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The Foundation of a Myth: Visualizing the American West

Monika Messner

American Western art reveals much about the development of American culture and displays certain images of the American West – images which can be seen as the basis of the Western myth. The West's potential for mythic status in American culture was a phenomenon that had been developing since the 1830s, when the first paintings of open plains, looming mountains or dramatic encounters with Native Americans were exhibited. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner characterized this phenomenon succinctly, when he proclaimed that the frontier no longer existed. The disappearance of the frontier was highly significant, as until then the existence of "an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward" had been the major defining feature of American national development (Turner 2). But already at this point in time, the myth of the West had started to make headway. Romantic renderings of the exploration, settlement and development of the West were used to rationalize the destruction and exploitation of the region and to justify the genocide of the Native Americans. The visualization of the American West – whether in nineteenth-century paintings, in advertising or in recent Hollywood films – has always been and still is very popular. The extreme popularity of Western visual art contributed significantly to the mythology of the West as a place where opportunities can still be found or where characteristics such as freedom and individualism are still present. The main focus of this paper is on the function of the West and its visualizations as a series of ideological positions throughout the West's history, as well as how these positions have contributed to the mythic status of the American West.

The very word *Western*, an adjective that has come to serve as a noun, carries popular connotations that suggest the simplicity and limitations of the popular Western history celebrated in films and novels, paintings and prints, theme parks and local summer pageants. The word suggests a particular

time, place, and cast of characters – a sparsely populated part of the West during the mid-to-late nineteenth century, inhabited by cowboys and Indians, mountain men and cavalry troops, most of whom adhere to a particular moral code of honor. Western art – nineteenth century landscape painting in particular – has created a distinctive and very prominent version of the American West, and has contributed a great deal to the mythic status of the American West. These paintings were organized according to emotions and feelings which were associated with the American West at that point in time. In the mid-1860s one painter became one of the leading artists of America's West and engraved his vision of the West in people's minds. Unlike anyone before him, Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) caught the nation's attention, although despite his enormous popularity his paintings were long out of favor by the time of his death in 1902 (Mitchell 57). The fact that Bierstadt's reputation reached such heights so quickly raises the following questions: What contributed to his fame? Which artistic features might explain Bierstadt's great appeal to his contemporaries? And finally, what does the tremendous response to Bierstadt's paintings tell us about the 1860s?

One possible explanation of Bierstadt's immense success might be that he treated the West as a mental region rather than as a distinct geographical one. His romantic renderings of the West did not portray a realistic but rather a surreal image of the West; they addressed a large audience who saw themselves – as well as distinctly American values – reflected in Bierstadt's Western settings. This paradoxical mixture of reality and imagination reified the mythic associations the West was taking on at that time.

Another explanation might be that the melodramatic structure of Bierstadt's paintings focused on emotion and sensation, and thus his most compelling landscapes suited the taste of his 1860s audience. Bierstadt's renderings of the American West featured stock settings such as the Rocky Mountains or Yosemite Valley, emphasizing sensational and spectacular atmosphere. Bierstadt's approach can be compared to that of a stage designer. He organized his paintings according to showmanship and not according to perspective. Apart from astonishment, plenitude, vastness, incongruity, and melancholy, spectacle is one of the keywords in Bierstadt's art. In this context, Michael Rogin suggests that

spectacle is the cultural form for amnesiac representation, for specular displays are superficial and sensately intensified, short lived and repeatable. Spectacle and amnesia may seem at odds, to be sure . . . but this opposition . . . is what enables spectacle to do its work. (106)

The viewers are so absorbed by Bierstadt's compelling landscapes, his exaggerated scenery, and the dramatic atmosphere that they forget the moment and are challenged by the paintings' mixture of actual sites and fantastic settings.

In this context, it does not really matter whether Bierstadt's sites are false or authentic. The profusion of carefully arranged details gives Bierstadt's paintings more realistic detail than the actual sites (Mitchell 66). This concept of being just a little grander than reality is clearly apparent in any of his other paintings, and indeed in *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mount Rosalie* (1866). The dramatic setting of the painting with its various centers of interest rivaling for the viewer's attention corresponds to the title. The more obvious eye-catchers, namely the towering mountains on the right, the lake in the center, the cracked trees in the foreground, and the typically Bierstadtian sky, compete with the details of a lonely bird fighting against the storm, or of Indians chasing a horse. The dramatic excess in *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* and in most of Bierstadt's other paintings has the effect that his sites seem fictitious even though they are named after actual places. In this way Albert Bierstadt helped to invent the West as a dramatic setting rather than an actual geographical one. Bierstadt's visualization of the American West revealed its potential as a place waiting for transformation and evoking characteristically American values, qualities, dreams, and emotions.

