UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

IT'S NOT ABOUT COWBOYS:

THE COWBOY AS SUBJECT IN CONTEMPORARY ART

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

MELYNDA J. SEATON
Norman, Oklahoma
2015

IT'S NOT ABOUT COWBOYS:
THE COWBOY AS SUBJECT IN CONTEMPORARY ART

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
SCHOOL OF ART AND ART HISTORY

BY

_____
Mr. B. Byron Price, Chair

_____
Dr. W. Jackson Rushing III

_____
Dr. Alison Fields

_____
Dr. Kenneth Haltman

_____
Dr. Robert Bailey

_____
Dr. Misha Klein

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

Figures

Abstract

Images of American cowboys are examined in a selection of lens-based artworks including Richard Avedon's *In the American West* (1984), Laurie Simmons' *Cowboys* (1979), David Levinthal's *The Wild West* (1987-89), Matthew Barney's *Cremaster 2* (1999), Anton Corbijn's music videos "Personal Jesus" (1989) and "All These Things I've Done" (2005), James Casebere's Western landscapes (1979-1985), and various cowboy images (1980-2013) by Richard Prince. While iconographically similar to historical art of the American West, these examples are not categorized under the same art historical rubrics nor widely exhibited at the same venues. Artistic intent as well as medium, often sets their work apart because it brings into question what stereotypical associations of the cowboy signify while at the same critiquing the historical treatment of Western subjects in popular culture. While working cowboys represent a sub-set of American labor, the image of the cowboy has been manipulated over time to create a larger imagined national identity. Existing scholarship regarding cowboy mythology is the basis from which artworks of cowboys are analyzed to consider how such images signify in relation to prevailing theories of visual representation. Roland Barthes' theory of myth is employed in regards to how documentary photographs of cowboys achieved mythological status. Theories of simulacra also provide a framework for understanding how the recycling of cowboy imagery both perpetuates and changes the mythological meaning of such representations. Later manipulations in postmodern artworks are investigated in regards to how the imagery advances and/or dispels the myth of the cowboy hero.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

In this dissertation, I examine a select group of contemporary artists who create lens-based artworks that are iconographically similar to historical art of the American West but are not categorized under the same art historical rubrics nor widely exhibited at the same venues. The manipulation of cowboy imagery by these artists, who began incorporating the subject into their work, affects the mythological signification of cowboy imagery for contemporary audiences. I survey Richard Avedon's *In the American West* (1984), Laurie Simmons' *Cowboys* (1979), David Levinthal's *The Wild West* (1987-89), Matthew Barney's *Cremaster 2* (1999), Anton Corbijn's music videos "Personal Jesus" (1989) and "All These Things I've Done" (2005), James Casebere's Western landscapes (1979-1985), and various cowboy images (1980-2013) by Richard Prince.

These artists and works are not generally considered representative of Western American art as defined by mainstream art museums that predominately exhibit such work. Instead, they present a viewpoint of cowboy iconography appropriated from popular culture and fine art of the past in artworks fundamentally different from stereotypical art of the American West. Artistic intent as well as medium, often sets their work apart because it brings into question what stereotypical associations of the cowboy signify while at the same critiquing the historical treatment of Western subjects in popular culture.

From the time Euro-Americans began exploring the lands west of the Mississippi in the nineteenth century, the region and its inhabitants captured the imagination of artists. In the post-Civil War West detailed figurative works produced

1

by such artists as Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell, among many others, portrayed cowboys who worked for wages on Western ranges and trails as working class heroes and the embodiment of American masculinity. Cowboys also appeared as sensational characters in dime novels and starred in Wild West shows that highlighted riding and roping, skills they had honed on the range. The performances also added sharp shooting to the cowboy's repertoire even though "real" cowboys were not gunslingers. Carrying pistols was banned on most ranches and inconvenient when working cattle. By the time cowboys appeared in films in the early twentieth century, their media image had proliferated throughout American popular culture, transforming into something that no longer signified simply a cowhand but rather a mythological legend.

It was not until the 1990s, however, that scholars began viewing art of the American West as anything but "analogue to history" and evaluating its worth based on how it conformed to "contemporary public notions about the frontier mythos of the taming of the wilderness and winning the West."[1] Art historian Peter Hassrick, observed in 2007 that "[s]cholarship in the field has traditionally languished somewhere within in these two extremes, unable to satisfy either expectation or losing any connection with its aesthetic core in the process."[2]

Revisionist viewpoints emerged in the 1990s that challenged previously accepted notions regarding the genre. In 1991 *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920,* an exhibition and catalog produced by the

---

[1] Peter H. Hassrick and Patty Limerick, *Redrawing Boundaries Perspectives on Western American Art* (Denver; Seattle; London: Institute of Western American Art, Denver Art Museum; University of Washington Press, 2007), 9.
[2] Ibid.

National Museum of American Art (NMAA), re-evaluated the meaning of Western American art in symbolic and ideological, rather than, strictly historical terms.[3] The following year, the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma, organized the exhibition, *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West*. In the accompanying catalog, art historian Jules David Prown explained the purposes behind the exhibition: first, "to re-examine surviving contemporary paintings, drawings, and watercolors of that West in search of a deeper understanding of the reality that was, and is no longer," and second, "to consider the processes whereby a scrim of myth has come to veil our view of the past, misleading by pleasing."[4] Although revisionists remained wedded to interpreting art of the American West produced before the mid-twentieth century, many prominent painters and sculptors, including Pop artists Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, continued to address the region in their works. They attracted little scholarly attention as most academic assessments continued to focus on mainstream works from an earlier era, while largely ignoring new media that questioned the myth of the West.

Beginning in the 1970s a few museums also began to exhibit decidedly non-traditional, irony-laced views of the West, produced by contemporary artists and photographers. Two such exhibitions of note took place in Fort Worth, Texas, a self-proclaimed "Cowtown." *The Great American Rodeo*, an exhibition mounted by the Fort Worth Museum of Art in 1976, for example, included work by Robert

---

[3] William H Truettner et al., *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920* (Washington: Published for the National Museum of American Art by the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

[4] Jules David Prown et al., *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press : Yale University Art Gallery, 1992), xi.

Rauschenberg, Terry Allen, Andy Mann and Red Grooms. Richard Avedon's *In the American West*, sponsored by the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, made its debut in 1984.[5] In contrast to exhibitions featuring works dating from the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the interpretation, catalogs, and reviews that accompanied these two shows did not include in-depth art historical analysis of their themes and received relatively little critical attention outside of the region.[6] The content of these shows represented a shift away from a realist tradition in representing cowboys and other Western subjects, but did not analyze and critique the image in the same manner as postmodern artists working at the end of the decade would.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s contemporary artists David Levinthal, Richard Prince, Laurie Simmons, and James Casebere also began questioning the historical meanings associated with images of cowboys through the appropriation and repurposing of cowboy imagery from popular culture. In artworks that recontextualized objects and images ranging from portraiture to cowboy action figures to cigarette advertisements, viewers were prompted to re-assess their personal assumptions of what cowboys symbolized and the historical realities of who cowboys were in the past and who they are today.

While working cowboys represent a sub-set of American labor, the image of the cowboy has been manipulated over time to create a larger imagined national identity. I draw from existing scholarship regarding cowboy mythology to analyze

---

[5] Note that the Amon Carter replaced the designation of "Western" in favor of "American" art officially in 2011.

[6] More in depth analysis of *In the American West* emerged following the 20th anniversary exhibition in 2005, however, beyond reviews in the press the topic was addressed by few scholars.

how images of cowboys signify in relation to prevailing theories of visual

representation. For example, I employ Roland Barthes' theory of myth to consider

how documentary photographs of cowboys achieved mythological status.[7] Jean

Baudrillard's theories of simulacra and simulation also provide a framework for

understanding how simulacra of cowboys both perpetuate and change the

mythological meaning of such representations.[8] I also explain how later

manipulations, particularly in postmodern media, advance and/or dispel the myth of

the cowboy hero.

Understanding the meanings and the myths of the American West conveyed by

images of cowboys is complicated by how the meanings of such representations are

compounded by the process by which they become simulacrum. I have chosen to

focus on particular photographs and films documenting performances that utilize

meanings associated with cowboys brought about by a continual recycling of the

image in American popular culture. According to Barthes, photographs are analogic

representations embodying a message without a code. Photographs are unique

because, unlike drawings or paintings, they provide the closest visual imitation of

reality possible. In turn, photographs carry two meanings; the first, a denoted message,

"the analog itself;" second, a connoted message, "the manner in which society to a

certain extent communicates what it thinks of it."[9] Evaluating the second message of

[7] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Noonday Press, 1972).
[8] Jean Baudrillard and Sheila Faria Glaser, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
[9] Roland Barthes, *Image - Music - Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday Press., 1990), 17.

the images in question is central to understanding how the representations of cowboys have come to represent larger ideals.

The connoted message is essentially a constructed meaning derived from the recycled values and symbols that make up the cowboy image—independence, courage, wide-brimmed hats, high-heeled boots, etc. At this point the imagery takes on mythological aspects by becoming hyper-real. Transmitted first through photography and then cinema, imagery that was once rooted in historical reality transforms into something that signifies more than itself. According to Baudrillard in cinema this occurs when the media "plagiarizes itself, recopies itself, remakes its classics, retroactivates its original myths, remakes the silent film more perfectly than the original."[10] The cultural theorist explains further that, "photography and cinema contributed in large part to the secularization of history, to fixing it in its visible 'objective' form at the expense of the myths that once traversed it."[11] Disseminated over time through popular culture, the image of the cowboy has, in like manner, been transformed from simply signifying an occupation to a system of codes transmitting American cultural and political ideologies.

Buffalo Bill's Wild West show exemplifies one of the first hyper-real representations of cowboys. Not only did the Wild West present cowboys in live performance, but also marketed their image to fans in posters, programs and photographs. In fact, several Wild West cowboys were photographed as working

---

[10] The 2010 remake of *True* Grit by the Coen brothers of the 1969 John Wayne classic film is a good example of this phenomenon. The 2010 version could be considered an attempt to perfect the original, because both versions were derived from a novel. See Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 47.

[11] Ibid., 48.

cowboys prior to entering show business and some of those images were marketed to the public in stereoviews. The nature of selling cowboy photographs is further evidenced by photographer Charles D. Kirkland, who, through his series "Views of Cowboy Life and the Cattle Business," proclaimed his intent to "illustrate graphically and truthfully" life on the range.[12] Kirkland sold his self-described "authentic" views of cowboys to both "tourists and armchair travelers."[13] Woodcut reproductions of some of Kirkland's photographs also appeared in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in 1887. By this time barbed wire had closed off much of the open range, prompting a wave of nostalgia for the cowboys of an earlier era. One observer remarked:

> The cowboy has at the present time become a personage; nay, more, he is rapidly becoming a mythical one. Distance is doing for him what lapse of time did for the heroes of antiquity. His admirers are investing him with all manner of romantic qualities; they descent upon his manifold virtues and his pardonable weakness as if he were a demi-god.[14]

The geographical gap between the open ranges of the West and the urban East distanced cowboys from city dwellers, thus permitting the cowboy to become the hero in the minds of his distant admirers. Today, Kirkland's images of cowboys are an expression of Baudrillard's concept of hyper-reality in the documentation of history via photography.

In arguing that the cowboy is a personification of American national character, it is important how notions of cowboy identity have entered into the American

---

[12] Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 332.
[13] Ibid.
[14] John Baumann, "On A Western Ranche [sic]," *The Fortnightly Review*, No. CCXLIV (April 1, 1887), 516.

imagination through popular media–books, live performances, film, television, and advertising. Nineteenth-century dime novels, for example, represent what Benedict Anderson calls "print capitalism."[15] Stories of imaginary cowboy heroes permitted individuals living elsewhere to encounter Western cowboys vicariously, at the same time that working cowhands were reading about themselves in the same publications. Consequently, popular media created a unified field of exchange and communication establishing a national consciousness about cowboys and the Western myth.

