, whereas Bob, who always wanted to be Jesse, merely gets to be (play) himself. In the end, Charley, having written a number of letters begging forgiveness of Jesse's wife, none of which he mails, echoes Jesse's death by committing suicide. Bob, his attempt to stage himself as a hero in tatters, leaves the stage to catcalls of 'cur,' 'murderer' and 'coward.'

One of Bob's central mistakes is to confuse legend with mere fame. He does become famous—'*By October of 1883, Bob Ford could be identified correctly by more citizens than could the president of the United States*'—but he never achieves that which determines mythical status: uneasy fascination, admiration tempered with fear, the audience's horrified and yet appreciative response to the violent act. 'You know what I expected?,' he asks his only friend Dorothy, describing his killing of Jesse. 'Applause. I was only 20 years old then. I couldn't see how it would look to people. I was surprised by what happened. They didn't applaud.' When Bob is killed in revenge for Jesse James, the legend of Bob Ford ends with his life. '*There would be no eulogies for Bob, no photographs of his body would be sold in sundries stores, no people would crowd the streets in the rain to see his funeral cortege, no biographies would be written about him, no children named after him. No one would ever pay 25 cents to stand in the rooms he grew up in.*' In pointing to the vastly different audience responses to Jesse and Bob, this passage also points out how similar they are in every other respect: they live similar lives, friendless and paranoid, blighted by guilt and fear, and die identical deaths.

The Assassination of Jesse James not only defines the Western myth as one of the past, but also clearly identifies the myth that will replace it: that of middle-class domesticity, moderate wealth, homeownership, and family life—in a word, what

is now known as 'the American Dream.' Throughout the film, traditional Western heroism is undercut to the point of farce. Whenever Jesse kills someone, he shoots him in the back, and the film's great gunfight scene—the shoot-out between Dick Liddil and Wood Hite, in which they fire at each other sixteen times from four feet away without inflicting much damage—speaks for itself. Clearly, the film insinuates, the Western myth is over. And what could replace it? The new myth of the American Dream is presented to us early in the film, in the following exchange between Jesse's older brother Frank James (Sam Shepard) and Charley Ford:

> *Frank*. […] after tonight, there'll be no more shenanigans. You can jot that down in your little diary. Sept. 7th, 1881, the James gang robbed one last train at Blue Cut and gave up their nightriding for good. […]
>
> *Charley*. Wait. Well, how are you going to make a living?
>
> *Frank*. Maybe I'll sell shoes.

This last line, whether serious or sarcastic, spells the end of the Western myth, the civilising of the Wild West, and the integration of the Western hero into society through domesticity, wealth and commerce. The Western gunslinger turns into a merchant and salesman, the least glamorous path imaginable for a hero. What Bob fails to understand is that the Western legend cannot simply be maintained by substituting a character. It is the Western myth itself that is dying.

One of the clearest signs of this is the facility with which the legend of Jesse James is adapted to these new conditions. While alive, he rarely appears as a family man; posthumously, however, 'family values' assume heretofore unsuspected proportions in the Jesse James-myth. In a song sung in Bob's bar, Jesse the bandit is turned into Jesse the devoted husband and father:

Well, Jesse had a wife to mourn for his life,
three children, they were brave,
but that dirty little coward who shot Mr. Howard
has laid Jesse James in his grave.

Bob, the film's great mythmaker, weakly tries to debunk the new myth—'It was two children, not three'—, only confirming what the film seems to imply all along: that he has wasted his life on the vain attempt to enter a world already gone. *The Assassination of Jesse James* shows us not only what its title announces, but also the assassination of an American myth. It shows us an America turning away from the Wild West towards law and order, prosperity, family, and the American Way of Life. In this new world, what was merely an undercover existence for Jesse James becomes universal middle-class reality. A job that supports the family (something pedestrian, like selling shoes). A bungalow, a porch, a rocking chair, a cigar. A wife and two to three (2.2) children. Playing with the children in the yard. Looking for their lost shoes. Complaining about the wife's cooking. Once a legend has outlived itself, it adapts to new historical circumstances.

