The Violent Frontier: The Evolution of Western Violence Through History, Film and Literature

Mark A. Neels
The University of Missouri – St. Louis

In October 2006, in the days following the close of the World Series between the St. Louis Cardinals and the Detroit Tigers, the Morgan Quitno Press, based in Lawrence, Kansas, released its study of the most violent cities in the United States. Ironically, as if mirroring the outcome of the ballgame, St. Louis took first place as the most dangerous city in America, ith Detroit in second place.[1] According to The Associated Press, St. Louis "has long been in the upper tiers of the annual ranking of the nation's safest and most dangerous cities …"[2] In retrospect, the West has always enjoyed a tumultuous past. Although historians ascribe that tumult to different origins, all mainstream historians acknowledge its presence.

A careful study of the origins of the violent frontier and its subsequent growth, demonstrates that the violent tendency of the region was enormously influential on the media of the time. Subsequently, the same media have, in turn, perverted the image of violence on the frontier. These influences on one another have continued through time, changing in their scope and breadth but no less continuous throughout. One can advance the theory that the violent frontier is as alive and well in the Twenty First Century as it was 200 years ago.

The Origins of the Violent Frontier

Writing at the turn of the Twentieth Century, Frederick Jackson Turner, the father of the modern study of Western history, explored some basic principles of violence in the region. In Turner's essay, *Social Forces in American History*, he stated that there were two interpretations of the ideals of the pioneer: anti-government sentiment, and a profound belief in egalitarianism.[3]

Turner later elaborated that the pioneer "had a passionate hatred for aristocracy,

monopoly and special privilege; he believed in simplicity, economy and in the rule of the people."[4] Such men "embodied the element of personal development, free from social and governmental constraint."[5] If conditions on the frontier were as Turner suggests, it is easy to consider the iconic images of the western "badman" or outlaw in the context of Turner's suggestion that the West was an individual's paradise. In Turner's construction, the pioneer distrusted the law and took matters into his own hands.

Twenty years of historical research led to new theories on the relationship between violence and the west. Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Plains*, published in 1931, interwove the notion of Western violence into a survey of the overall history of the Great Plains. Starting with the Native American, Webb proposed that the conditions of the West and the presence of hostile, non-conforming natives mounted on Spanish horses directly influenced the evolution of the passive farmer to the armed rancher, who in turn evolved his weapons to meet the threat of native warfare.[6]

To Webb, violence seemed a necessary evil on the Plains of the 1840s. His study of the relationship between native and settler was the story of the savage against the civilized. While he acknowledged the failures of the civilized along with their successes, the native was continually portrayed as the unrelenting enemy – terrorizing men, as well as innocent women and children.[7]

Far from solely projecting native-settler relations as the dominant form of violence on the plains, Webb allowed room for other causes of western violence. With the Mexican War came the need for a weapon that could be used effectively on horseback. The answer, according to Webb, was found in the Colonel Samuel Colt's "Peacemaker," the six-shot pistol that soon become the symbol of deadly violence in the hands of Westerners during the following decades.[8]

Apart from cattle ranchers and advances in weaponry, Webb borrowed a page from

Turner's theory regarding the distrust of the pioneer toward the law, deducing that the absence of law on the Plains corresponded with a peak in violence. Turner wrote that

> while individualism of the frontier, so prominent in the earliest days of the western advance, has been preserved as an ideal, more and more these individuals struggling each with the other, dealing with vaster and vaster areas, with larger and larger problems, have found it necessary to combine under the leadership of the strongest.[9]

Webb agreed, and took as his example the Cattle Kingdom, an entity that "formulated its own law, called the Code of the West, and did it largely upon extra-legal grounds."[10] The laws of the West, according to Webb, were set by men in the East. Turner argued that the pioneer was essentially a man of individual law. Webb added the trenchant observation, that "the plainsman, finding this law unsuited to his needs, broke it, and was called lawless."[11]

Webb also expanded on Turner's unique brand of Social Darwinism – a theory of survival of the fittest so prevalent in Turner's essays. To Webb and Turner, the Western pioneer "had to defend himself and protect his rights by his force of personality, courage, and skill of arms" simply because no other would do so in his place.[12] These historians clearly suggested that the people of the West fashioned a specific Code of the West, being an unofficial law of the land developed by the people out of lawless nature, which greatly influenced the American "outlaw."