From 1883 to 1913 Buffalo Bill's Wild West show grafted performance onto dime novels and newspaper narratives, offering audiences the opportunity to see firsthand, and in action, some of the characters they had read about. In the twentieth century Western film and television engaged an even greater number of spectators by bringing cowboys to local cinemas and into American living rooms. Building upon the work of such scholars as Richard Slotkin and John G. Cawelti, who have addressed the role of print capital in connecting the cowboy to American national identity, I utilize the work of more recent historians of visual culture and film theorists including Nicholas Mirzoeff and Michael Coyne to identify the means by which such imagery has been transmitted in contemporary culture.

Cultural knowledge is central to interpreting an image. Barthes explains that the reading of photographs is "always historical; it depends on the reader's 'knowledge'" and ability to interpret the signs.[16] Therefore, one can assume that what

---

[15] According to Anderson, print capitalism permitted a national consciousness through the distribution and exchange of information via print media. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 2006), 44-46.

[16] Barthes, *Image - Music - Text*, 28.

a photograph of a cowboy connotes is directly related to the knowledge of the reader

and therefore linked to the categorization and exhibition of cowboy images. The

connotation of an image, whether perceptive, cognitive or ethical, is impacted by the

viewer's knowledge.[17] Most relevant to this study is ethical connotation, "that which

introduces reasons or values in the reading of the image" and signifies according to the

reader's attitudes and understanding.[18]

Audience response is only one measure of analysis of Western and cowboy

photography. Aesthetic issues, artistic manipulation and technology also act upon a

photograph's signification and affect the connotation of any given image.[19] Meaning

derived from both photographic and cinematic images relies not only on the sign or

object represented, but also on the cultural knowledge of the reader and the technology

by which it is transmitted. In the selection of lens-based artworks I discuss, focus is

placed on the technological transmission regarding how the cowboy and the Western

myth are transmitted.

Postmodern discourse regarding photography is also a mitigating factor for

how artworks signify. Art historian Douglas Crimp suggests that published criticism

of artworks of the sort discussed in this dissertation affected the works' meaning.

Viewers only questioned the meaning of what the cowboys depicted signified because

the critics and theorists told them to.[20] In fact, Crimp's 1977 "Pictures" exhibition, and

subsequent essay, defined the work of photographers later recognized as part of the

---

[17] Ibid., 29.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., 46.
[20] Douglas Crimp and Louise Lawler, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 77.

Pictures Generation.[21] Moreover, the idea that criticism affects meaning coincides with Barthes' theory that an image's meaning is contingent on the text that accompanies it in combination with a viewer's cultural knowledge.

I begin by tracing the evolution of cowboy images from their roots in cattle culture to their appearance in political campaigns in order to illustrate the development of cultural knowledge over time and space. This arc establishes the methodological framework for the project and surveys the mythological development of cowboy imagery from nineteenth century "documentary" photographs to contemporary representations in photography, film and popular culture. This chapter also explores the Modern uses of Western imagery created during the mid-twentieth century by non-traditional western artists. Western inspired Pop Art by Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol is discussed as a precursor to later postmodern handling of the subject.

The quasi-documentary photography of Richard Avedon is the focus of Chapter 3. An in-depth analysis of the photographer's 1970s project *In the American West* demonstrates how Avedon departed from the historical documentary tradition in his photographs of working class Americans, including cowboys. In lieu of depicting his subjects against a natural backdrop, Avedon posed his subject in front of a solid white background. The stark nature of the portraits reveal each sitter's unique personality, thus rendering cowboys and others as distinct individuals rather than stereotypical types.

---

[21]The exhibition featured the work of five artists, Sherrie Levine, Jack Goldstein, Troy Brauntuch, Robert Longo and Phillip Smith. See Eklund and Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.), *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984*, 153–154.

Chapter 4 focuses on how artists of the Pictures Generation appropriated iconic cowboy imagery. James Casebere's images of fabricated Western landscapes, the toy cowboy action figures of David Levithal's *Wild West* and Laurie Simmons's *Cowboys*, are analyzed as is Richard Prince's rephotographing and repurposing of cowboy imagery from advertising and literary sources. This chapter demonstrates how the signification of cowboy imagery changed when the photographs were appropriated from pre-existing representations derived from other media.

Chapter 5 explores the use and manipulation of stereotypical iconography of Western cinema in Anton Corbijn's music videos "Personal Jesus" and "All These Things I've Done." Matthew Barney's experimental film/performance *Cremaster 2*, a self-described "Gothic Western" is the subject of Chapter 6. Both artists combine sound and image in their time-based artworks to recontextualize the cowboy imagery not only through the manipulation of their "cowboys'" appearance but also through associations to landscape. I also examine the artistic use of the body in performance as it relates to cowboys and masculinity and how the cowboy signifies as hero and villain simultaneously.

I conclude by discussing the signification of Western and cowboy imagery in contemporary America by arguing that such imagery does convey mythological meanings long associated with American identity and the Western hero. Often, however, the cowboy and the West serve merely as vehicles for the artist to address issues gender, class and commerce. Rather than simply celebrating and reiterating the myth, I contend that this new generation of artworks prompts viewers to question the

underlying meaning of myths regarding the American West and cowboys so that their

contrived nature is recognized.

Chapter 2 - America's Cowboy

Mass-market fiction, Wild West shows, the sport of rodeo, singing cowboys, cinema and television firmly embedded the notions of the cowboy hero in the collective imagination of Americans. Novels and films established a formula for this legendary westerner, imbuing him with rugged individualism, virile masculinity, equestrian and marksmanship skills and a moral code of right and wrong. The cowboy was a man of action, not words. Fictional portrayals invariably placed him in a dangerous environment filled with hostile Indians, deadly outlaws, uncertain weather and other formidable obstacles to be overcome for the benefit of society.[1]

Portrayals of this working class cowboy hero in popular culture blurred the lines between fact and fiction. Over time, as the American cowboy's image was recycled through a variety of media and adapted for commercial and political purposes, its occupational signification was compromised and overshadowed by meanings associated with the American national identity.

"Real" or "Reel" Cowboys

A brief look at the cowboy of history provides a starting point for understanding the myth and associated imagery that surrounds him. Not only were the techniques for working cattle on the open range of the Great Plains and Southwest adopted by Euro-Americans from Mexican vaqueros, but the style of dress, as well. Fashion historian Laurel Wilson points out that "stereotypical cowboy dress is a composite which owes its form to the nature of the work, the environment in which

---

[1] For this project the hero/cowboy is identified as male. While women did and do participate in the cattle industry, in terms of cowboy identity this study focuses on how the cowboy manifests as symbol of masculinity.

the work was done, the ethnic heritage of the wearer, and to tradition."[2] Garments that protected range riders from weather and other work-related hazards subsequently became key visual markers denoting cowboys in fact and fiction. Perhaps the most distinctive signifier of a cowboy, a wide-brimmed, hat with a tall crown that varied in shape according to personal preference, was worn in concert with a variety of protective outer wear that included vests, jackets, slickers, and leather leggings, or "chaps." The latter provided protection from thorns and brush, as did tall leather boots, whose narrow toes made it easier for riders to slip their feet into saddle stirrups and whose high heels helped insure that they stayed in place.[3]

In the Southwest, American settlers frequently used the Mexican term "*vaquero*" to describe cattle-tenders, regardless of race. The word "cowboy" traces its origins to 1000 A.D Ireland. The term also became common in Great Britain where it was used to describe young males who tended cattle and drove them to market on foot. The term also became synonymous with cattle thieves, a connotation that carried over to colonial America and by the 1830s reached Texas. Within another three decades, the term "cowboy" was associated with individuals who made a living rounding up and branding Longhorn cattle running free on the public domain. Over time the appellation broadly designated all hands who worked for wages on Western ranches or trailed cattle to market.[4]

---

[2] Laurel E. Wilson, "The Cowboy: Real and Imagined," *Dress* 23 (December, 1996), 3.
[3] Ibid.
[4] James R. Wagner. "*Cowboy*: Origin and Early Use of the Term," in Paul H. Carlson, ed., *The Cowboy Way* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2000), 13-15.

Many cowboys were indeed mere boys, most only in their twenties. Anthropologist Beverly J. Stoeltje once described cowboys as "an age graded, all male, occupational group, associated with animals and mobility, representing a variety of ethnic and class backgrounds, permanently situated at the bottom of the economic scale, and temporarily cast in the role."[5] Writer Gary Wills called them "paradoxical proletarians and elite of the cattle business, proletarian in their laboring status, elite in their skills."[6] With time, hard work, and superior equestrian and roping skills, some cowboys attained respect as "top hands," thereby signifying aspects of the American dream that linked economic success to hard work and perseverance. Relatively few cowboys, however, ever owned cattle of their own and fewer still reached the vaunted status embodied by the term "cowman," a title reserved for men of mature judgment, adept at managing land and labor as well as livestock. As they grew older, most cowboys quit the range and trail and settled into less strenuous occupations.

The cowboy of myth is rooted in the cowpunchers and trail drivers who worked the open range before the advent of barbed wire fences in the late nineteenth century. Cattle drives to Kansas railheads and the finishing ranges of Wyoming, Montana, and the Dakotas often required lengthy journeys of up to three months duration. Such trips were sometimes dangerous but mostly monotonous. By the mid-1890s barbed wire fencing coupled with an expanding network of railroads, the devastating livestock malady known as Texas Fever and the spread of the farmer's

---

[5] Ibid., 13.
[6] Gary Wills, "Twilight of the American Cowboy." *Civilization* 2, no. 6 (November 1995): 60.

frontier, closed the open range and ended the era of the long drives.[7] The breakup of

large ranches into smaller stock farms also reduced the amount of labor ranchers

needed to tend their herds. Cowboys who remained on the job in the wake of these

changes usually combined horseback herding with fence mending and other ground-

based farm chores.

As these developments were taking place, the image of the working cowboy

was undergoing a profound transformation in the news media and popular culture. In

the years immediately following the Civil War, trail hands and other cowpunchers

gained an ill-deserved reputation for violence and outlawry thanks to sensational

newspaper reporting and pulp fiction. In reality, most cowboys experienced little

violence during their brief careers. Prudent ranchers and trail bosses forbade pistols on

the range and many towns prohibited carrying them on their streets. Disputes between

cowboys and outlaws were rare as were violent collisions between cowboys and

Indians.

By the 1880s romantic and heroic images of cowboys began appearing in

publications touting investment in the cattle trade. Historian Lonn Taylor suggests that

such mentions were among the first mythical representations of the cowboy, depicting

him as "manly, self-reliant, virtuous, competitive (but always fair), a free agent in the

labor market, dependent only on his own skills for employment, and above all, 100

---

[7] Carried by longhorns driven north from South Texas, Texas Fever, was fatal
and quickly spread to breeds further north. In 1885, Kanas banned the movement of
Texas cattle across its border. See Tamara Miner Haygood, "Texas Fever," last
modified June 15, 2010, http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/awt01.

percent Anglo-Saxon, embodying all of the alleged virtuous characteristics of that ethnic group."[8]

Beginning in 1883 William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody brought the cowboy of history and fiction to life in his famous Wild West show. Cody's version of the winning of the West set the tone for the future portrayal of the region and its frontier inhabitants in popular culture. For those who had never ventured West, the heroic image that Buffalo Bill and his troupe portrayed was real. What made the myth of the West so believable in Cody's shows was his use of authentic Western types, including "top hands," who performed extraordinary roping and riding feats beyond the abilities of most regular cowboys and who also acted in various historical tableaus, some of them reenactments of real events.[9] Historian Brian Dippie points out that audiences believed that Wild West shows presented a more authentic version of cowboy life than that lived by real-life hands engaged in ranch work in the West.

Cody's version of the cowboy hero had been playing to audiences for a decade when Frederic Jackson Turner, an academic historian, delivered his famed 1893 address to the American Historical Association, titled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Turner argued that America owed its distinctive character and democratic institutions to the existence of a frontier—"the meeting point between savagery and civilization,"[10] as he defined it.

_____

[8]Lonn Taylor, *The American Cowboy: An Exhibition at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., March 26, 1983-September 15, 1983*. (Washington: American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 1983), 63.

[9]The Wild West shows often included reenactments of Custer's Last Stand and riders on the Pony Express.