Burials and Border Crossings: Living the Dystopian Dream

The Assassination of Jesse James, in documenting the painful transition from American Myth to American Dream, can be considered a straightforward dystopia: looking back, it sees nothing but obsolete myths; looking ahead,

nothing but bleak banality. Tommy Lee Jones's directorial debut, *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005), takes this a step further but in the end follows a different track: in the very act of stripping the new myth of its mythical proportions, it paradoxically hints at an alternative world, a new utopia. Melquiades Estrada (Julio César Cedillo), an illegal immigrant and friend of Pete Perkins (Tommy Lee Jones), is shot to death by border patrolman Mike Norton (Barry Pepper), who believes erroneously that Melquiades, who was shooting at a coyote, was aiming at him. Norton, in an attempt to cover up his crime, buries the body in a shallow grave. When it is found, Sheriff Belmont (Dwight Yoakam) refuses to investigate because 'He was a wetback,'[20] automatically assuming that Melquiades was shot because he was involved in drugs or smuggling. Although Pete shows Belmont a photograph of Melquiades's wife and children, Belmont has Melquiades buried in the town cemetery without trying to notify his family and without any attempt even to find out his last name (the ramshackle cross on his grave simply states: 'Melquiadis. Mexico'). When Pete finds out that Mike Norton killed his friend, he forces him to disinter Melquiades's body and accompany him to Mexico in an attempt to fulfill Melquiades's wish to be buried at home. The third burial of Melquiades Estrada

takes place in an abandoned ruin somewhere in Mexico after Pete and Mike find out that Melquiades has invented both his home village and his family.

Modern American myths (Family Values, the American Way of Life) are mercilessly taken to task throughout the film. At the outset, Mike and his wife Lou Ann (January Jones), the quintessential lower-middle-class couple, are shown their slice of the American Dream, a double-wide trailer, complete with washer, dryer, heat and air conditioning, garbage disposal optional, 'strictly top o' the line,' as the realtor assures them, with the highest re-sale value of 'mobile residences' in its class. The view out of the window shows a depressing vista of a train yard, a warehouse, cars and asphalt, other trailers, dusty yards with occasional tufts of grass, and a sign reading 'Liberty means freedom from high interest rates.' Both Mike and Lou Ann are in their late teens or early twenties; she is a blond, stick-thin ditz on a diet; he a crew-cut soldier-type who feels empowered by his uniform and his gun to brutalise Mexicans. Unsurprisingly, she stays at home as he does this under the heading of 'work.' Entertainment is TV and the occasional Saturday excursion to the mall. For Lou Ann, the future is clearly mapped out in brief visual and dialogue snippets: her middle-aged overweight neighbour, sunning herself in a bikini and a Stetson in front of her trailer; or a scene with Rachel (Melissa Leo), the local diner waitress and the only

person Lou Ann occasionally speaks to: Rachel's indifferent question to her husband how long they have been married (he cannot remember) followed by a meaningful glance directed at Lou Ann.

Nobody in the film has a functional family life. Mike and Lou Ann are entirely uncommunicative. The only real interaction between them is Mike's casual rape of Lou Ann at the kitchen counter while she is watching a TV soap opera and chopping vegetables for dinner. As he pushes into her from behind, showing as much concern for her as he does for the porn magazines he regularly masturbates over, she endures, rolling her eyes, her gaze fixed on the TV on which another marital drama unfolds. Rachel, although married to Bob (Richard Jones), the short-order cook, for longer than he can remember, has regular trysts with both Belmont and Pete. For many characters, fantasy plays a significant role in counterbalancing their dreary reality. Lou Ann is glued to the TV, where the soap-opera marriages she watches seem no happier than her own, but where, nevertheless, men and women demonstrate a verbosity and emotionality undreamed of in her reality. Melquiades invents a family life for himself, showing Pete a picture of a woman and three children, whom he describes, with great tenderness and a dreamy look of longing, as his family. His request to Pete to bring him home after his death already seems to indicate that such fantasies

cannot be lived in real life: 'If I die over here, carry me back to my family and bury me in my hometown. I don't want to be buried on this side among all the fucking billboards.' If 'home' is where the heart is, it becomes, in this heartless land of pure commercialism, a difficult place to reach:

Realtor. Where y'all from?

