

## **The Shadow of the American Hero**

In this short essay the genealogy of the American hero will be briefly presented, from his appearance in the first mythological narratives by the seventeenth century settlers, through his appearance and development on the screen. There will be a focus on the dark side of the hero throughout the centuries, giving him a moral ambiguity, which resists coming to terms as long as the historical conditions allow for the postponement of facing the moral crisis that accompanies him. It will be shown that in the movies, in the beginning of the twentieth century, the gangster character appear as the personification of the dark side of the American hero, stressing even more his crisis, a crisis that will be more clearly manifested in the later decades of that century.

The initial myth narratives were concerned with expressing in a genuine way the hopes and conflicts of the first settlers in the United States during the second half of the seventeenth century. As Richard Slotkin observes, the “culture and literature we call American was born out of the confrontations between cultures that embodied two (...) conflicting modes of perception, two antagonistic visions of nature and destiny of man and the natural wilderness” (RTV 25). Here the historian is making reference to the clash between the romanticized mythology brought from European cultures, the original home of the settlers, and the indigenous cultures they found in the new land, “whose mythology was closer to the primary, Moira stage, whose vision of the American landscape was mythopoeic rather than conventional... and... were in important respects antagonistic to those of Europe” (RTV 25).

Thus, from such a conflict appears in 1682 the first Captivity Narrative, in which Mary Rowlandson narrates her experience as a captive among the Indians till her

eventual rescuing.<sup>1</sup> Still according to Slotkin, Rowlandson's book, by far the most widely distributed book devoted to a single captivity, "functioned as a myth, reducing the Puritan state of mind and world view, along with the events of colonization and settlement, into archetypal drama" (RTV 94). In that drama, a white woman captured by the Indians, "stands passively under the strokes of evil, awaiting rescue from the grace of God" (idem), which will come by the hand of a white man. There the captive woman stands for the values of Christian civilization: chastity, monogamous and heterosexual marriage, the right to property. These are the values, which must be rescued from the forces of evil, and which pervade the forest and the Indian culture. In order to fulfill his mission, the white man must master the war and survival techniques of the Indians, and must act violently and without mercy.

It is worth stressing that the structure of the captivity narratives tries to solve the conflict between the expectations of the Puritans, who dreamed of a new Eden in the new land, and the natural and cultural environment, unknown and frequently hostile, which was the scenery the settlers really found. Such a contradiction is expressed by the characteristics of the American hero since his origin. He is the champion of the Puritan values, but in order to shield them he must embody the ways and perspective of the Indians, the enemy, the Other. He finds redemption from his plunge into darkness as he saves the captive woman, who keeps chaste and pure throughout the narrative.

In any event, I call attention here to that original ambiguity of the American hero: he is the very force that advances civilization, but can never be part of it as an innocent member, since he also carries inside the worldview of his Other. It is too from that same ambiguity that the relation of the white man with his gun acquires a mythic significance, as both a tool for violence and progress. Such is the American hero: white,

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Sovereignty & Goodness of God... a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration.*

lonely, armed and the champion of civilization, in a long tradition that includes heroes as Benjamin Church, Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, and Buffalo Bill.

However, it is interesting to note that until the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, those heroes can always find some means to get away from their own community, disappearing amidst a seemingly endless nature, the same nature he confronts in order to promote progress, but that shelters him after his mission is completed. Till the twentieth century there is a physical and a corresponding mythological geography, which allows that hero to function of at once as the promoter of civilization and as an antisocial individual.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, Americans perceived their own country as predominantly agrarian. As that view begun to change, they had to adapt more and more to the new industrial and urban reality. It is during that time that appears on the screen that, which many understand as the great American contribution for the mythological narratives: the Western and the cowboy.

The *cowboy* became a folkloric and legendary symbol of the Wild West and of the period of expansion of the internal frontiers of that new nation. It is from that period, the second half of the nineteenth century, the figure of the lonely rider amid the prairies in his way to some small town with its dusty streets and a turbulent saloon. Such a figure, which Hollywood would immortalize as a hero wearing a wide-brimmed hat, boots and his inseparable gun, resting lazily on the gun belt, was born in a short period of North-American history. After all, the wars against the Indians occurred mainly around 1860 and 1890, when all Indian nations which had not been decimated were confined into the reservations. One should note, however, that such a brief period of 30 years did witness a great variety of life styles, each with the potential to generate its own adventure stories. Even if they probably had little contact among themselves,

farmers, cowboys, miners, Indian warriors, gunmen and railroad workers were contemporary.