[10] Fredrick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Xroads.virginia.edu*, September 1997, http://xroads.virginia.edu/~

The U.S. Census had already declared the Western frontier closed, however, and many U.S. residents mourned its passing and with it, the end of national exceptionalism. The *idea* of the frontier lived on, however, and came to represent a "boundless realm of possibility" in the collective imagination of succeeding generations of Americans.[11] In the years that followed, the cowboy hero became the centerpiece of this new "frontier" and representative of crucial components of American identity, among them rugged individualism, self-reliance and undaunted courage. The heroic cowboy was also capable of violence in the resolution of personal and societal problems, including the conquest of the West's Native population.[12]

By the early 1900s, historian Brian Dippie explains, "popular histories and biographies, dime novels and the periodical press were addicted to western stories and colorful western types."[13] The cowboy myth was fitfully assuming its classic form.[14] Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1904), the most influential literary iteration of the cowboy hero of its time, built upon earlier characterizations.[15] Known only as "the Virginian," the anonymous hero and main character of Wister's tale, signified as a

HYPER/TURNER/. Turner's lecture is reproduced in digital form copied from the *Report of the American Historical Association* for 1893, 199-227.

[11]Judith Kleinfeld and Andrew Kleinfeld, "Cowboy Nation and American Character," *Society* 41, no. 3 (March, 2004): 49.

[12] Michael Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997), 3.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 13.

[15] Taylor, "The Cowboy Hero: An American Myth Examined," 71. Wister's 1895 *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* article, "The Evolution of the Cowpuncher" illustrated by Frederic Remington was a precursor to the stand representation of the cowboy as he appeared in *The Virginian.* See Owen Wister, *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (New York and London: MacMillan, 1902).

cowboy through his distinctive attire and what were by now stereotypical responses to dishonesty, danger and women.[16]

Literary and Wild West Show cowboys made the transition to film in the first decade of the twentieth century.[17] For audiences this transition was seamless and the celluloid cowboys in Western films connoted the same horsemanship and character traits embodied by "real" cowboys from the traveling performances of Buffalo Bill's Wild West and its imitators. Not only were the individuals who appeared in the arena and films often one and the same, the story lines remained consistent as well. The constructed fictional protagonist of film and literature appropriated the authenticity of Wild West show celebrity in order to be read as a true embodiment of the cowboy. Over time, Western cinema solidified and expanded the stature of the cowboy as Western hero. Historian William H. Goetzmann has called film the "greatest mythmaking machine the world has ever known."[18]

The rise of Western cinema, beginning in 1903, reinforced cowboy signifiers, including race. Historian John Coyne argues, however, that Western motion pictures did not promote "white supremacy" but "white centrality." Members of other races were marginalized nevertheless. In the nineteenth century race also played a role in judgments of masculinity, another overarching characteristic of the cowboy hero. Historian Jacqueline M. Moore argues, for example, that throughout history white men

---

[16] Charles W. Harris and Buck Rainey, eds., *The Cowboy: Six-Shooters, Songs, and Sex* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 6.

[17] Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 267.

[18] William H Goetzmann and William N Goetzmann, *West of the Imagination* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 346.

were portrayed as "the epitome of virility and masculinity, thus, being a minority automatically meant a man was less of man."[19]

Some of the earliest Westerns starred Tom Mix who made the transition from Wild West show performer to the silver screen. Engaged in non-stop action and donning dandified cowboy attire, Mix's characters changed little from role to role, reinforcing the cowboy's identity as a hero who stood for right over wrong and justice for the common man. Drawing from and adding to the formulaic cowboy characters of Zane Grey's popular Western novels, the cinematic version would embody character traits that included individual freedom, self-reliance, common sense, strength, toughness, honesty, and silence.[20]

William S. Hart, a contemporary of Mix, was an equally influential figure who brought a veneer of "realism" to the Western. A former Shakespearean actor, Hart rode like a seasoned ranch hand and used historical artifacts, including a pistol of legendary frontier lawman Wyatt Earp to lend authenticity to such classic silent Westerns as *Hell's Hinges* (1916), *Sand* (1920), and *Tumbleweeds* (1925). Friends with Charles M. Russell, Hart drew inspiration from the artist's stories and images of cowboy life. In additional to the "realism" of his movie portrayals, Hart added the role of gunman to the cowboy's repertoire of character traits.[21]

In many ways, the cowboy persona of Will Rogers, star of stage, screen and radio during the first three decades of the 20th century, was the antithesis of William S. Hart's portrayals. Rogers grew up on a ranch in Oklahoma and had been a working

[19] Jacqueline M. Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men: Class and Masculinities on the Texas Frontier, 1865-1900* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 9.
[20] Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie,* 10.
[21] Goetzmann and Goetzmann, *West of the Imagination*, 352–53.

cowboy and a vaudeville performer before landing in Hollywood. His "insider"

understanding of cowboy life helped make him, in the words of historian, Lonn

Taylor, a "pivotal figure in the growth of the cowboy myth." Like Buffalo Bill's

cowboys, Rogers merged the world of working cowboy with that of the make believe

variety.[22]

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Westerns, like other film genres,

offered escapist fare to a beleaguered nation. The films of singing cowboys such as

Gene Autry, not only boosted national morale, but also addressed important political,

economic, social, diplomatic and military issues facing American society on the eve of

World War II. After the war, Autry authored a "Cowboy Code" that set forth the ideal

traits of American patriotism and personal behavior. Autry's code appeared in *Life*

magazine in 1948 and was subsequently included in promotional material sent to fans

and youth groups such as the Boy Scouts. The code's guidelines not only influenced a

generation of American youth but also the cowboy characters Autry and other actors

played on the new medium of television.[23]

In the late 1940s, other B-Western film stars joined Gene Autry in making the

transition from the silver screen to television.[24] Entrepreneurial William Boyd, not

only parlayed his cinematic portrayal of a heroic cowboy character known as

Hopalong Cassidy into a lucrative television contract, but also lent "Hoppy's" name

---

[22] Taylor, "The Cowboy Hero," 78.

[23] See Appendix A for full list of the code and "GeneAutry.com - Gene Autry: Gene Autry's Cowboy Code." Gene Autry.com: The Official Website of Gene Autry, accessed December 10, 2011, http://www.autry.com/geneautry/geneautry_cowboy code.html

[24] B-movies emerged in the 1920s as low-budget counterpart to premier films when theaters began screening double features. Westerns gained prominence in 1930s and 1940s as B-movies. Many B-Westerns featured Western stars.

and image to a variety of merchandise, ranging from action figures to milk cartons to wallpaper and bedroom furniture.[25] Between 1955 and 1967, the golden age of television Westerns, cowboys not only dominated the airways but also the children's toy market.[26]

 With Westerns topping the film box office and television ratings, the roster of cowboy stars included some the most famous men in Hollywood—Gary Cooper, Randolph Scott and Roy Rogers among them. None, however, exceeded John Wayne's identification with the Western film genre and the cowboy hero. Starring roles in such influential Westerns as *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Searchers* (1956), both directed by John Ford, established Wayne as a Western icon and the benchmark by which other cowboy actors were judged. Historian James Campbell called him "an embodiment of authority, masculinity, love of country, and other allegedly endangered American virtues."[27]

Exempt from military service during World War II, Wayne's portrayals of heroic soldiers and cowboys, considered essential to the war effort by some, continued to draw huge crowds.[28] His heroic image also earned him commercial endorsements. A 1950 print ad, for example, combined a portrait of the actor holding a lit cigarette

---

[25] Michael Kackman, "Nothing on but Hoppy Badges: 'Hopalong Cassidy,' William Boyd Enterprises, and Emergent Media Globalization," *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 4 (July 1, 2008): 81.

[26] Elliott West, "Shots in the Dark: Television and the Western Myth," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 38, no. 2 (1988): 72.

[27] James T. Campbell. "'Print the Legend': John Wayne and Postwar American Culture." *Reviews in American History* 28, no. 3 (2000): 466.

[28] In fact, great efforts were made to insure that the actor was not enlisted and he was "the only leading man of his generation to avoid military service." In 1944, for example, studio lawyers insisted Wayne's films were essential to the war effort. Ibid.

with quotations detailing why he preferred the Camel brand.[29] Both the text and the image of the ad also focused on Wayne's physicality (fig. 2.1). The caption next to his photograph, for example, touted his appeal to both sexes: "Man's Idea of a Movie Hero. And the women agree. 6 feet 4 inches, John Wayne has smashed his way to fame in dozens of motion pictures!"[30] Such ads effectively connected Wayne's stardom, physical appearance and sex appeal with his choice of cigarettes and suggested that the viewer's fortunes were similarly linked to what brand they smoked.

Prior to World War II, Western film plots emphasized the wresting of the West from its Native inhabitants. Following the tragedy of Pearl Harbor, however, the narrative changed to one of preserving the West.[31] According to film historian, Michael Coyne, by 1946 the Western was not only a respectable cinematic genre, it had "asserted its primacy" and began to "set social guidelines for American identity."[32]

Many of the so-called "Adult Westerns" of the 1950s and 1960s including *The Big Country* (1958) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) contained narratives exploring the dichotomy between East and West. In these and other sagas the cowboy hero exhibited masculine traits of independence, courage, honesty and

---

[29] Cigarette endorsements by Hollywood stars were commonplace by this time. The wide promotion of cigarettes by Hollywood led the Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education to examine the impact of such endorsements on smoking among the American youth. K.L. Lum, J. R. Polansky, R.K. Jackler, and S.A. Glantz. "Signed, sealed and delivered: 'Big tobacco' in Hollywood," Tobacco Control - BMJ Journals, accessed December 5, 2010, http://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/17/5/313 .full#BIBL

[30] Jack Doyle, "Wayne for Camels, 1950s," *PopHistoryDig.com*, January 29, 2010.

[31] Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie,* 23.

[32] Ibid., 30.

selflessness in contrast to Easterners who preferred "reason to emotion and intelligence to violence."[33] On the world stage during the Cold War, the news media often portrayed the United States as a masculine cowboy and European countries as weak and feminine.[34] At the same time the U.S. pursued a foreign policy that called for the containment Communism, a task sometimes likened to taming of the Western frontier.

The line between right and wrong in the adult westerns of the 1950s and 1960s, however, was not often as clear-cut as the Cold War. Reflecting the times in which they were made, several Western films of the 1960s and early 1970s depicted outlaws such as Jesse James, Billy the Kid and Butch Cassidy through the lens of myth and romance as appealing heroes rather than dishonest villains.[35] Film historian Paul Koositra notes that such:

> tales of outlaws may appeal to an audience because of dramatic elements embedded in the stories, as vehicles of vicarious rebellion against authority (with an implicit message that crime does not pay), or because broad cultural values such as honor, loyalty, courage, or cleverness may be expressed through the character of the social bandit.[36]

In such cases illegal actions appear rational and justified because the hero "is," writes Koositra, "endowed with noble attributes reflecting admirable cultural traits that cancel out the negative aspects of lawlessness."[37] Although not necessarily a cowboy, the outlaw hero(es) of such films invariably read as such because of their attire.

---

[33] Ibid., 88.
[34] Ibid., 57
[35] Paul Kooistra, "Criminals as Heroes: Linking Symbol to Structure." *Symbolic Interaction* 13, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 219.
[36] Ibid., 222.
[37] Ibid., 233.

One of the best examples of the elevation of criminal to hero is the 1969 film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (BCSD), directed by George Roy Hill. Played with a light-hearted and comedic touch by actors Paul Newman and Robert Redford, the infamous, real-life outlaws, wear cowboy hats and boots but have no obvious association with ranch work. The film adheres to other basic tenants of Western cinema—wide-open landscapes, skilled horsemen and marksmen—but also reflects social concerns of the 1960s —the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War and the Sexual Revolution. Film historian Michael Dunne described the film as a "new style Western: non-heroism, humor, sex and sophisticated camera-work"[38] and believed that "viewers recognize the mediation of experience which epitomizes the world of late Sixties America, but not the world of *Stagecoach* or *The Searchers*."[39]

While a fundamental change in the American Western was underway, an Italian version gained notoriety in the early 1960s, beginning with director Sergio Leonie's famed *Dollars Trilogy* staring Clint Eastwood.[40] Filmed on sets outside Altamira, Spain, these movies featured a cowboy hero whose appearance and values also broke the traditional movie cowboy mold. The trilogy's central character, "The Man with No Name" rode a mule, wore a poncho, chomped a cigar, bore a weathered

---

[38] Michael Dunne, "Mikhail Bakhtin and the Sundance Kid: Generic Dialogue in the Western," *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* 23, no. 2 (January 2004): 35.