Lou Ann. Cincinnati.

Realtor. Oh, long way from home, huh? What line o'work bring you to Texas?

Mike. Border patrolman. We're always a long way from home.

Part of the film's project is to bring Melquiades Estrada 'home,' 'home' being defined as a place where any human being can hope for a basic measure of acceptance and respect. The distance between 'home' and 'a long way from home' is measured in the three burials of Melquiades Estrada: the hasty and furtive interment in a shallow grave by his killer; the indignity of a loveless bulldozer burial by people who do not know, or want to know, his name; and

finally being 'laid to rest' by someone who mourns him. Going 'home' means crossing several frontiers: the national border, racial divisions, and the line that separates men from human beings. The inhumanity of traditional masculinity is indicated clearly enough in Mike's violence towards others, for example his sadistic treatment of the Mexicans he catches at the border and his rape of Lou Ann. Men in the film are defined as oversexed beings; Mike's rape and his penchant for porn figure as prominently here as the extramarital sex scenes and Belmont's terror of impotence (Melquiades, significantly, is extraordinarily shy around women). Racial divisions are brought to the fore by Belmont's refusal to investigate the murder of a 'wetback,' and by the border patrolmen's casual acceptance that they will not be able to keep out illegal immigrants ('Well, somebody's gotta pick strawberries'). One of the most notable scenes documenting racism is Pete's failed attempt to make Mike see the Mexican he has killed as a human being by bringing him into Melquiades's hut: 'Melquiades lived here. That was his bed. Kept his clothes right over there. That was his plate. And that was his cup.'

Compared with the many dysfunctional, callous, or dejectedly uncaring Americans portrayed in the film, all Mexicans are shown as humane, approachable, generous, hospitable and successful communicators. Accorded

about equal space with Americans (about half of the film is shot in Spanish), they present not a minority but an alternative to the American 'way of life.' Their generosity is exemplified by Melquiades in a touching scene in which he gives Pete his favourite horse, but also generalised beyond his character. A group of Mexicans whom Pete and Mike encounter in the mountains, watching, on a generator-powered TV, the same soap opera episode that provided the backdrop to Mike's rape of Lou Ann, share their food and drink with Pete and Mike. When Mike breaks down crying in front of the TV (it is not entirely clear whether he cries in sentimental identification with the TV-couple's misery or in remorse at his own act of rape), the Mexican who has shared his bottle of whiskey with him offers him the entire bottle: 'Take it, for your troubles.' In another scene, Mike is cured from a rattlesnake bite by Mariana (Vanessa Bauche), a woman he had brutalised earlier when he caught her trying to cross the border, knocking her down and breaking her nose. Mariana saves his life but whacks him hard in the face with a coffee-pot as soon as he is sufficiently recovered. Immediately thereafter—'Now we're even, asshole'—both Pete and Mike are seamlessly integrated into community life. Mariana and Mike sit peacefully next to each other, both shucking corn, casting embarrassed glances at each other, looking virtually identical with their broken noses. Significantly,

the film's Mexicans form communities rather than 'families': these communities include men, women and children, but no sense of either ownership or hierarchy, and no hint as to who might be the biological parents of the children running around at any given time. The sole Mexican 'family' we encounter that might be typed within the unimaginative confines of American 'Family Values' exists only in Melquiades's photograph and turns out to be a fantasy. Similarly, 'home' in the Mexican sense is completely uncoupled from the American Dream's commercial definition of 'home' as a nice house in White Suburbia. The 'home' Mexicans fashion for themselves centrally relies on their ability to act on human impulses, both positive ones like generosity and supportiveness, and negative ones like Mariana's petty act of vengeance. Even more centrally, it relies on the ability to let go of a festering malice and animosity that, for many of the American characters, is rooted in their firm belief in their own racial superiority.