Under the Code of the West, violence received a new definition. What was considered murder in the East was a mere incident in the West. On the Plains, individuals assumed the roles of sheriff, judge and executioner. "Each was his own defender. His own survival imposed upon him certain obligations which, if he were a man, he would accept."[13] And in accepting this idea of survival of the fittest, at the hand of man holding the six-shooter, judgment was declared upon the lesser man, and the icon of the American Outlaw was born.

The Perversion of the Violent Frontier

Though historians agree that violence has had a distinct role in the shaping of the West, there has always been a component of the sensational incorporated into the image of the Western territories. A common theme running through late Twentieth Century scholarship has been the contrast between the legendary and the real history of Western violence. This has done much both to shed light on, as well as to enhance, the mythic iconography. Ultimately, consensus has developed that the mediums of literature and film in the Twentieth Century have seriously distorted and perverted the reality of the violent frontier.

Written over twenty years after Webb's *Great Plains*, Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* focused strongly on the mythic West and urged readers to look past the curtain of history at the importance that this iconography had in the national image of the region. In doing so, Smith could not avoid touching upon the image of the violent frontier and sought to explain it by stating that Easterners living in urban developments projected violence on the "virgin land" of the West because in doing so they were associating their preconceived way of life onto a foreign landscape that they would likely never see. The result was a series of dime novels depicting exotic stories, themes and characters that were almost completely stereotypical and removed from reality.[14]

The 1970s saw another burst of energy attempting separate the mythic iconography of the west with the reality of history. Philip D. Jordan, in "The Pistol Packing Cowboy," was one of several authors who dealt with this mythology. Jordan sought to expand on the work of earlier writers, such as Smith, by further researching the myths fueled by dime novels and magazines as well as looking at Western films of the mid Twentieth Century. He further proposed the theory that these characters and situations were largely removed from the reality of the violent frontier.

Western films, especially, presented a much more distorted picture – a perversion one

might say – that built its conceived image of the west from the iconography of the dime novel.[15] Jordan's work was riddled with striking contrasts between the hero of the Western film and the pioneer of reality. In fact, he blatantly considered the traits of the hero of the typical Western film as nonsense, and concurred with Smith that as far as his ability with a weapon, the image of the "hammer fanning, finger twirling, six shots which sound as one – is set down by those who never have handled weapons consistently or been tutored in their use."[16] Furthermore, Jordan demonstrated that to inflict the kind of wounds a victim of a fictional cowboy suffered would have required a modern day weapon, not a Nineteenth Century piece.

In order to carve his own niche from earlier writers, Jordan attempted not only to note the mistakes made by fiction writers and movie directors, but also to explain just what the reality of the violent frontier was. He began by asking whether or not the stereotype of the cowboy was a fabricated legend, and if so, from whence did the legend originate? Previous historians had formulated hypotheses as to the origins of the badman, but Jordan believed that the answer lay ultimately in the origins of the term "cowboy." Jordan found that originally the name belonged to cow herders and drivers in Texas, but it became corrupted in the territories of New Mexico and Arizona.[17]

In 1877, a dispatch would change the use of the term "cowboy" forever. At Fort Griffin, "situated on the Clear Fork of the Brazos River," the dispatch read, "'two cowboys full of old rye and the devil,' fired several shots from their Colts and broke up a saloon dance." This scene became typical of fictional westerns from then on, for, as Jordan explained, "the appeal of the word was great … and authors of the dime novels seized upon it, and almost before anyone realized it, the cowboy was a quick-tempered, gun-slinging, no-account character."[18]

If we are to believe Jordan, the image of the outlaw cowboy in films from the dawn of Hollywood – from the making of *Red River* (1948), to *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*

(1962) and *Tombstone* (1993) – are legendary icons that replaced the less-fanciful, realistic characters of the violent frontier. Jordan wrote, "Only rarely was he a cold-blooded murderer, a horse thief … or a crack shot."[19] Indeed, the cowboys were just as likely to carry no weapons at all![20] Still, Jordan conceded the existence of at least some of the characteristics of the stereotype when he observed, "The west was a hard territory … guns were worn out of necessity against dangerous animals, and could be exploited by the man who found his fellow westerners disagreeable."[21]

The cowboy became the gun-toting character of legend because while he was not the only person to carry a weapon, readers and movie fans singled him out as the one character *most likely* to carry a weapon and use it in reckless fashion. The violent frontier encompassed much more than the characteristic cowboy/outlaw, but it was easiest to ascribe that violence to one character than to attempt to place those characteristics on an entire population consisting of people of all trades and states of life.