[39] Ibid., 40.

[40]*A Fistful of Dollars* (1964, US release: January 1967), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965, US release: May 1967) and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966, US release: December, 1967) comprised the trilogy. For more on how the concept of marking the films as sequels William McClain, "Western, Go Home! Sergio Leone and the 'Death of the Western' in American Film Criticism," *Journal of Film and Video* 62, no. 1–2 (April 2010): 52–66.

look and engaged in a flashy violence that differed from the measured cowboy persona proffered by John Wayne.

Despite being filmed abroad, critics applauded the "Spaghetti Westerns," as the genre came to be known, for their visceral realism, a quality lacking in some of their American counterparts. Film historian William McClain noted that although "historical realism seemed to mark them as rather conservative… at another level something was somehow amiss—the horses and hats and guns remained, but the story and the themes seemed vastly different."[41] The tawdry violence and other tropes of the Spaghetti Western soon became common in many American Westerns as well.

Not long after Italian Westerns began to impact the film landscape, a pair of elegiac films about the trials and tribulations of working cowhands in a changing world appeared. *Will Penny* (1968) and *Monte Walsh* (1970) paid homage to a pastoral life and moral code threatened by romance and progress. Forced to choose between the solitary life of a cowpuncher and a woman's love, aging cowboys Will Penny (Charlton Heston) and Monte Walsh (Lee Marvin) prove unable to leave their cowboy identity behind. The revisionist story line of *The Culpepper Cattle Co.* (1972), another film of the era, struck at the very heart of cowboy mythology. On a trail drive, the main character, a young farm boy turned cattle drover, comes to realize that, when viewed close-up, the cowboys he once idealized from afar, were not heroic after all.

Ironically, the release of films that foreshadowed the decline of the cowboy of history and myth also foreshadowed the waning popularity of the Western film genre itself. The failure of U.S. policy in Vietnam and the civil and women's rights

---

[41] Ibid., 58.

movements had taken their toll on long-held beliefs in American invincibility and

righteousness and on the hero that had come to symbolize both.[42] Some scholars

blamed the demise of Westerns in the 1980s on Michael Comino's titanic box office

bomb, *Heaven's Gate*, an ill-conceived film based on Wyoming's notorious Johnson

County Range War of 1890. Others faulted U.S. President Ronald Reagan, who had

acted in a number of Westerns and was widely perceived as a "cowboy," for his hard-

nosed foreign policy relative to the Soviet Union and support of covert operations in

Central America.

As interest in stereotypical Westerns faded, the traditional cowboy hero

morphed into a science-fiction superhero. Historian M. Keith Booker asserts that,

"superheroes are distinctly American cultural icons because of their close family

resemblance to the quintessentially American figure of the frontier hero."[43] Han Solo,

a character played by actor Harrison Ford in the blockbuster film *Stars Wars* (1977),

exemplified the evolution from frontier hero to space cowboy. Solo wore his laser

pistol tied low on his hip like a B-western gunfighter and piloted his space craft like a

cowboy reined a horse. An individualist and a loner, Solo was a reluctant hero until

confronted by evil.[44]

Resembling their predecessors in dime novels and Western films, cowboy

superheroes remained aloof from society, lived by a personal code of honor and stood

ready to defend society at all costs.[45] Melding traditional Westerns and classic

---

[42] Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie,* 189.
[43] M. K. Booker, *Red, White, and Spooked: The Supernatural in American* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2009), 50.
[44] Ibid., 62.
[45] Ibid., 68.

Science-Fiction, cowboy superheroes in such televisions series as *Battlestar Galactica* (1978 and 2004) and *Firefly* (2002), and the film spinoff, *Serenity* (2005), sometimes operated outside the law.

Although Western film production slowed in Hollywood, television movies and mini-series based on novels of the region by such top-selling authors as Larry McMurtry and Louis L'Amour flourished in the 1980s. The characters who inhabited the mini-series *The Sacketts* (1979), *The Shadow Riders* (1982), and *Lonesome Dove* (1989) recalled the cowboy heroes of an earlier era—honest, passionate and idealistic, but unable to live within mainstream society.

The 1990s ushered in another wave of revisionist westerns, including *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Posse* (1993), *Bad Girls* (1994), *Unforgiven* (1992), and *Lone Star* (1996), and a new generation of films about historical lawmen and outlaws,[46] all aimed at modernizing the genre and challenging the Western myth. Reflecting broader changes American society, these and other films lent greater visibility to women and African Americans.[47]

Since 2000, Westerns set in the nineteenth century have been scarce and comprised mainly of remakes and films continuing the revisionist trend of the 1990s. Set in the contemporary West, motion pictures such as *No Country for Old Men* (2007), *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005), and *Brokeback Mountain*

---

[46] Films based on historical lawmen and outlaws included Wyatt Earp (*Tombstone,* 1993 and *Wyatt Earp*, 1994), Wild Bill Hickok (*Wild Bill,* 1995), and Billy the Kid (*Young Guns 2*, 1990 a sequel to *Young Guns,* 1988).

[47] Andrew Patrick Nelson, *Contemporary Westerns: Film and Television Since 1990* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013), xv.

(2005) have continued to update and expand the Western motif and cowboy narrative for twenty-first century audiences.

Although constantly characterized as a "dying breed," working cowboys, like their cinematic counterparts, still ply their trade in the West. The idea that cowboys are disappearing has been around since the stringing of the first barbed wire; not unlike the idea of the "vanishing race" applied to Indians. Their continued survival is ever-precarious, given the formidable challenges and constant adaptation that modern day cowboy life requires.

Nevertheless, more cowboys work on ranches in the United States today than in the nineteenth century. An agricultural census conducted in Texas in 2002 counted 150,000 farms and ranches raising cattle on 129.3 million acres of land. Three years later, an estimated 13.8 million head of cattle roamed the range in the Lone Star State[48] requiring the attention of thousands of full and part-time cowboys. While new technology and land use patterns have dramatically changed the way most cowboys work, hot iron branding and cattle handling methods akin to those used in the nineteenth century are still in evidence, particularly on rugged, remote, and economically marginal land.

Work is one way of identifying cowboys, attire, another. Yet working cowboys comprise only a fraction of the number of Americans, men and women, who regularly don elements of western garb—wide brimmed hats, pearl snap-button shirts with distinctive yokes, starched jeans, high-heeled boots and tooled leather belts. Such clothing permits the wearer, regardless of sex or ethnicity, to be identified as a

---

[48] Census of Agriculture for the State of Texas, Historical Highlights Table 1 (2002): http://www.nass.usda.gov/census/census02/volume1/tx/st48_1_001_001.pdf

cowboy, whether he or she is a working hand or not. "It's funny," an African American rodeo performer told an interviewer in the 1990s, "because when I put that cowboy hat on and my gear in people seem to treat me different. They kinda respect you more: people in the stands and other cowboys. It's like it doesn't matter what color you are—you're a cowboy."[49]

Historian Lene Cecilie Hellum argues that assuming the identity of a cowboy makes the wearer what she calls a "performed cowboy" and includes "everything from wanna-be cowboys and rodeo cowboys to working ranch cowboys and 'cowboys at heart.'"[50] The term "cowboys at heart" suggests that being a cowboy is not dependent on job description or physical appearance but more of a state of mind.[51] Hellum's research among working cowboys in Texas found that most identified cowboys by the work they do. However, some of her interviewees expressed the belief that that "real" cowboys—those who make a living horseback, take pride in their work and follow the old traditions—no longer existed. They blamed pickups and four-wheelers, avarice and a lack of opportunity in rural America for their disappearance.[52]

It can be argued that the only "real" cowboys are ranch hands who dress the part out of necessity and tradition, not fashion. This definition excludes rodeo cowboys, urban cowboys, Hollywood cowboys, and political cowboys, among others. There are differences in each of these types to be sure, but are any of them more or

---

[49] Demetrius W. Pearson and C. Allen Haney, "The Rodeo Cowboy as an American Icon: The Perceived Social and Cultural Significance," *Journal of American Culture* 22, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 18.

[50] Lene Cecilie Hellum, "The Face of the Cowboy: Perspectives on Myths and Identities among Texan Cowboys." Ph.D. Diss., (University of Oslo, Norway 2007), 57.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid., 62-69.

less authentic than the others? The answer to this question is likely dependent on who is asked and under what circumstances—by whom, when and where—cowboy identity is enacted.

Political Cowboys

The liminality of the cowboy's existence between fact and fiction allows it to be employed as a contemporary means of describing a multitude of Americans; yet, the multiple layers of cowboy identity also make it difficult to describe in simple terms. Like all identities, that of the cowboy is multifaceted and complicated, combining old school characteristics such as independent spirit with relatively new features such as entrepreneurism. The attributes of the cinematic and literary range rider have long since morphed and merged with those of the "real" article in a cowboy hero that remains alive in the American imagination. Language inspired by the cowboy West still permeates contemporary American culture including such expressions as "riding shotgun," "shoot from the hip," and "looks like a ghost town." As John E. O'Connor and Peter C. Rollins explain, "these and other colloquialisms derive from the liminal persistence of western narrative in the American mind."[53]

American presidents and presidential candidates have long evoked the Western myth and used the cowboy persona to shape and enhance their identity with voters. Theodore Roosevelt was the only president, however, who could actually support such a claim with a substantial resume of ranch work. As a cowboy in the Dakota Badlands,

---

[53] John E. O'Connor and Peter C. Rollins. *Hollywood's West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 1.

in the mid-1880s, Roosevelt pursued what he called "the strenuous life."[54] Despite his

upper class upbringing in New York, Roosevelt's exploits as a cowboy permitted him

to reinvent himself as a son of the frontier. In early photographs, Roosevelt dressed in

fringed buckskin recalling the likeness of James Fennimore Cooper's fictional

character, Leatherstocking (Natty Bumpo), and real-life frontiersmen such as Daniel

Boone and Davy Crockett (fig 2.2).

Roosevelt's books, *Hunting Trip of a Ranchman* (1885) and *Ranch Life and*

the Hunting Trail (1888), bolstered his cowboy persona and portrayed the cowboys he

knew in a more romantic and sympathetic light than most fictional accounts. Art

historian Byron Price has noted that Roosevelt "minimized their faults and argued that

on the job most were courageous, independent, rugged, generous, and friendly."[55] In

his books, the future U.S. president discounted their wild reputation and assured

readers that "no man traveling through or living in the country need fear molestation

from the cowboys, [they] treat a stranger with most whole-souled hospitality."[56]

In 1898, during the Spanish American War, Roosevelt led a volunteer cavalry

regiment known as the "Rough Riders" in Cuba. This unit was composed in large part

by cowboys and other Westerners, many of whom would actively campaign for his

election as U.S. President in 1904. Several dozen rode horseback in his inaugural

parade the following year, dressed in their best cowboy gear.[57] Roosevelt believed that

---

[54] R. K. DeArment, "The Cowboy Brigade's Inaugural Invasion," *Wild West* 22, no. 3 (October, 2009): 36.

[55] Byron Price, "Cowboys and Presidents," *Convergence*, (Spring/Summer 2008), 16.

[56] Susan Faludi, "An American Myth Rides Into the Sunset," *New York Times*, March 30, 2013.

[57] DeArment, "The Cowboy Brigade's," 37-38.

the cowboy's "stern, manly qualities" were "invaluable to a nation."[58] With this in

mind he appointed several ex-cowpunchers to important federal posts in his

administration, although not all proved to be exemplary public servants.