Melquiades's 'home,' a non-existent village he has named 'Jiménez,' becomes a symbol for these possibilities. As he describes it to Pete, 'Jiménez is a beautiful fucking place. It sits between two hills. The air is so clear there you feel you can hug the mountains with your arms. A stream of clear clean fresh water bubbles up right out of the rocks there. If you go to Jiménez, I swear to you your heart

will break with so much beauty.' After Pete and Mike are told by locals that they do not know of such a place, much of their dialogue focuses on the question whether Jiménez exists, with Pete calmly insisting and Mike hotly denying that it does. When the two arrive at a ruin of a stone house, surrounded by an unspectacular and unvaried landscape of dry hills and dusty rocks, Pete declares, 'This is Jiménez. It's just like Mel said it was.' Mike, nonplussed but possibly deciding that it's no good arguing with a madman, agrees: 'Yeah. This is it. You found it, Pete.' In the final scenes of the film, Pete and Mike are seen working together for the first time; they fill in the cracks in the stone with mud, sweep the inside of the house, create a ramshackle roof for it, even make a sign for the village: 'Jiménez.' What is shown here is more than two overgrown boys building a pile of sticks and rocks and calling it a house. We are witnessing the creation of 'home.'

After Melquiades is buried for the third time ('laid to rest' rather than flung into a hole in the ground), Pete frogmarches Mike to a tree, pins the photograph of Melquiades's fictitious family to it and demands that Mike ask for forgiveness. And Mike does, tearfully, in moving and surprisingly credible words, all the more convincingly since Pete, who has initiated Mike's breakdown by threatening to shoot him, moves off-screen, leaving Mike alone with the

photograph. Mike's words, delivered as he tearfully looks up at the photograph the way penitent sinners look up to the cross ('It hurts me, and I regret it every single day. Forgive me. Forgive me, Melquiades, for taking your life. Forgive me. Forgive me') are worlds apart from his earlier rationalisations ('I didn't mean to kill your friend, man. He shot at me, all right?'). His (and the film's) final line, shouted after Pete as Pete rides off ('You gonna be all right?') is the first indication that Mike is capable of showing concern for another human being.

The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada is a massive debunking of modern American myths, ranging from 'family values' to 'truth' (Melquiades), 'justice' (Mike) and the 'American Dream,' which boils down to keeping other people (non-whites, non-North-Americans) out of it. It shows us an America that is both emotionally stunted and physically depressing with its trailer homes and 'all the fucking billboards,' an America where a stable home and family life, for the middle class and the poor, exists only in the realm of fantasy. It is an America that boasts about its technological achievements ('strictly top o' the line') but in which most things actually do not work (Melquiades's second burial is sped up because the refrigeration unit is broken, as is the heat-seeking radar that would enable the border patrol to spot Pete). It is an America that defines itself largely through separatism ('protecting our borders'), enforced through overkill military

prowess (Pete, a single man on horseback, is pursued by eight prowlers, one helicopter, and a dozen border patrolmen). The idealised portrayal of the Mexican community offers a foil for American society, an alternative world that is portrayed as both unreal (the search for Jiménez) and real (on the level of human interaction and support). In this way, Pete can be read both as the fool who refuses to let go of the illusion of Jiménez and as a wise man who, through contrition and forgiveness, turns a pile of rubble into a paradise.

As these possibilities suggest, the film, ostensibly an American dystopia, may well be the most utopian Western ever made. It rejects the vengeance option enacted at the end of every traditional Western and offers, as an alternative, the successful conversion of a man into a human being. Were this a traditional Western, one in which, to invoke Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, deserve's got something to do with it,[21] Mike, the film's most thoughtless, brutal, unsympathetic and contemptible character, would inevitably be punished by a spectacularly and satisfyingly messy death. Amidst all the frontiers the film puts on display—the national border, racial divisions, male-female relationships, the distance between masculinity and humanity—relinquishing the desire for retributive 'justice' may well be the most difficult frontier to cross. The film's portrayal of Mike's conversion as serious and successful is an offer to the

audience, asking indirectly whether Mike's escape can be accepted as a gratifying ending, perhaps even a more enjoyable conclusion than it is within the power of 'justice' to provide.