Jordan's research revealed the story of a nation that, upon the closing of the frontier in the Nineteenth Century, faced the reality of a society that had become "beclouded with the fantastical rather than the real."[22] This fantastical image of the West became a dominant stereotype with the invention of film. Images of rough men in black clothing running amok amongst the dusty towns of the West until strong men in white clothing. fast with a gun and wearing a shining marshal's badge brought them down, had some, but little, grounding in reality. Jordan and Smith proved that it was the Eastern misconception of these instances that gained the eye of excited readers and kept them begging for more.

The Impact of Perversion and History

Turner once wrote that history was the direct "self consciousness" of the society in which that history is written and that "each man is conditioned by the age in which he lives and must

perforce write with limitations and prepossessions."[23] Similarly, as Turner warned his readers not to misinterpret the past for sake of the present, John H. Lenihan, in *Showdown: Confronting Modern America in the Western Film*, projected Turner's theory of the changing dynamic of history onto the silver screen's misrepresentation of the underlying motive for violence. Lenihan suggested that portrayals of violent characters in historic settings actually reflected the hardships of the present.

Echoing Smith's suggestion that the dime novel's iconographic image of the Western hero eventually shaped the perception of its realistic counterpart[24], Lenihan believed that something similar had happened in the Twentieth Century: the Western film had been shaped by modern America. Lenihan suggested that the tremendous effect in the Twentieth Century of two world wars, along with the social impact of the Cold War, led to a projected image of violence on Western films. This projected violence in dime novels was accepted by people exposed to social upheavals in the Nineteenth Century, and it was all the more true of the Twentieth Century due to the ready accessibility of violence by any person able to turn on a radio or television set.[25]

Postwar American history lent much to the illusion of the Western Outlaw in literature and film by describing him as a product of social turbulence. Lenihan observed that,

> Since American soldiers had been directly exposed to extensive brutalities, it was logical to assume that many veterans had suffered emotional scars … Westerns, likewise, depicted individual disillusionment and social discontent in the aftermath of the civil war, as veterans returned to an uncertain future, cynical, confused, and hardened to the realities of violence. A favorite theme involved basically good men who are driven to lawless behavior by the trauma of war and its unsettling aftermath.[26]

This seems like a solid theory. In the film *Red River,* the plot followed the plight of one rancher, Dunson, whose dream of prosperity in the ranching business was short lived due to the economic conditions of Texas during Reconstruction. As such, the character saw his chance to redeem his lost prosperity in a cattle race to Sedalia, Missouri; and when that vision was contested, Dunson turned to violence to achieve his goal. Dunson's determination to achieve his

end lead him even to adopt extralegal force; as he declared, confronting one of his crew, "I am the law!"[27] Dunson's angry, cocksure assertion may be the essential expression of what it meant to be an Outlaw, one who places himself beyond the Law by *becoming* the law.

Not only is the plot of *Red River* congruentr with the theories of Turner, Webb and Lenihan, the very timing of the production of that film provides further evidence of the validity of Lenihan's argument. By 1948, the United States was only three years removed from World War II, and the effects of war and hardship on veterans – and the home front population – could not have been fully understood by the mainstream public. Many veterans would have found something to which to relate in the plight of Dunson and his group, realizing that the ability of war to change a man in ways subtle and incomprehensible. And the violence that enveloped Dunson was a likely example of the change wrought on otherwise good-natured people forced to endure extremely turbulent times.

Further, violence in postwar literature and film did not go without its consequences. Most outlaw stories of this time period ended with the outlaw's death, thus offering a sort of warning against lawlessness bred from war. The veteran could reflect on how easily a person might go down the wrong path, and was urged to turn his energies, instead, toward the betterment of future generations, lest he meet a similar fate to that of the antagonist.[28]

Turner suggested that, "American history is chiefly concerned with social forces, shaping and reshaping under the conditions of a nation changing as it adjusts to its environment."[29] Lenihan's research joined that of other historians who already concurred with Turner's various other theories, and suggested that the westerns of the 1960s were largely anti-establishment propaganda.