All the presidents who followed Theodore Roosevelt in office used cowboy

imagery of one form or another to communicate at home and abroad, some more than

others. None employed the cowboy to better political advantage than Texan Lyndon

B. Johnson. Johnson's cowboy persona and working cattle ranch were significant in

his successful presidential election campaign in 1964. Photos of Johnson horseback on

his Texas ranch helped counter the claims of political opponents that he was a corrupt

Washington insider[59] (fig.2.3). In his later handling of the Vietnam War, however,

Johnson found his western image a liability as he was often lampooned in the press

and political cartoons as a reckless cowboy.[60]

During the 1970s the fortunes of political cowboys waned along with the

declining interests in Westerns on the silver screen. In the election campaign of 1980,

Ronald Reagan's advisers tried to mitigate the widespread impression that, as

president, the republican candidate might "put on a six-shooter and take Iran" in an

effort to effect the release of American hostages held there. Using terms that included

"bravado," "swagger," and "tough guy," voters described Reagan as man willing to

stick to his guns.[61] Although he had appeared in a scant six Hollywood Westerns, only

---

[58] Theodore Roosevelt, *Ranch Life and the Hunting-Trail* (New York: Century Co., 1888), 109.

[59] Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie,* 1.

[60] Eileen Boris, "On Cowboys and Welfare Queens: Independence, Dependence, and Interdependence at Home and Abroad," *Journal of American Studies* 41, no. 3 (2007): 607.

[61] Ibid., 611.

two as the leading man, Reagan, as U.S. president, often evoked the Western hero in both word and deed.[62] His economic policies, nicknamed "cowboy capitalism" connoted ideals of the open frontier and rugged individualism.[63]

In Europe and the Soviet Union, however, Reagan's cowboy persona was not as popular as it was among Americans. Communist party newspapers of the 1980s routinely portrayed him in political cartoons as a wild and dangerous. In one such caricature, the cowboy hat-waving U.S. President rode a ballistic missile as if it was n bronc, an act that imitated a scene from the satirical film *Dr. Strangelove* (1964).[64] Reagan embraced the cowboy image until the end of his life. Fittingly, he was laid to rest in California, at sunset, in a ceremony reminiscent, wrote one scholar, of the "extraordinary resonance of Reagan's own attachment to the language, visual and spoken, of Westerns."[65]

Ronald Reagan's presidential successors George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton invoked the cowboy image only occasionally and usually while campaigning in the West. In the 2000 presidential campaign, however, Republican candidate, George W. Bush, a former Governor of Texas, relied heavily on cowboy mythology. Recalling Ronald Reagan's cowboy connections, supporters wore campaign buttons that included photos of both Reagan and Bush wearing white cowboy hats with the slogan "My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys"[66] (fig. 2.4). The white hat evoked the

---

[62] Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie,* 185.
[63] Boris, "On Cowboys and Welfare Queens," 612.
[64] Joyce Barnathan, "The Cowboy Who Roped in Russia," *Business Week*, June 21, 2004, 38.
[65] Alexandra Keller. *Re-imagining the Frontier: American Westerns Since the Reagan Administration*. Ph.D. diss., (New York University), 254.
[66] Ibid., 616.

"good guy" image of cowboy heroes in early Westerns and the slogan capitalized on a popular country-western song performed by Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings and a 1991 film of the same name, starring Robert Redford.

"I started as a cowboy," Bush declared after winning the election, "Now I'm a statesman."[67] Following the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, however, the new U.S. President repeatedly drew upon the cowboy image in both his rhetoric and dress, particularly when dealing with Europe and the Middle East. In public addresses, for example, he sometimes evoked the persona of an Old West lawman in announcing that terrorist Osama Bin Laden and Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein were "Wanted Dead or Alive." With language befitting a frontier sheriff, Bush promised to bring these outlaws to justice. His propensity for decisive action and personification of a masculine cowboy ran counter to that of European leaders, who moved with more deliberation and were still portrayed in the U.S. media as timid and uncertain.[68] Fans of Western art, novels and film no doubt recognized these depictions as variations of the familiar trope of the cowboy and the Eastern dude.

Bush's cowboy posturing bolstered the idea that he was a man of action and that the issues with which he dealt were black and white, good and evil. His association with the cowboy myth linked him to the idea that the cowboy acts according to his own moral compass and, thus, is not accountable to a higher authority. He often claimed that he based his decision to invade Iraq in 2003 on a "gut feeling" that it was his moral and Christian-reasonability to take such action.

---

[67] Boris, "On Cowboys and Welfare Queens," 615.
[68] Wendy Christensen and Myra Ferree, "Cowboy of the World? Gender Discourse and the Iraq War Debate," *Qualitative Sociology* 31, no. 3 (September, 2008): 291.

Bush's supporters saw him as a "plainspoken American cowboy" and thought his actions appropriate for dealing with "outlaws."[69] In a March 26, 2002, editorial cartoon in *The Denver Post*, the U.S. president, clad in Western style garb, wears a double rigged gun belt, one holster of which is filled with a rolled document labeled "Diplomacy" and the other a pistol marked "Cowboy Diplomacy" (fig.2.5). Critics, however, viewed Bush's Western rhetoric as unsophisticated, irresponsible and dangerous. The mainstream media in Germany, for example, routinely characterized him a "trigger-happy cowboy."[70]

Although George W. Bush's successor as U.S. President, Barack Obama, largely distanced himself from the cowboy image in public, it was never far away. He donned a black cowboy hat on campaign in Texas and near his desk in the Oval Office in the White House sits a casting of Frederic Remington's famed bronze, *The Bronco Buster*, a constant metaphorical reminder of some of the qualities the presidency requires.[71]

As a consistent and lasting manifestation in American popular and political culture, the cowboy supports an ideology that identifies not only specific elements of American culture but also the country's politics. The cowboy's mythical identity communicates its own ideology as well, a philosophy initially employed to justify and promote the idea of Manifest Destiny and the conquest of the American frontier. In the

---

[69] Christensen and Ferree, "Cowboy of the World?" 299-301.

[70] "Europe: Is it rejection or seduction?: Germany and America," *The Economist* 372 (July 31, 2004), 37.

[71] B. Byron Price, "Still in the Saddle: Cowboys in American Art," in Thomas W. Smith, ed., *Elevating Western American Art: Developing an Institute in the Cultural Capital of the Rockies* (Denver: Petrie Institute of Western American Art, Denver Art Museum 2012), 202.

century that followed the taming of the West and the closing of the open range, however, the cowboy hero continued to range the American imagination, and became the embodiment of national identity.

Cowboys and Fine Art

Before rugged cowboys and open landscapes became staples of Western cinema and U.S. politics, they were mainstays in art of the American West. The first instances of cowboy imagery illustrated stories detailing their occupation in popular publications such as *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* as early as the 1870s. Lonn Taylor argues that these largely unattributed early sketches set the stage for later "romantic and idealized illustrations" by such well-known artists as Frederic Remington, Frank Tenney Johnson and Maynard Dixon, among many others.[72] Magazine and book illustrations, in turn, spurred later generations of artists and photographers to depict cowboys in their own work. Ever present from the 1870s onward, "cowboy art" influenced the way the range riders of the Western frontier would subsequently be portrayed in music, cinema and television.

In the influential 1991 exhibition, *The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, chief curator William H. Truettner and his colleagues argued that figurative romantic images of the nineteenth century West propagandized Euro-American expansion and communicated the distressing political, racial and economic ideology behind it. This revisionist approach challenged the prevailing belief in the art of the West as straightforward historical analogue and spawned a backlash among those who considered such work both authentic and

---

[72] Taylor, "The Cowboy Hero: An American Myth Examined," 64.

authoritative. To some, questioning the myth of the American West was tantamount to questioning core national values.

While European and mainstream American art had veered toward Modernism in the early twentieth century, painting and sculpture representing the American West continued to be judged by the "accurate" depiction of its subjects. Fidelity to detail and the persistence of subject and region continued to define the field and largely overshadowed more than a few abstract works that portrayed the region and its inhabitants. During the first half of the 20th century, for example, artists such as Walt Kuhn, who helped organize the famous Armory show in New York and painters Maynard Dixon of California and Frank Mechau of Colorado, among others, addressed traditional western subjects in a Modernist style.[73] At mid-century, Pop artists Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol appropriated stereotypical images of cowboys and the American West in compositions that would influence postmodern artists at the end of the twentieth century.[74]

Lichtenstein, for example, tapped a longstanding, "interest in a purely American mythological [subject] matter," including the "American Knight" or cowboy hero.[75] Rendered in Cubist and Expressionist styles borrowed from Pablo Picasso and Surrealist Max Ernst, his paintings from the 1950s recycled Western

---

[73] For an overview of Modern painters depicting the Western subjects see Patricia Janis Broder, *The American West: The Modern Vision*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984).

[74] Certainly these artists represent a small sampling of mid-century artists depicting Western imagery in their work. However, I have selected Lichtenstein and Warhol because their work set a precedent for appropriating Western imagery that related directly to the work of the contemporary artworks to be discussed later.

[75] Terry Smith, "Introduction," in *Impossible Presence: Surface and Screen in the Photogenic Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 7, 9.

themes portrayed by such nineteenth century artists as George Catlin, William T. Ranney and Frederic Remington.[76] *The Cowboy (Red)* (fig. 2.6) and *Cowboy on Horseback* (fig. 2.7), both from 1951, exemplify this merger. Each features a fragmented figure wearing a cowboy hat, brandishing a revolver and riding a disjointed horse. Mirroring Cubism, the paintings are flat and convey multiple viewpoints and dimensions on a single plane.

The presence of mythological subject matter of the American West can be also be seen in Lichtenstein's *Still Life with Cow Skull* (1972) (fig. 2.8), a homage to Georgia O'Keeffe's famed skull paintings, and his *Amerindian* series from 1979-80. Lichtenstein's self-styled "Indian Surrealism"[77] rendered Native designs with ben-day dots characteristic of his Pop Art style. *Indian Composition* (fig. 2.9) and *Little Landscape* (1979) (fig. 2.10), for example, combine the generic imagery of Western landscapes—cacti and mountains—with abstracted geometric forms that mimic Native American designs. Flattening the imagery into his signature graphic style, Lichtenstein reinterprets Native designs and the Western landscape tradition in much the same way he turned works from Cubist and Baroque periods into pop pastiche.

While Lichtenstein borrowed forms based on aesthetic interests, Andy Warhol directly appropriated specific images representing the American West to create new works loaded with commentary. Although Warhol dabbled with Western and cowboy imagery as early as the 1940s, his most significant foray into the field was his 1986 *Cowboys and Indians* suite. The cowboys in Warhol's work were all celebrities—John

---

[76] Iria Candela, "Picasso in 2 Acts," in *Roy Lichtenstein*, ed. Graham Bader, October Files 7 (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), 38.

[77] James Rondeau, Art Institute of Chicago, and Tate Modern, *Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective*, (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2012), 68–69.

Wayne, Howdy Doody and Elvis Presley. His choice of subjects related directly to his childhood and personal experiences with the cowboy mythology and capitalized on the ubiquity of the cowboy image in popular culture. The celebrity of Warhol's subjects is significant as he questions who or what each signifies in American society. Art historian Hugh J. Silverman, explains that such images are omnipresent, "not because they are world 'historical,' or even that that are 'singular universals.' It is because they are icons, name and signs of everyday life. Their identity is not their uniqueness, their individuality, their singularity. Their identity lies in their 'knownness.'"[78] In regards to the cowboy, this "knownness" is most obvious in Warhol's silkscreen *Double Elvis* from 1963 (fig. 2.11). Foremost, it is Elvis Presley; secondarily, it is a cowboy.

Warhol's Elvises were derived from a promotional photograph taken during the production of the film *Flaming Star* (1960).[79] Presley poses as a cowboy-gunfighter, identified as such by his attire—gun belt and cowboy boots—combined with his stance and the pistol pointing directly at the viewer. First seen in the artist's pencil sketch of Roy Rogers (1948) (fig. 2.12) and later works such as *John Wayne* (fig. 2.13), a cowboy with a revolver in hand is a recurring motif in Warhol's work. In *Double Elvis*, Warhol depends upon the cultural knowledge of viewers to connect the singer with cinematic predecessors dating to the famous scene in *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) (fig. 2.14), the first Western with a plot, where a lone cowboy fires his pistol directly at the audience.