By using the creative freedom that fiction allows and the historical condensation on which myths are based, Hollywood cinema created an indefinite historical moment and an imaginary geography where mythical figures live in search of harmony in a violent universe. Thus, it is just when the time of great territorial expansions are being left behind that such a powerful mythological space appears on the screen.

Interestingly enough, until 1909, the period of experimentation with form and conventions of the Western, one can still observe the coexistence between two ways of representing the Indian: either as an irrational character, or as the representative of the dignity of the original, or native, American. Such a striking coexistence of two so antagonistic tendencies will never be repeated again; from then on the focus is on the processes of colonization itself and the conquest lead by “the good guy”.

As that focus predominates, the good guy, the westerner, is established as the mythical character who “confronts real and immediate social conflicts: individual versus community, town versus wilderness, order versus anarchy, and so on” (SHATZ 30).<sup>2</sup> In the mythological filmic universe that was being created at that time, contemporary conflicts could be narrated within a setting that pointed to a previous historical moment, making possible the unproblematic valuing of all the qualities of the hero, including his already mentioned violence, his individualism and his identification, even if partial, with what white society saw as evil.

On the other hand, the process of urbanization and industrialization continued at an accelerated pace along those first decades of the twentieth century, generating social and moral conflicts that had no precedent. That is, a significant part of the population

---

<sup>2</sup> SCHATZ, Thomas. *Hollywood genres: formulas, filmmaking, and the studio system*. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1995, p.30.

did not live anymore in an environment where it was always possible to “move West;” they lived in big cities, a place where confrontation was not against the Indian or Nature, ever more distant, but against neighbors in an environment with no sunset to ride away.

It is within such a transition that in 1930 the first gangster films appear, contributing with the Hollywoodian mythological universe a new character: the gangster himself. And he, among other things, and by his own definition, will play the shadow of the cowboy, as well as of other Hollywood heroes, as the war hero, the big entrepreneur and the romantic hero.

It is worth noting that although the cowboy and the gangster exist in the same mythical and fictional universe, the latter updates the conflicts of American society, in a process that will make more and more evident the inconsistencies in the structure of the original mythological narrative, which had been preserved fairly unaltered till then. The ways the gangster makes evident the increasingly unsustainable contradictions of the cowboy in particular and of the Hollywood heroes in general are many. In what follows some of them will be briefly discussed.

Let us recapitulate: according to the original structure of the American mythological narrative, the hero is at once the promoter of progress and civilization and an individual who cannot live within that same civilization, and who feels limited by the very values inherent to the society he champions.

To illustrate the representation of such a contradiction one can think of two symbols of industrial and technological progress frequently involved in Western films: the gun and the train. The gun, one of the defining elements of the cowboy, plays a central mythical role in American culture, considering that it was an essential tool in the process of colonization and conquest of the native peoples and nature. In other words,

the gun acquires a fundamental mythical meaning: it synthesizes the urge to build a new Eden and the violence inherent to that same urge.

Thus, the cowboy establishes a very especial relation with his gun. Possibly as the character that better incorporated the original mythological hero, the cowboy is represented on the screen as having his own code of honor. From the positive side, in terms of reaffirming the dominant ideology, it is his fast draw that allows him to play the hero. It is because he is so good with the gun that he can be the protector of the weak in the Westerns. For the same reason, he is allowed not only to live with the community he protects during the time needed to accomplish his mission, but he can also wander freely through the immense wild and unexplored territories. On such a basis he builds his code of honor: never hesitate to use the gun if to protect the white community, but never use it before being extremely just and necessary, according to his own judgement. And it will be just and necessary to kill whenever his opposer can be considered unfamiliar, an enemy to the values he champions.

On the other hand, such an ontological moral justification undergoes a process of weakening and becomes problematic as more and more Americans get further and further apart from the menacing nature and even from the original Puritan values, as it becomes evident with the urban crimes and the crimes perpetrated in the name of the big capital. Throughout the evolution of the Western genre, such a crisis will be manifested in the form of a progressively cynical opinion of the cowboy about white society, till the 1960s, when the screens show cowboys haunted by intense sexual, racial and psychological crises.

In his turn, the gangster also exhibits a deep identification with his gun. He can use a gun efficiently and with gusto. He is also quick in identifying the enemy and attacking him. His gun is the basis of his code of honor. However, if his ability with the

gun, in addition to his courage, allows one to identify him with the cowboy, other elements complicate such a relation between the gun and heroism. For the gangster, the gun is an instrument of personal conquest, not collective. It is an instrument of power, not of justice, a means to establish a personal order that leads to social chaos. Such a combination of traits makes of the gangster at once a hero and a villain. It denounces the failure of the idealized violence of the American hero in replacing a morally superior society for a wild, primate and sinful world. In a way, by attracting the empathy and admiration of the public, the gangster unveils how frail is an ideology, which sees violence as a tool for a higher good. In this sense, his fictional and mythological representation undermines the good intentions and superior values of the cowboy.