Just as the "anti-establishment West" of Turner's time found an outlet for its agenda in the trust-busting legislation of President Theodore Roosevelt,[30] so too the anti-establishment

generation of the 1960s found an outlet for its agenda in violence which often transitioned, quite easily, to films such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.* By the time *Butch Cassidy* was released in 1969, the Vietnam War had been in mainstream media for almost a decade, and just as post-World War II films provided an outlet for veteran sentiment, so too the films of the Sixties provided an outlet for both veteran and protester. Lenihan explained that *Butch Cassidy* depicted "outlaws who are trying to preserve a way of life in the early twentieth century against the increasingly effective law enforcement that is generated by the railroad." The Sixties were a time of "dissidence and confrontation … ," and filmmakers thus wished to portray characters in Westerns as "outlaws who are violently at odds with a new social order that eschews personal freedom."[31]

Interestingly, by the time of Lenihan's writing in the 1980sm the violent history of the West had been manipulated and redefined to incorporate themes of mainstream society that Frederick Jackson Turner was keen to warn his audience *against*. Far from heeding the cry of Turner in accordance with the interpretation of history, the violent frontier would soon spawn a complete perversion of that history.

The appeal of the violent frontier was increasingly evident in bookstores in the 1980s, where sales of stories about the outlaws of the Old West remained high on the bestseller lists.[32] In literature, the West was seen primarily as a mythic land of cowboys and Indians, but a more *contemporary* West provided a niche for violence as well. Taking into account both Lenihan's theory of societal influence on the violent frontier, and the popularity of violent fiction generally, it is clear that out of contemporary appeal an unconditionally violent frontier emerged, one that is not necessarily viewed as Western outside of the setting of these works.

At first glance, Robert Bloch's novel *Psycho* seemed anything but a Western. However, the deeper one delves into Bloch's tale, the more one finds trends that illustrate, compellingly,

parallels with mainstream, or "classical" Westerns of the dime-novel period that made *Psycho* a great example of an unconventional Western. Bloch wrote his novel at the height of the Cold War – a time of freeway expansion that connected the West with the East and unified the United States, physically, as one nation in a way no other technology had. The story examines the fate of Mary Crane, from Fort Worth, who met a violent death at the hands of Norman Bates, a lonely, middle aged man who had lost his mind to a combination of Freudian undertones toward his late mother. The *milieu* of Bloch's story is the loneliness of Fairville, Oklahoma, a barren town suffering economic depression brought on by a new freeway that has rerouted traffic away from the town.[33]

Bloch established this violent tale in the heart of territory largely defined and described by historian Walter Prescott Webb, and in doing so provided his audience with a look at the consequences of one man's life of solitude at the mercy of the solitude of the American West. Webb argued that the remoteness of the Great Plains constituted what has been called the "Great American Desert," which was both a blessing and a curse to settlers who found their way onto it[34] Bloch highlighted the consequences of such a barren land: the cursed loneliness of Fairville created a life of solitude that contributed to Bates' madness. Equally, the solitude of the Bates Motel proved a double-edged sword: Besides contributing materially to the mental deterioration that transformed a dutiful son into a psychopathic murderer, it allowed Bates the freedom to carry out his dire crimes unmolested by the law. In no way would a story such as Bates' be as believable had it taken place in a more urban, or Eastern setting.

While the example of *Psycho* provided a scene of insane violence as the result of succumbing to the forces of nature inherent in the remote, violent frontier, there are also examples of the unconventional Western story wherein the violent frontier appears to have no conceived motive at all. In 1978, producer/director John Carpenter's *Halloween* unleashed one

of the coldest murderers in cinematic history upon the Old Northwest which Frederick Jackson Turner studied.

As this study has suggested, there were various motives associated with why Western heroes and villains turned to violence, motives that seemed to coincide with post-turbulent periods of history. However, *Halloween* took violence a step further, making the West far more dangerous by presenting *no motive* for violence. The only answer given to this inhuman shape's violent killing spree was that it was "purely, and simply evil." Even the bullet, the old killer of villains and heroes of the West, seemed to have no further effect in the violent frontier of the late Twentieth Century: Michael Myers was shot several times at point blank range, only to disappear into the autumn night, apparently to carry on this motiveless inhuman violent streak on the unsuspecting victims of the Old Northwest.[35]

Though films like those just mentioned prove that the violent frontier continues to provide an outlet for senseless violence and the further exploitation of the frontier's history in the unconventional Western story, the presence of scholarly works from the very early Twentieth Century stand as witness to an ongoing attempt to understand and acknowledge that perversion as a distinct part of American culture.