---

[78] Hugh J. Silverman, "Andy Warhol: Chiasmatic Visibility," in *Impossible Presence: Surface and Screen in the Photogenic Era*, ed. Terry Smith (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 196.
    [79]This particular silkscreen represents one single work from a series of Elvises exhibited in 1963 at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. Half of the gallery was lined with silver silkscreens with only slight variations of the exact same image of Presley.

Printed in silver, Warhol's' Elvises not only comment on the serial nature of the silver screen cowboy but also appear against a solid background void of landscape, a commonality in all of Warhol's cowboy images but the antithesis of cowboys in film and art. The absence of landscape indicates that cowboys are not primarily defined by the environment they inhabit but solely by their attire and firearms. For Warhol, anybody wearing cowboy clothes is a cowboy. The artist's experimental film *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968) in which some of his Factory cohorts play cowboys, suggests as much.[80] According to art historian David McCarthy: "Warhol seems to assert that if the cowboy identity is only style, then anyone might inhabit the character, whether a famous rock and roll singer, the Factory players enjoying their brief charade, or audiences standing before the screen paintings as though in front of a mirror."[81] McCarthy also explained the importance of the context in which Warhol's life-size Elvises were first exhibited. "The full-length treatment," he wrote in a 2006 article in *The Art Bulletin*, "allows audiences to contemplate the look and accouterments of an American myth enacted by one of it significantly lesser actors in an entirely forgettable film, at a moment, ironically, when the genre was enormously popular and profitable."[82] With regard to the mythological connotations of cowboy imagery, Warhol's exhibition at Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles marked a significant moment when the artist ceased simply appropriating such images and began to more

---

[80]Commonly known as the Factory, Warhol's studio in New York was frequented by the artist's friends, other artists, models and celebrities; many of whom appeared in Warhol's films.

[81] David McCarthy, "Andy Warhol's Silver Elvises: Meaning through Context at the Ferus Gallery in 1963," *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 2 (June 2006): 365.

[82] Ibid., 360.

generally question what the cowboy signifies. McCarthy called his effort "a camp critique of the Western."[83]

Conclusion

As the cowboy image became more ubiquitous in fine art, literature, live performance, film and television, all examples of what Benedict Anderson calls "print capital," it simultaneously became a potent mythical symbol of America nationalism and identity both at home and abroad.[84] Though his successors still ride the Western range, the working cowboy past or present is rarely the image that the cowboy hero of popular culture calls to mind. Dialogue from the film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* perhaps explained it best by suggesting that if Americans have a choice regarding how to imagine the West, and by extension, the cowboy; they will always choose a fictional version over a factual one.[85]

To be sure, the cowboy way of life and image have changed over the last century; yet, both remain a thriving part of American popular culture. Transitioning from a working hand to performer to outlaw hero to space cowboy, the cowboy's image has responded at any given time to the needs of the American audience and prevailing social and political conditions of the day. The mythological connotation of the cowboy, has also taken on fresh layers of meaning with each new iteration of his image—historical or contemporary, factual or fictitious.

---

[83] Ibid., 364.

[84] Historian, Michael Coyne defines the latter as "as characteristic of, or pertaining to, the history, culture, political philosophy, social experience, myths, traditions and common origin of United States citizens." See Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie*, 2.

[85] A point aptly illustrated by a newspaper editor's proclamation when he learns of the truth about who really shot Liberty Vance: "This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

Beginning in the late 1970s, a number of lens-based artists including Richard Avedon, James Casebere, Laurie Simmons, David Levinthal, Richard Prince, Anton Corbijn, and Matthew Barney all took a postmodern approach to the representation of cowboys. Through direct appropriation of tropes made popular by television, cinema, and music and advertising, their artworks simultaneously questioned, reinforced and added to the cowboy myth, further conflating what the cowboy signifies. Their thought provoking postmodern and contemporary work demonstrates that the cowboy occupies a part of the American imagination that extends beyond realism and other stereotypical tenants of art of the American West and those who embrace it.

Figure 2.1
John Wayne cigarette advertisement. The Pop History Dig, accessed December 2, 2010. http://www.pophistorydig.com/?tag=john-wayne-cigarette-ads

Figure 2.2
"Teddy Roosevelt in 1885." History.com Photo Galleries." History.com, accessed December 14, 2011, http://www.history.com/photos/teddy-roosevelt/photo2

Figure 2.3
Stoughton, Cecil. *Trip to the Lyndon B. Johnson Ranch.* "Civil Rights: 1964,The
Dirksen Congressional Center." CongressLink, accessed December 14, 2011,
http://www.congresslink.org/civilrights/1964.htm

Figure 2.4
"My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys Button at Republican Market." Patriotic and
Republican Products at Republican Market, accessed December 10, 2011,
http://www.republicanmarket.com/store/item/21197My.Heroes.Have.Always.Been.Co
wboys.Button

Figure 2.5
Mike Keefe, "Bush Cowboy Rhetoric." PoliticalCartoons.com, accessed December 10, 2011, http://www.politicalcartoons.com/cartoon/cc7e5411-093c-4757-b062-ab1943d20e1c.html

Figure 2.6
Roy Lichtenstein, *The Cowboy (Red)*, 1951, Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches
Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, accessed March 24, 2015,
http://www.lichtensteinfoundation.org

Figure 2.7
Roy Lichtenstein, *Cowboy on Horseback*, 1951, Oil on canvas, 18 1/4 x 20 inches
Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, accessed March 24, 2015,
http://www.lichtensteinfoundation.org

Figure 2.8
Roy Lichtenstein, *Still Life with Cow Skull*, 1972, Oil and Magna on canvas, 42 x 52
inches, Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, accessed March 24, 2015,
http://www.lichtensteinfoundation.org

Figure 2.9
Roy Lichtenstein, *Little Landscape*, 1979, Oil and Magna on canvas, 36 x 48 inches
Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, accessed March 24, 2015,
http://www.lichtensteinfoundation.org

Figure 2.10
Roy Lichtenstein, *Indian Composition*, 1979, Oil and Magna on linen, 84 x 120 inches
Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, accessed March 24, 2015,
http://www.lichtensteinfoundation.org
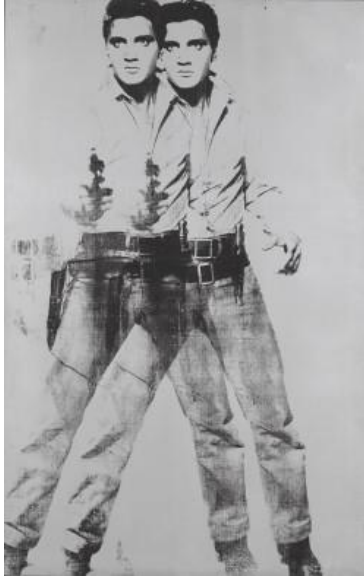
Figure 2.11

Andy Warhol, *Double Elvis*, 1963, Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 83x 53 inches, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/andy-warhol-double-elvis-1963

Figure 2.12

Andy Warhol, *Untitled (Roy Rogers)*, ca. 1948, Pencil on paper, 11 x 8 1/2 inches, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, accessed March 14, 2015, http://www.moma.org/m/arts/34797?locale=en

Figure 2.13
Andy Warhol, *John Wayne*, from *Cowboys and Indians*, 1963, silkscreen, 36 x 36 inches, accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/popart/images/AndyWarhol-John-Wayne-1986.jpg

Figure 2.14
Film still from *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), accessed March 24, 2015, https://timeentertainment.files.wordpress.com/2011/07/02_top10trainmovies.jpg?w=480&h=320&crop=1

Chapter 3 - Avedon's Cowboys

During his long and distinguished career as a photographer, Richard Avedon visually recorded the likenesses of hundreds of people ranging from celebrities, models and politicians to Vietnam War veterans and blue-collar workers. Posing each against a solid white background, Avedon developed a distinctive minimalist aesthetic that focused on his subject's body language and facial expressions. In the late 1970s, the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas, commissioned Avedon to photograph people of the American West for a single artist exhibition and accompanying book. The resulting photographic essay, vintage Avedon in concept and execution, proved controversial and challenged the efficacy of long held beliefs associated with the region and its legendary cowboy hero.

In a *Newsweek* magazine article that coincided with the opening of a 1978 retrospective of his work at the Dallas Museum of Art, Richard Avedon remarked: "I'm interested in people who are defined by their accomplishments. It may be an enormous presumption, but I know more about the uncommon than the common man. I'm interested in people under stress, people who are living very close to the edge."[1] The photographer's comment and his portrait of Wilbur Powell (fig. 3.1), a ranch foreman in southwestern Montana, who he described as "an uncommon common man… a victim and…completely heroic,"[2] caught the attention of Mitchell A. Wilder, director of the Amon Carter Museum.[3] Convinced that the photographer could bring a fresh perspective of the American West to the world, Wilder proposed that Avedon

---

[1] Charles Michener, "The Avedon Look," *Newsweek*, October 16, 1978, 71.
[2] Ibid., 72.
[3] Bill Marvel, "Large than Life: Avedon Photographs the Face of the West," *Dallas Times Herald*, September 15, 1985, sec. C, 1.

photograph the region in any way he chose, the project to be underwritten by the museum.

Known primarily for its premier collection of Western American art, the Amon Carter Museum also housed a superb collection of photography. Although the museum had never offered such an open-ended commission to any artist, its visionary director was confident that Avedon would produce a unique view of the West. After due consideration, the photographer, who viewed the project as one of discovery, concluded that he would need five years to create "a poetic definition of the West not a literal one."[4] Not surprisingly, he also decided that portraiture rather than landscape as his interpretive vehicle and openly expressed his intention to challenge the prevailing romantic view of the region.

During the early planning stages of the project, Dallas photographer, Laura Wilson, became Avedon's research assistant.[5] She soon discovered that Avedon's artistic vison of the West differed profoundly from that of predecessors such as Edward S. Curtis.[6] Rather than confirming mythical images as Curtis had the "Noble Savage" in his classic *The North American Indian*, Avedon would avoid or subvert them. Instead of seeking subjects that conformed to the West of Hollywood and popular culture, he would seek out "faces that expressed what he felt about the human

---

[4] Michener, "The Avedon Look," 72.
[5] Wilson's husband, Robert A. Wilson, an advertising executive, had been instrumental in securing funding for the project.
[6] Christine Wicker, "Travels With Avedon," *Dallas Life Magazine*, November 3, 1985, 8.

condition"[7] and focus his lens on those who experienced economic and social hardships unique to the region.[8]

The first western locale Avedon visited, the famed "Rattlesnake Roundup," in Sweetwater, Texas, set the tone for the project. The photographer told Wilson that he was "looking for people who are surprising-heartbreaking or beautiful in a terrifying way. Beauty that might scare you to death until you acknowledge it as part of yourself."[9] The portrait, *Boyd Fortin, thirteen-year-old, Sweetwater, Texas, 3/10/79* (fig. 3.2), a boy holding a gutted rattlesnake, exemplified the subjects that continually attracted Avedon's camera during the course of the Amon Carter project.

Accompanied by Wilson and two other photography assistants, Avedon spent the summers between 1979 and 1984 traveling through seventeen Western states and visiting 189 towns. To people who caught Avedon's eye as potential subjects, Wilson explained that the project was on par with the art of "Remington or Russell or some Western photographer that all of them were familiar with" in order to convince them to participate.[10] Of the 754 people she approached over the course of the undertaking, only two refused to be photographed.[11] On October 28, 1984, the last portrait in the

---

[7] Laura Wilson, *Avedon at Work: In the American West* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 16.

[8] Even if Avedon had sought out Curtis's "West" he would not have found it. According to Wilson: "We did not see Indians that looked like the ones in the portraits by Edward Curtis – steadfast, noble, and unbroken…To many Indians with whom we spoke, the possibility of success in contemporary America seems remote." See Laura Wilson, "Background," in *In the American West*, reprint ed. (New York: Abrams, 2005), [146–60].

[9] Wilson, *Avedon at Work*, 16.

[10] Wicker, "Travels With Avedon," 13.