Albert Bierstadt's version of the West set the first basic Western characteristics that other artists could easily transform and nonetheless label "Western." More than any artist before, Bierstadt exposed the possibilities that emerged from seeing the West in a particular way. Ray Allen Billington poignantly describes the dominant attitude towards the Western landscape among nineteenth-century artists – in particular among writers of popular literature:

Something more than a monotonous landscape was needed by the novelists; they must have oases when adventures could find haven from desert heat, caves to shelter them from marauding Apaches, towering cliffs where hero and villain could battle with bowie knives, raging rivers where bad men could be swept to their deaths. Hence writers performed feats of geographic legerdemain remarkable to behold as they transformed the southwest to suit their needs. (98)

In fact, Bierstadt's paintings established a kind of the American West that offered ground for a distinctive plot and set of characters, enabling its reinvention and revision by so many writers and directors of the twentieth cen-

ture. Thus, it was not surprising that the advertising and film industries were quick to discover and exploit the mythic status of the West established by nineteenth-century artists like Albert Bierstadt. The popularity of Western themes, with their distinctive values and easily recognizable elements, was and still is most effectively used by Western films and advertising. These two genres relate and refer to each other: motifs like the Gold Rush, Custer's Last Stand, ranch life, or the impressive setting of Monument Valley are frequently drawn on, either to appeal to a large audience fascinated by Western themes and values or to sell a large range of products including cigarettes, cars, clothing, or perfume. Especially in the years before and after World War II, when the Western established itself as the dominant and most popular genre in Hollywood, advertising could fully exploit the familiar Western iconography and its immense appeal to the American public (McArthur 170).

In the 1950s, it had become evident that Western films and advertising set the terms for the image of the (old) West in the twentieth century. Images of the American West used in advertising – one variety of the Western myth – reveal much about America itself. Ethnic minorities, such as Asian Americans, African Americans or Native Americans, as well as lower class people rarely appear in such advertisements. Thus, the Western myth is primarily made by and for white, middle class Americans.

Marketing slogans like "pure America," a "sense of adventure," or a "respect for tradition" combined with Western scenery became instantly recognizable icons and appealed to the market, as these advertisements represented distinct values deeply rooted in American society (Milner [1994] 797). Advertisements of this sort seem to solve the problem of how to use the mythic power of the West in a world with little in common with the Old West. By abstracting the West, advertising executives managed to convince the market that the Old West still exists.

The most familiar and probably the most successful advertising campaign in this category is the Marlboro Man. Since 1954, when the first Marlboro Man advertisement was released, the sales figures of the brand have increased steadily. The brilliantly designed campaign, with its image of the mythical American hero, the cowboy, combined with a whole set of implied messages, has created an immediately and universally recognized icon representing an idealized and appealing American lifestyle. The Marlboro cowboy working the Western range once more draws the nation's attention to the unique paradise of the American West – or in other words – to Marlboro Country, the land "where the flavor is".

The most appealing factor of Marlboro cigarettes is certainly not the cigarette itself but the cowboy and his imagery. By exploiting the well-known stereotypes about the cowboy and his surroundings, Marlboro has created a basic formula that is easily recognizable all over the world. Consumers smoking Marlboros believe they can buy a portion of the Western dream and share the Marlboro Man's virility and his sense for adventure. The Marlboro imagery with the mythic cowboy figure transcending everyday life embodies any association smokers may have when they think of the American West. The ready-for-anything image of the Marlboro Man, his masculinity and independence are features that apparently fascinate men and women alike, as both want to be part of this idealized West.

Despite the fact that the Marlboro Man and his homeland barely call to mind the product they are advertising, the brilliant marketing strategy of Philip Morris promoted the brand Marlboro with the most universally recognized and aesthetically appealing image in the advertising world. The Marlboro image has left all the anti-smoking campaigns behind and has metaphorically used the skills of the tough and rugged cowboy to meet the constantly changing demands of the consumer market. Within less than fifty years, the Marlboro Man and his country succeeded in becoming an icon of the American West (= Marlboro Country).