Conclusion

Human beings have, since the dawn of time, contended with violence as a part of their society: The United States has been no exception to that rule. In many cases, it is due to violence that empires have risen and consequently fallen. As is evident by early Western historians such as Turner and Webb, violence has been an integral part of the American frontier since its earliest settlement. Historian Henry Nash Smith suggested, further, that the progressing theme of Western violence in literature seemed to suggest an exploitation of the virgin West. Later historians concurred, and further suggested that while literature exploited this violence,

film and literature of the Twentieth Century picked up the banner and carried it to the present day, further exploiting the violent frontier and giving birth to the unconventional Western story, until the reasons behind the violence blurred almost into nonexistence.

Whether in literature, film or the nightly news, the violent frontier is alive and well today. Instances such as the massacre at Columbine High school in Colorado, and most recently on the campus of Northern Illinois University, are almost unbelievable acts of violence in territories symbolic with the Old West of Webb and Turner. In the case of Columbine, the violence was largely decried as mimicry of the violence showcased in movies and video games. Almost a decade later, in the fall of 2007, St. Louis fared little better in the list of the nation's most violent cities than it had in 2006. Instances such as these suggest that we are continually made aware of the violent frontier's existence as well as the reality that the violent frontier continues to remold the conventions of Western storytelling. In truth, the violent frontier looks to continue merging legend and reality without abatement for a very long time to come.

NOTES

[1] "City Crime Rankings Names Brick, New Jersey as America's Safest City St. Louis, Missouri Ranks as Most Dangerous," *The Morgan Quinto Press,* 30 October 2006, <www.morganquitno.com/safecity.htm>.
[2] "Report Finds St. Louis Most Dangerous U.S. City," *The Associated Press,* 30 October 2006, <www.msnbc.com/id/15475741/print/1/displaymode/1098>.
[3] Ibid., 127.
[4] ________. "Pioneer Ideals and the State Universities," (1910) in Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner, ed. John Mack Faragher. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994), 105.
[5] Faragher, *op. cit.*, 103.
[6] Walter Prescott Webb, The Great Plains. (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1931), 58-167.
[7] Webb, 169.
[8] Webb, 179.
[9] Frederick Jackson Turner, "Contributions to the West (1903)" in Faragher, *op. cit.*, 90.
[10] Webb, 206.
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] Webb, 496-497.
[13] *Ibid.*
[14] Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950) 211-250.
[15] Philip D. Jordan, "The Pistol Packing Cowboy," in The Cowboy: Six Shooters, songs, and sex, ed. Charles W. Harris and Buck Rainey. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), 57-83.
[16] Jordan, 58.
[17] Jordan, 61.
[18] Jordan, 63.
[19] Jordan, 62.
[20] Jordan, 60.
[21] Jordan, 64.
[22] Jordan, 83.
[23] Turner, "The Significance of History (1891)," in Faragher, *op. cit.*, 21-22.
[24] Smith describes how the fictional character of Buffalo Bill was based upon the characteristics of William F. Cody, a former Nebraska State Representative and actor in the Wild West show. Other famous characters of Western fiction, such as Deadwood Dick, may also have been loosely based on real people, though nothing to the extent of Buffalo Bill, whose authors went so far as to state the validity that their character was a true historical man. Smith, 102-103.
[25] John H. Lenihan, Showdown: Confronting Modern America in Film. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 103-161.
[26] Lenihan, 103.
[27] *Red River,* directed by Howard Hawks and Arthur Rosson, screenplay by Borden Chase adapted from his short story. (Hollywood, CA: Charles K. Feldman Group and Monterey Productions, 1948).
[28] Lenihan, 104-105.
[29] Turner, "Social Forces in American History (1910)," in Faragher, *op. cit.*, 129.
[30] Turner, in Faragher, *op. cit.*, 126.
[31] Lenihan, 161.
[32] *Ibid.*
[33] Robert Bloch, Psycho. (New York: Tor Books, 1959), 24-51.
[34] Webb, 152-160.
[35] *Halloween*, directed by John Carpenter, screenplay by John Carpenter and Debra Hill. (Hollywood, CA: Compass International Pictures and Falcon International Productions, 1978).