[11] Paul Span, "Richard Avedon's Stark Faces of the West: The Photographer and the American Myth in His Gallery," *The Washington Post*, October 29, 1985, C1.

series was at the Texas State Fair in Dallas, just over 200 miles east of Sweetwater where the project began.[12]

As he crisscrossed the West, Avedon avoided iconic subjects, choosing instead "men and women who worked at uncelebrated jobs, people whose lives were often ignored or overlooked."[13] Critic Joan Murray pointed out in *Artweek* that Avedon's subjects were representative of the everyday man and could have been photographed anywhere in U.S.:

> I have seen the people in this exhibition, because they exist everywhere, both the ordinary and the extraordinary, those who can function in society and those who are on the fringes, those who earn their living at hard work and those who do not or cannot. There are salesmen, farmers, students, truckers and cowboys. There is a scientist, a nuclear-fallout victim and an ex-prize fighter. There are prisoners and drifters.[14]

Only 2 of the 124 portraits included in the exhibition were identified as cowboys, although Avedon may have photographed others.[15] The photographer's work included a number of other cowboy "types," which he classified as ranchers, ranch hands, rodeo contestants or stock contractors.[16] At least two other sitters, a

---

[12] Wilson, "Background," [160].

[13] Wilson, *Avedon at Work*, 16.

[14] Joan Murray, "Harsh Truths and Unexamined Lives," *Artweek*, April 5, 1986, 1.

[15] *Milo Dewitt, cowboy, Payson, Arizona, 8/29/82* and *Harrison Tsosie, cowboy, Navajo Reservation, Window Rock, Arizona, 6/13/79*

[16] Ten photographs identify subjects with titles that relate to cowboy work include: *Wilbur Powell, rancher, Ennis, Montana, 7/4/78*; *Richard Wheatcroft, rancher, Jordan, Montana, 6/19/81 and 6/27/83*; *G.R. Cook III, rodeo contestant, Douglas Wyoming, 7/21/81*; *Dawn Jones, waitress, Clint Jones, ranch hand, Rocky Ford, Colorado, 8/23/80*; *Roy Honeycutt, rodeo stock contractor Alamosa, Texas, 6/13/83; Clifford Feldner, unemployed ranch hand Golden, Colorado, 6/15/83*; *Theresa Waldron, fourteen year old, Joe College, rodeo contestant, Sidney, Iowa, 8/11/79*; *Heidi Hamilton and Gordy Bray, rodeo contestants, Douglas, Wyoming, 7/28/81*; *Clyde Corley, rancher, Belgrade, Montana, 8/26/79*; *Jon Wearier, ranch hand, Augusta, Montana, 6/27/82.*

maintenance man and a teenager, wore the western dress symbolic of cowboys but were not identified as such.[17]

Despite his aversion to romanticizing the West, Avedon's approach to the project and the tools and techniques he employed to capture his images were in some ways similar to those of earlier photographers whose work had helped idealize the region. To obtain sharp, detailed images of high quality, Avedon exposed 8 x 10 black-and-white negatives with a Deardorff view camera, the choice of many nineteenth-century photographers. And like his historical forerunners, Avedon stepped beneath a black cloth to focus the lens of his tripod-mounted camera, then stood beside it to direct the sitter's pose. As Laura Wilson, observed, this approach permitted the photographer "the intimacy of eye-to-eye contact, which would not have been possible if he were holding a camera up to his face."[18]

Early on in the project, Avedon found backgrounds that included landscapes and animals too distracting. Instead he began posing each subject against a blank white background because he "wanted the thrill of the person to come forward out of the white, to be vivid and stand alone without the distraction of the landscape."[19] After experimenting with color film and strobe lights at the onset of the American West project, he concluded that "color overwhelmed the subject, diminishing any emotion, and artificial lights gave a hard, contrived look to the portraits."[20]

---

[17] See *Cotton Thompson, maintenance man Fat Stock Show, Fort Worth, Texas, 2/2/811* and *Russell Laird, Tammy Baker, seventeen year olds, Sweetwater, Texas, 3/10/79*

[18] Wilson, *Avedon at Work*, 16.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

It is important to note that Avedon directed his subject's poses. As he explained, "I am observing how he moves, reacts, expressions that cross his face so that, in making the portrait, I can heighten *through instruction* what he does naturally, what he is."[21] While such manipulations undoubtedly altered the documentary value of his images, Avedon's instructions were not out of the ordinary in the field. Avedon came to believe that Westerners placed a greater value on being photographed than some of his more famous celebrity subjects and that common people brought "more of themselves, more dignity to the moment. It is very moving the way in which they confront the camera," he once remarked "…It is a serious moment, and very beautiful, moving things happen in front of my camera."[22]

While on the road Avedon edited copy prints made from his negatives with the museum exhibition in mind. Unlike fine art photographers only out to please themselves, Avedon usually worked on commission and subsequently developed a style with a particular audience and client in mind. Despite the artistic latitude he had been given to shape the project as he saw fit, he made choices based on what he thought would work best in the prescribed museum's environment. Of 17,000 negatives Avedon exposed for the Amon Carter project, he would destroy all but the 124 included in the exhibition.[23]

Avedon also guided the printing process of each image in order to control its emotional content and enhance the expressiveness of the subject's personality.[24] To

---

[21] Ibid., 14.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., 122. The negatives are now part of the Amon Carter Museum's archive, but no additional prints will ever be made per Avedon's directive.
[24] Ibid., 14.

achieve confrontational immediacy with the viewer, he printed the selected negatives

full frame, without any cropping, and made the prints as large as possible. Most were

56 ¼ x 45 inches in size, with ten images reaching 78 1/8 by 64 ¼ inches.[25]

Although women and girls appeared in his exhibition and book, Avedon

originally envisioned the American West project as a study in masculinity, a

characteristic long associated with the region and embodied by its cowboys. The

photographer ultimately pursued broader themes, however, and the degree of

masculinity exhibited by the subjects he included in his exhibition varied widely.

Critic Robert Atkins noted that: "Traces of this idea [masculinity] linger in certain

images, including those of an effeminate-looking Navajo cowboy and an aging

Marlboro Man lookalike."[26] In the photographic diptych *Richard Wheatcroft, rancher,*

Jordan, Montana, 6/19/81 and 6/27/83 (fig. 3.3), Laura Wilson found the positioning

of the rancher's curved wrist, fingers tucked in his jeans pocket, at odds with

otherwise masculine features. Wheatcroft appears vulnerable, on edge. His demeanor

lacks the confidence usually associated with the stereotypical cowboy. Avedon,

however, believed that this disconnect was the very element that made the image

interesting.[27]

Jane Kramer's 1997 nonfiction book *The Last Cowboy* and the short stories of

Raymond Carver greatly influenced Avedon's views of the West and what he wanted

---

[25] For more detail analysis of Avedon's printing process see: Sylvie Pénichon, "The Making of In The American West," *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 47 (2008): 177.

[26] Robert Atkins, "Frontier: On Richard Avedon's Vision of the American West," *Arts Magazine*, April 1986, 60.

[27] Wilson, *Avedon at Work*, 102.

to photograph.[28] In particular, the faces of many of the photographer's subjects seem to reflect the bleak narrative of Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981). Set in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the poignant short story focuses on two couples engaged in conversation around a kitchen table. The male narrator, one of the husbands, sinks deeper into despair as the alcohol-infused banter touches on topics of love, children and former spouses and sheds light on the everyday problems of people struggling to get by in the American West.

Kramer's *The Last Cowboy* commingles the history of ranching in the Texas Panhandle with a profile of a modern-day cowboy, Henry Blanton. Dreaming of a time when a cowpuncher could be more than just a poor hired hand working for wealthy landowners, Blanton and his fellow cowboys champion hard work at low pay. Rejecting welfare, Blanton's wife works as a secretary to keep their children fed and clothed because her husband is unable to make ends meet on a cowhand's salary. As his grandfather, Able, points out, Blanton's twentieth century notions of cowboy pride rests on a flawed foundation:

> There was not much room in the cowboy myth for the real cowboys of the nineteenth century—range bums and drifters and failed outlaws, freed slaves and impoverished half-breeds, ruined farmers from the Reconstruction South and the tough, wild boys from all over who were the frontier's dropouts, boys who had no appetite for the ties of lands or family, who could make a four-month cattle drive across a thousand miles and not be missed by anyone.[29]

Before he visited the American West, Avedon associated the region with John Wayne films and "Marlboro men," the stylized cowboys who appeared in cigarette

---

[28] Nancy Stapen, "Avedon's Western Faces Will Never Live in 'Dallas,'" *Boston Herald*, March 1, 1987, sec. Art, 1; Vicki Goldberg, "Richard Avedon's Own True West," *New York Magazine*, September 16, 1985, 60.

[29] Jane Kramer, *The Last Cowboy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 9.

advertising of the era. "I discovered," he told one interviewer, "that that West has nothing to do with the West of today, if it ever did."[30] Indeed, Avedon's cowboys do seem to have more in common with the likes of Henry Blanton than the heroic characters of popular Western fiction.

Avedon's style of photography is often described as documentary. In his selection of and interaction with his sitters, Avedon displays what photographer and historian Richard Steven Street calls an "attitude of engagement."[31] He moves beyond merely surveying and categorizing his subjects and portrays them as actors within a larger public rather than as exploited victims.[32] Although he denied having a social agenda, Avedon did in fact create a series of images that confronted viewers with the down-and-out of society and succeeded in portraying ordinary individuals.[33]

Although Laura Wilson and others in Avedon's circle knew better, some of Avedon's critics insisted on comparing *In the American West* to the work of Edward S. Curtis, who spent more than three decades photographing and publishing images of Native Americans. In comparing the two photographers, art critic Liz Lufkin cited Theodore Roosevelt's opinion that "truth" rather than "mere accuracy" was at the

---

[30] D.C. Denison, "The Interview: Richard Avedon," *Boston Globe*, August 5, 1987, 2.

[31] Richard Steven Street, *Everyone Had Cameras: Photography and Farmworkers in California, 1850-2000* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 121.

[32] Ibid., 123.

[33] Ibid., 140. This is similar to what Street described as the ambitions for the new social documentary photographic practice "focused on the underclass, the disenfranchised, the poor, the helpless, the exploited, and the "common man" in need of sympathy and understanding."

heart of Curtis' work.[34] She admired the technical skill in Avedon's photographs of

Westerners but declared their content pure fiction, something the photographer readily

admitted in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue. Yet Curtis, too, was often

guilty of artifice, staging many of his subjects, using unsuitable ethnological objects

on occasion to achieve more dramatic visual effects, and sometimes retouching images

to remove modern accouterments.[35]

Larry McMurtry, whose popular cowboy novel, *Lonesome Dove,* won a

Pulitzer Prize the same year that *In the American West* opened at the Amon Carter,

compared Avedon's "implied" landscapes to the work of Curtis, who also "muted his

landscapes, refusing to let them overwhelm his portraits."[36] Landscape being a key

signifier for the Western myth and the space that cowboys inhabit, McMurtry

suggested that Avedon intentionally disassociated his subjects from their environment,

in a manner similar to the way Curtis posed some subjects in front of plain

backgrounds or employed the soft focus of pictorialism to eliminate detail. As a

counterpoint to the work of these two image-makers, McMurtry cited the photographs

of L.A. Huffman, whose late nineteenth century images of working cowboys in

Montana were frequently dominated by the landscape.[37] Avedon's omission of the

landscape in his close-up portraits encourages the viewer to see the cowboy as a

---

[34] Liz Lufkin, "Avedon Vs. Edward Curtis: Two Views of the West," *San Francisco Examiner/Chronical*, March 23, 1986, Review sec., 13.

[35] Mick Gidley, "Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952) and The North American Indian," *Edward S. Curtis's The North American Indian: Edward S. Curtis in Context*, January 2001, http://curtis.library.northwestern.edu/curtis/aboutwork.html.

[36] "Faces of the West," *Texas Monthly*, September 1985, 148.