Back to Nature, or Forward to the Past: The End of the Quest

Both *Assassination* and *Burials* move traditional American foundational myths into the dystopian context of everyday U.S. reality: the frontier, for instance, once understood as the utopian symbol of discovery, exploration, and Manifest Destiny, becomes a defensive vision of a national border that must be protected against 'illegals'. Both films show us the rather painful modernisation of the nineteenth-century American mythical male, who, transformed into family father and breadwinner, stands at the centre of the twentieth-century myth of the 'American Dream' of white middle-class wealth and family life. But it is not an easy transition. The fact that Bob is universally hated and despised for killing Jesse James, that he becomes, instead of the hero he has always wanted to be, the 'coward' Robert Ford, shows that his audience (in the film) falls into the same trap as he did—confusing the man with the myth—, and that they deeply resent the elimination of the myth and its substitution through a sleazy theatrical

simulation (this move may well define Dominik's film as one of the more self-referential Westerns in recent history).

If *Assassination* shows us that legends are difficult to let go of, particularly if the myth that replaces them is as inexpressibly dreary as the American Dream, *Burials* takes us both a step further and a step back. In its merciless debunking of the most central aspects of the American Dream—'home,' 'family,' 'justice,' middle-class wealth, and technological prowess—the film returns us, in a manner of speaking, to the wilderness. For the film's true 'home' is not one that is bought but one that is first imagined ('dreamed') and then built by hand, much as the settlers of the American West must have built their homes. The true 'family' is not defined by blood or marriage but by human interaction and support, the ability to indulge in minor acts of revenge (like Mariana) but forgo major ones (like Pete). Both the representation of the wealth that is the American Dream's most defining feature, visualised by 'all the fuckin' billboards,' and of Mexican-style poverty, visualised by dust, rubble and the total absence of advertising, define Mexico as 'nature' in stark contrast with North American 'culture.' Similarly, the film casts the Mexican characters' basic humanity as an alternative world to the U.S. style 'American Dream' with its emphasis on the acquisition of wealth.

And yet, this conclusion at the end of Jones's Western is more than a simple call for Westerners to abandon our wealth and return to nature. Nor does the film—despite its utopian finale—offer viewers a replacement myth. On the contrary: its endorsement and enactment of simple human interaction, the very opposite of the interaction between legend and stalker, myth and mythmaker, implies the abandonment of the quest itself, the end of myths and the death of dreams.

Notes

[1] Greil Marcus, 'John Wayne Listening', in *The Dustbin of History* (London: Picador, 1996), 209-15, here 211.

[2] Christopher Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2000), xiv.

[3] For example: Joe B. Frantz and Julian Ernest Choate, Jr., *The American Cowboy: The Myth and the Reality* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1956); William W. Savage, *Cowboy Life: Reconstructing An American Myth* (Newman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973); William M. Osborn, *The Wild Frontier: Atrocities during the American-Indian War from Jamestown Colony to Wounded Knee* (New York: Random House, 2000).

[4] For example: Andreas Baur and Konrad Bitterli (eds.), *Brave Lonesome Cowboy: Der Mythos des Westerns in der Gegenwartskunst oder: John Wayne zum 100. Geburtstag* (Nuremberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2007); Fred Erisman, 'Clint Eastwood's Western Films and the Evolving Mythic Hero', in *Clint Eastwood: Actor and Director. New Perspectives,* ed. Leonard Engel (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2007), 181-94; Michael Kimmel, 'The Cult of Masculinity: American Social Character and the Legacy of the Cowboy', in *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure, Power, and Change,* ed. Michael Kaufman (Toronto and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 235-49; Lee Clark Mitchell, *Western: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Ray White, 'The Good Guys Wore White Hats: The B Western in American Culture', in *Wanted Dead or Alive: The American West in Popular* Culture, ed. Richard Aquila (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 135-59.

[5] Edward Buscombe has linked the Western's marginality since the 1970s to the Vietnam war and resulting doubts about the concept of 'heroism' (*Unforgiven* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 8-11); see also John H. Lenthan, 'Westbound: Feature Films and the American West', in *Wanted Dead or Alive: The American West in Popular Culture,* ed. Richard Aquila (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 109-34, here 116-17.