For more than a century the American West has been envisioned, revised, invented and reinvented in almost every genre. Without doubt, the most popular and the most characteristically American of these genres is the Western film. The Hollywood Westerns established visual stereotypes that became indispensable in the Western genre. The use of excessive violence, wide open spaces, the lack of familiar relationships, and the necessity of taking the law into one's own hands belong to the standard repertoire of the Western, and have long been considered authentic descriptions of the Old West. In the course of time, the Western genre developed from unsophisticated, low-quality B-pictures to revisionist Westerns with a feminist, Native American, or African American perspective. But even these "new" Westerns cannot do without the archetypical scenes of the classic Westerns, as they recover a seemingly lost world. Hundreds of Western films have created such a powerful image of America's past that the actual history seems to be distorted.

After a short period of unpopularity, Western movies experienced something of a comeback in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Films like *Dances with Wolves*, *City Slickers* (both 1991), *Unforgiven* (1992), *Tombstone*, *Wyatt Earp*, *Maverick*, *Bad Girls* (all 1994) more or less successfully ex-

plored the myth of the American West. When Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* was released in 1992, many critics argued that the mythic West no longer existed (McReynolds 46). In a *Newsweek* film review, David Ansen wrote that Eastwood was expressing "disgust for the false mythology of the Western hero" by using "familiar Western archetypes [. . .] to new effect" (52). Revisiting the Western genre, actor-director Clint Eastwood explores the myths of frontier violence, dominance, and invulnerability. Eastwood revives the old conventions of the Western and reestablishes the mythical world of the Old West, but at the same time he uses these conventions to express current concerns – namely the contemporary understanding of what the West means to America.

Despite the fact that *Unforgiven* alludes to several elements of traditional Western films (e.g. character types, plot, and setting), Eastwood does not romanticize the West or glamorize violence; rather the film deconstructs and undermines well-known Western myths. In particular, the character of William Munny (Clint Eastwood) lacks the traditional heroism of a Western gunfighter. William Munny is a former gunman and outlaw who has changed his life, becoming a hog farmer and family man. During the course of the film, he slowly reverts to his former identity as a legendary killer whose revenge of unjust acts, among them the cutting up of a prostitute's face and the killing of his friend Ned Logan (Morgan Freeman), is presented as non-heroic and quasi-masculine. Although William Munny returns to his former profession, he keeps telling everyone that he "ain't like that no more."

But what does he mean by being no more "like that"? In one of the first scenes of the film, he is discovered face-down in mud and pig shit on his hog farm; he is unable to shoot a target with his six-shooter and has to resort to a rifle to hit a tin can; he keeps falling off his horse, gets beaten by the town sheriff, Little Bill Daggett (Gene Hackman) and, unlike a true hero, he even avoids drinking, gambling, and women. Thus, for most of *Unforgiven*, grey hair, children, a hog farm, and difficulties in mounting a horse are the obvious elements that distinguish him from the man he used to be. But there could also be a subtler meaning to the sentence "I ain't like that no more." His departed wife Claudia changed him from a killer into a farmer, and in contrast to his former self he is now able to control himself and to judge when his gun fighting skill is appropriate. Although much of the film explores Munny's incompetence as a classic Western hero, it finally reaffirms the traditional myth, transforming William Munny / Clint Eastwood into the heroic gunslinger demanded by both myth and audience.

Besides deromanticizing the traditional Western hero, *Unforgiven* departs from the standard visualization of women. The main female characters are not agents of civilization but prostitutes. In contrast to the traditional role of women in Western films, the women in *Unforgiven* are not the background decorum whose only task it is to add to the glamour of the hero, but they are the source of all the action (Yacowar 248). In fact, in offering a \$1,000 reward for the killing of the men who mutilated the prostitute Delilah, the women define the plot and the men's actions are a direct result of the reward. Thus, the film provides a contrast to Hollywood's former representations of Western women as Calamity Jane or Belle Star. Instead of continuing to submit to the men's power, the prostitutes exploit their business in order to raise the bounty money. Despite the feminist touch in *Unforgiven*, the Western film and feminism still seem to be contradictory terms. This is demonstrated in the lack of a central female character in the film. While the cutting up of Delilah's face and the offering of a bounty trigger off the action, the women do not have much to say. Their stories are either unknown or lost, and they silently watch the men's battles. Despite the women's rebellion against the men's law-making, their decision to offer a reward ironically confirms their subjection to masculine power.