As for the train, it is possible to make a clearer relation with the issue of technological development. For the cowboy, the train presents itself in an ambiguous way. As promoter of progress, he sees that machine as a symbol of the world he helps to implement; in this case, he appears saving trains from Indians and even outlaws, who attack the train to conquer wilderness to their own profit, not of the community. Still from its positive aspect, the train is an example of the technological superiority (as it happens with the gun), which explains and justifies the assumed moral superiority of white civilization. In his turn, the gangster is also partially defined by his interest and control of the new technologies. He is always after the fastest or most luxurious car; he trades happily his pistol for a machine gun, and finds pleasure in every modern technological gadget.

Of course Westerns were made in which the cowboy opposes the tycoons and bankers brought west by the train; an effort to preserve the hero's integrity. In such films the hero can be spared from his contradictions because the spectator is invited to identify his opponents as representatives of the forces of evil. But by also presenting

himself as a hero, the passion of the gangster for modernity and technology only as instruments of power and as a consumer's articles confounds and undermines the positive symbolic relation between technological modernity and moral superiority.

Another way to analyze how the gangster denounces the obscure side of the cowboy and other traditional American mythic heroes is to observe the relation each one has with women. As already mentioned, in the original narrative structure, the white woman is the symbol of the superiority of the Puritan values. Thus, although the hero finds redemption as he saves her, he cannot marry her, since one cannot marry the very symbol of chastity. Even if redeemed, that hero could not put his somber and violent side aside without losing his characteristics and his mythological function.

In the Westerns such a contradiction often appears in the following way: although always characterized as a strong masculine figure and with an eye for women, he always behaves as a confirmed bachelor, who abandons the small town by the end of the story, taking his gun and riding toward an indefinite horizon. In the rare opportunities in which a future marriage is implied, the cowboy already views with cynicism the community he is driven to defend. Striking examples are *High Noon* (1952), by Fred Zinnemann and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), by John Ford.

Such a difficulty for the hero to deal romantically with women can also be largely observed in other Hollywood genres. In the adventure films and detective films the hero spends most of his time in fights, shootouts and explosions, by the end of which he defeats the villains and is finally free to dedicate himself to the heroine. However, in such films that is the moment to end the plot; even if a suggestion is left that both protagonists will make a couple, what the end of these films usually include is



a lead for a sequel, causing the hero to keep eternally fighting enemies, never being able to try and live the life of a married man.

By the same token, as the original hero, the gangster has also an eye for the ladies. Once again one should note that the gangster is seen as a hero because he shares a number of positive traits with the latter. However, the positive qualities he shares with the hero are always undermined by its motivating impulse, a destructive impulse always pointing to the destruction left behind by the conventional American hero. The gangster also gives priority to his violent mission, giving only an occasional attention to the female characters. But as he finishes his job (organizing crime), he finds himself amid a community with no chaste women to offer him redemption. By updating the setting of the myth to the urban environment of the twentieth century, the gangster film exposes the result of the long intervention of the hero. And that result comes as a failure, in the form of a consumerist, repressive and violent society, where women are just a consumer's object. Under that aspect, the gangster anticipates the seemingly unavoidable routine of the Hollywoodian hero of the second half of the twentieth century: to always employ physical force and his cunning to protect society and save the girl, without ever raising a family organized around a real father.

Until 1967, with *Bonnie & Clyde*, by Arthur Penn and especially with *The Godfather* (1972), by Coppola, the gangster films showed a protagonist so sexually repressed that it was impossible for him to have a conventional bourgeois family. Penn's film shows a gangster who dreams of a conventional family, while Coppola's confounds the very word "family" by using it to refer both to the institution based on marriage and blood relations and to organized crime. There, the gangster seems to declare that, after centuries the Christian and patriarchal family can only exist as a set of violent, repressive and problematic relations.

## Bibliography

FENIN, George N.; William K. Everson. *The Western from silents to Cinerama*. New York: Bonanza Books, 1962.

MAST, Gerald. *A Short History of the Movies*. Bobbs-Merrill: Indianapolis, 1976.

SLOTKIN, Richard. *Regeneration Through Violence - The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1996 (1st ed.1973).

SHATZ, Thomas. *Hollywood Genres*. New York: Random House, 1981.

WOOD, Robin. "Ideology, Genre, Auteur." *Film Comment*, Jan-Feb 46-51, 1997.

WRIGHT, Will. *Sixguns & Society - A Structural Study of the Western*. University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles, London. 1977.