[6] On Academy Awards for Westerns, cf. Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood*, 2nd ed. (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 2; Buscombe, *Unforgiven* 84-5, and Lenthan, 'Westbound' 116-17. The only three Academy Award winners so far in the genre (in the 'Best Film' category) are *Cimarron* (1931), *Dances with*

Wolves (1990) and *Unforgiven* (1992), the latter two made when the talk about the demise of the genre was already in full swing.

[7] Blake Allmendinger, *Ten Most Wanted: The New Western Literature* (New York, London: Routledge, 1998), 12-13.

[8] See Philip J. Rasch, *Trailing Billy the Kid* (Stillwater, OK: Western Publications, 1995); Michael Wallis, *Billy the Kid: The Endless Ride* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).

[9] Frank Forrest Latta, *Dalton Gang Days* (Santa Cruz, CA: Bear State Books, 1976).

[10] Dir. by Franklin B. Coates, cast: Jesse James Jr. and Diana Reed.

[11] Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones, *The Negro Cowboys* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1965), 227.

[12] Marcus on John Wayne: 'professional American, he wears the mantle of Manifest Destiny easily, happy to represent America to the world, to itself, to himself' ('John Wayne Listening,' 209).

[13] On the American Dream, cf., among others: Jim Cullen, *The American dream: a short history of an idea that shaped a nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Sandra L. Hanson and John Kenneth White (eds.), *The American Dream in the 21st Century* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011); Heather Beth Johnson, *The American dream and the power of wealth* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2006); Patrick Primeaux, *Reinterpreting the American Dream: Persons and Ethics* (San Francisco: International Scholars, 1999).

[14] The average number of children per U.S. family has been 2.2 for much of the period since 1945. According to the CIA's World Fact Book, the TFA (Total Fertility Rate per family) in the United States, for more than 40 years pegged at 2.2, now stands at 2.06. Cf. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2127rank.html (accessed 9 November 2011).

[15] 'Family Values,' still one of the most sacred cows in U.S. politics, became a widespread political term after 1992, when then-Vice President Dan Quayle held a speech in which he attributed the Los Angeles riots following the brutalisation of Rodney King at the hands of four police officers to a breakdown of family values. On Family Values as a political term, cf. Dan Quayle and Diane Medved, *The American Family: Discovering the Values that Made Us Strong* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996); Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).

[16] For a more extensive treatment of both Dominik's and Jones's films, see Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer, *Contemporary Hollywood Masculinities: Gender, Genre and Politics* (New York: PalgraveMacmillan, 2011).

[17] *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007, dir. Andrew Dominik). Italics indicate quotations from the film's narrative voice; dialogue quotations will be rendered in regular type.

[18] Andrew Dominik, who wrote the screenplay, followed the original novel closely and often quoted from it verbatim (Ron Hansen, *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (London: Souvenir Press, 1984)); Dominik's screenplay was one of the film's two contenders for the 2007 Academy Awards.

[19] Bob's pursuit of Jesse clearly defines the film as a stalker movie, with a rather self-referential subtext about movie stars, their fans, their lack of privacy and so forth. Bizarrely, Brad Pitt was the victim of an incident very similar to that described in this scene in January 1999, when Athena Rolando broke into his house, put on his clothes and slept in his bed. On the case against her, see Nancy Martinez, 'Arrest Warrant Issued For Brad Pitt Stalker,' http://www.turnto23.com/entertainment/137797/detail.html (accessed 8 November 2011).

[20] This and all further quotations are taken from *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005, dir. Tommy Lee Jones).

[21] Possibly the most memorable and most frequently quoted line from *Unforgiven* is delivered by William Munny immediately before shooting Little Bill Daggett in the face, in answer to Little Bill's final desperate bid for survival: 'I was building a house. I don't deserve this.' Munny: 'Deserve's got nothing to do with it.' *Unforgiven* (1992, dir. Clint Eastwood).