But whereas the classic Western glamorizes this masculine power and its inherent violence, *Unforgiven* undermines the myth of Western masculinity. Some of the male characters show deficiencies in skills that are indispensable for the traditional Western hero: whether it is the "teensy little pecker" of the cowboy who cuts up Delilah's face, William Munny's problems with his horse, or the near blindness of the Schofield Kid – their inadequacies are recurrent motifs and they are contrasted with the overstated masculine (= violent) power of Little Bill. But unlike the almost comic effect of their incompetence, Little Bill's demonstrations of masculinity shock the audience. His physical brutality, his uncontrolled sadism, and his inadequate law enforcement are shown to be a destructive force, emphasizing the disturbing nature of violence. In this context, *Unforgiven* departs from the classic generic representation of violence. While most Westerns do not show the destructive reality of violence, *Unforgiven* is one of the few Westerns which deal with its physical and emotional effects.

Eastwood's critique of the standard representation of masculinity and violence is linked to the exposure of the myths about the West and about its gunmen. The mythologizing of the West in *Unforgiven* is personified by the dime novelist W.W. Beauchamp, who is only interested in the legendary West and not in the historical truth, and also by the self-proclaimed would-

be gunfighter Schofield Kid. Their romanticized visions of the West do not correspond to the film reality. This becomes evident when Little Bill exposes the heroic acts of English Bob, described in Mr Beauchamp's dime novel, as cold-blooded murder, or when the Schofield Kid wants to prove himself against the legendary Western heroes about whom he has heard so many stories, but who turn out to be nothing but broken down old pig farmers.

The discrepancy between Beauchamp's and the Kid's version of the West and the film reality is paralleled by the distinction between those men who know the real West through their own experience and those who only know of the mythical West. William Munny, Little Bill, or Ned Logan, all legends in their own time, tell us of the true West, but at the same time they deconstruct the myths of the Old West. In the end, however, the mythical status of the Western gunman is recovered, as Mr Beauchamp attempts to reconstruct the chronology of the massacre he has just witnessed. Despite the fact that Beauchamp's reporting is temporarily stopped by Munny's threat that he is going to be shot next, we can be sure that events like this will be transformed into myths by dime novelists and the readers of such stories.

Seen as a 1990s visualization of the American West, *Unforgiven* demystifies but at the same time demonstrates the power of the Western myth that survives even its exposure. The myth of the American West is a popular image made up of more than 150 years of visualizations and verbalizations in almost every genre. And all these works seem to say the same thing: the West is real because it should be real. In this context, the terms "history" and "myth" are often used synonymously, "making myth look simply like a stylization of history" (Durgnat 69). But the myth of the West is not stylized history. Rather, it is the product of two imaginations – the real and the unreal – each nourishing and supporting the other. Indeed, the interaction between myth and reality seems to be the true center of the West's power. By verbalizing as well as visualizing the American West "every generation seem[ed] to define the West anew" and in doing so they defined themselves (Pomeroy 30).

The multiple roles the West has played throughout its history and its shifting ideological positions are also evident in the three examples I presented in this paper. In his paintings, Albert Bierstadt cleared the ground for an image of the West as a mystical land, "a place where troubling issues of justice, manhood, and social control might be for the moment resolved" (Mitchell 93). Later on, advertising campaigns showed a more general reliance on conventions invented by artists like Bierstadt. The Marlboro Man fills the Bierstadtian landscapes with notions of freedom, individualism, and

a closeness to nature. Even though the Marlboro cowboy is promoting cigarettes, he is also selling the American landscape and character to the rest of the world and thus represents a very special facet of the American West. A few more aspects of the West are portrayed in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*. In its representation of patriarchy, masculinity, and violence, *Unforgiven* offers parallels with contemporary America. Released shortly after the Rodney King trial and the subsequent riots in Los Angeles, Ned's whipping to death relates to the history of racism in the USA. As the title already suggests, there can be no forgiveness for corruption, false populism, or the mistreatment of women or ethnic minorities. Thus even if the film's ending affirms the myth of the old West, it works to reveal the discrepancy between reality and myth.

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Filmography

Unforgiven. Dir. Clint Eastwood. Perf. Clint Eastwood, Gene Hackman, Morgan Freeman, and Richard Harris. Warner Bros., 1992.