[37] For more on Huffman see Larry L. Peterson and L. A. Huffman, *L. A. Huffman: Photographer of the American West*, revised edition (Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 2013).

unique individual rather than as a type, thus situating his portrayals apart from most

other historical and contemporary images of working cowboys

Art historian Julian Stallabrass calls this popular aesthetic choice, "quasi-

ethnographic" and compares Avedon's work to historical novelty photographs sold as

souvenirs.[38] Stallabrass' argument proposes that Avedon's subjects, a collage of

western American micro-identities, can be considered inferior lower class curiosities

subjugated by the gazes of an elite museum-going upper class. Much like Curtis'

ethnographic studies, Avedon's subjects also can be read as "others," racially inferior

to the photographer. Avedon's "other," however, is tied more to economic class than

race or gender.[39] "While such photography may offer a critique of the classifying

impulse that lay behind imperial ethnographic photography at home and abroad,"

Stallabrass contends, "it is not one that impedes the guilty pleasure of viewing these

contemporary subjects as mere image."[40]

Maintaining eye contact with his subjects as he stood beside his camera,

Avedon posed them in a way that would accentuate their gaze. As a result few shots

are centered and the sitter is often cropped awkwardly. Stallabrass argues that

Avedon's compositions marginalize the subject by creating a sense of "social and

mental instability" conveyed by an "old and regular photographic technique to suggest

unease with an environment by a disturbance of the expected placement of the subject

---

[38] Julian Stallabrass, "What's in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography," *October* 122 (Fall 2007): 73.
[39] This draws on elements discussed throughout Stallabrass' essay in regards to photographic representations of class in what is often seen as an era of post-class democracy in America.
[40] Stallabrass, "What's in a Face?," 87.

within the photographic frame."[41] This technique, among others employed by the photographer, invokes his personal artistic style and his hand in the creation process. Avedon captured the emotion and expression of his subjects at the moment of exposure, exaggerated by aesthetic manipulation. The "unease with the environment" that Stallabrass describes may result from the sitter's unease and/or the tension Avedon sought to create between subject and photographer; a feature more prevalent *In the American West* than in Avedon's other photographic essays.[42]

Some of the criticism leveled at *In the American West* resulted from the artist's focus on aesthetics rather than documentation.[43] Other contemporary documentarians of the West, those Richard Street calls "activist photographers,"[44] focused "first on content and second on form and style, always fighting the tendency to trivialize through art."[45] These image-makers, too, however, have been accused of creating victims where none exist and charged with exploiting their subjects with images that are aesthetically pleasing and/or popular.[46]

The criticism of Avedon's approach to portraiture is reminiscent of the furor over photographs taken by Swiss-born Robert Frank, in the 1950s and included in his book *The Americans* (1958). Awarded a Guggenheim grant in 1955 to create a

---

[41] Ibid., 78.

[42] See Richard Avedon, "The Family 1976: Richard Avedon," *Rolling Stone*, October 21, 1976.

[43] Accuracy versus artistry is often a bone of contention in Western art. For example, Fredric Remington is criticized for an inaccurate portrayal of a bucking horse in comparison to Charles M. Russell. See B. Byron Price, *Imagining the Open Range: Erwin E. Smith, Cowboy Photographer* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1998), 47.

[44] Street, *Everyone Had Cameras*, 559.

[45] Ibid., 519.

[46] Ibid., 561.

photographic portrait of his adopted homeland, Frank shot 767 roles of film during a

nine-month period. He later explained that he sought "to portray Americans as they

live at present. Their everyday and their Sunday, their realism and dreams, the look of

cities, towns and highways."[47] Critic Susan Weiley thought Frank's a "harsh vision of

America" though an "insightful response" to the nation and its people.[48] She found

Avedon's *In the American West*, however, "disagreeable not because it is cruel or

unflattering but because it is condescending to its subjects (one wants to say victims),

and in its exploitation of them frankly arrogant."[49]

Perhaps Richard Avedon's aesthetic desires did trivialize his subjects in a way

that strict documentarians try to avoid. Yet, Robert Frank was not without artistic

ambition. In his application for the Guggenheim grant Frank described his project as

"essentially the visual study of a civilization…only partly documentary in nature: one

of its aims is more artistic than the work documentary implies."[50] Here Frank touches

on a key aspect that sets his and Avedon's work apart from other documentary

photographers, it is not about the content as much as the aesthetic way in which the

content is captured. MOMA curator of photography John Szarkowski noted that

Frank's approach made his images:

> more difficult to accept, more pessimistic. There was something approaching a
> sharp edge of bitterness in the look of the picture. And of course what was
> eventually learned from that was that it was not necessarily the sensibility that
> gave the pictures their bitter taste, but rather the knowledge that the medium

---

[47] Robert Frank, *The Americans* (Millerton, NY: Aperture, 1978), 163.
[48] Susan Weiley, "Avedon Goes West," *Art News*, March 1986, 89.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Jonathan Day, *Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* (Bristol; Chicago: Intellect, 2011), 37.

itself was more plastic, and was open to a wider range of invention than we ever realized.[51]

Just as Frank's aesthetic changed the way in which the public viewed 1950s America, Avedon's aesthetic created a similar unsettling feeling for those who viewed his Western portraits,

Frank's photographs of cowboys in New York City and rodeo fans in Detroit illustrate why so many found Avedon's portrayals unsettling. Despite being shot amid urban landscapes, Frank's cowboys adhere to stereotypical images in popular culture. In *Rodeo, New York City* from 1955 (fig. 3.4), a man dressed as a cowboy leans against a garbage can lighting a cigarette. His pose is both masculine and confident. The brim of his hat obscures the subject's face, rendering him a type, and thus, signifying as a cowboy hero in contrast to the working class hands in Avedon's photos.

Some of Avedon's cowboy portraits, by comparison strip their subjects of signifying accouterments to expose their individuality. His photograph of Clint Jones, for example, captures the young ranch hand shirtless and wearing only blue jeans (fig. 3.5). Hatless with hands on his hips, Jones stands alongside a young waitress, and both stare directly at the viewer. The ring Jones wears on a delicate chain around his neck draws the viewer's attention and seems out of character for a working cowhand or the cowboy hero of popular culture.

New York Times art critic, Gene Thornton, was less concerned with the absence of stereotypical Western heroes in Avedon's essay than with the lack of

---

[51] Ibid., 37–38.

"white collar workers, much less community leaders."[52] Thornton did not ere in his

observation but like so many others, overlooked Avedon's intent to photograph

representatives of working class Westerners. Through static portrayals of unsmiling

and sometimes tortured faces, Avedon brought to light the economic hardships faced

by many of the region's residents during the late 1970s and early 1980s. His

photographs also recorded the physical and psychological impacts of boom and bust in

the oil and mining industries.[53] Returning to Butte, Montana, in 1982, two years after

Avedon had photographed copper miners there, Laura Wilson found the town

"suffering from boomtown aftershock." The value of copper had declined and

eighteen hundred miners had been laid off.[54] "By inviting us to stare at the marks of

rural life and physical labor," Amon Carter Museum Curator of Photography John

Rohrbach wrote that *In the American West* "asks us to confront the disquieting specter

of our prejudices and expectations…and to stop romanticizing life in American's

West."[55] Avedon's West was indeed a region full of empty promises.

Professional art critics were not the only ones who objected to the

photographer's portrayal of the West. Letters to the editor of *Texas Monthly* magazine

included a variety of negative responses to Avedon's photographs and Larry

McMurtry's accompanying appraisal of the Amon Carter Museum exhibition. A

---

[52] Gene Thornton, "Photography View; Avedon Takes A Dark View Of The West," *New York Times*, December 15, 1985, 8.

[53] *In the American West* also featured a number oil field workers and miners throughout the region. For example see *Tom Stroud, oil field worker, Velma, Oklahoma, June 12, 1980* and *Joe Dobosz, uranium miner, Church Rock, New Mexico, June 13, 1979*, among others.

[54] Wilson, "Background," [149].

[55] John Rohrback, "Preface," in *In the American West*, reprint ed. (New York: Abrams, 2005), [1–3].

Midland, Texas, resident asked, for example, if the photographer had not met "anyone in more than five years of searching who smiled, who was pleasant?" Another reader disagreed with McMurtry's comparison of Avedon's project to the fictional West of cowboy actor John Wayne. "Avedon's nonpastoral West," the naysayer wrote in protest, "is less authentic than the Duke's…he [Avedon] pointed his Eastern camera poorly."[56]

Such opinions ignored the fact that some of Avedon's portraits reflected people who appeared happy and well-to-do. Two of this group, a mother and daughter who were attending the Fort Worth Fat Stock Show, reported that they were photographed because they were dressed-up for the event. The pair attended the exhibition opening expecting to see their portrait displayed, and were relieved to discover that they were not included among what the mother described as images of "the downtrodden, working people, lunatics, drifters and prisoners."[57]

H.D. "Cotton" Thompson, photographed at the same stock show wearing a rhinestone-spangled western suit, reminiscent of the gaudy garb worn by some country and western singers, did not mind being included in Avedon's show. Thompson had donned the outfit in good fun, "acting a fool and…pretending to be the big boss," when in reality he cleaned animal pens at the stockyards for a living. He wore that same get-up when he attended the exhibit opening of *In the American West* at the

---

[56] "The Roar of the Crowd," *Texas Monthly*, October 1985, 10.

[57] Individuals included in the exhibition were sent a copy of the exhibition catalog and invited to attend the opening reception. Despite being cut from the final exhibition, the mother and daughter received a complimentary print of their portrait. See Glenn Lane, "Avedon's Subjects Thrilled, Chilled," *Dallas Morning News*, January 5, 1986, sec. Metro West People, 1.

Amon Carter Museum, proud to see his larger than life image and claiming it was "the best picture I have ever taken." [58] (fig. 3.6).

Docents at the museum reported that visitors had diverse reactions to Avedon's show; some applauding the photographer's choice and depiction of subjects, while others were "appalled."[59] Whatever their response, the installation of *In the American West* was central to how viewers experienced the imagery. Jane Livingston, who later assisted Avedon in installing the exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C. described the photographer's attention to space limitations, the sequencing of images and customized lighting.[60] "Avedon was incapable of creating anything that wasn't theatrical in nature," she observed.[61]

Livingston also recalled the "palpable discomfort" of some of the congressmen who attended the show. Art critic John Hubner anticipated having a similar reaction during his own visit, but happily discovered that the large-scale presentation of the work removed "the surface grotesqueness of some of the portraits."[62]

Avedon denied that he sought and exploited the grotesque in his work:

I don't think there's anything grotesque about any of these…You're looking at the work of an artist, who insists that this work is a fiction. Why can't people make the leap to subjectivity? It's such a simple thing: There is a sensibility and an intelligence and an opinion behind the camera. The opinion is not to make them look bad or make them look good. "Why, people will ask, is no one

[58] Ibid., 4.

[59] Ibid.

[60] *In the American West* was on view at the Corcoran Gallery of Art December 7, 1985 to February 16, 1986.

[61] Jane Livingston, "Richard Avedon (1923-2004) Wanting to Understand Everything, to Express Everything," *American Art* 19, no. 19 (Spring 2005): 108.

[62] John Hubner, "Avedon Goes West 'for Someone Who Was Me,'" *Eagle-Beacon* (Wichita, KS), June 3, 1986, sec. C, 1.

smiling in these pictures? Well, in the history of portraiture no one smiles. The smile is a mask. [63]

Despite Avedon's contention that he was not interested in "aesthetizing" his subjects, their portrayal is often what is most unnerving. And while the photographer claimed to have simplified his compositions in order to create "a direct confrontation between the person who's being photographed and the viewer,"[64] that very act effectively "aesethicized" the subject.

Reviewer Douglas Davis believed that *In the American West* was more a portrayal of Avedon himself than the subjects he captured. The style and technique of shooting with a blank background, he argued did not enhance the sitter's presence but rather that of the photographer.[65] To Davis "the deadpan stare into the camera, the slouch of the body, the cropped arm or head at the edge of the frame" were markers of Avedon's signature style and emblematic of the photographer's desire to capture the "antithesis of the celebrities to whom he is identified." Such images were, the critic concluded, "as contrived as the salon photography of the 19th century."[66] In a 1986 interview the artist admitted as much:

> I don't separate…photographs of celebrity or fashion photography from these portraits in the West[.] A life begins anywhere [w]hen you photograph someone. You photograph that person in that situation… In the bad photographs that don't achieve my purpose- then it looks like less than a passport picture. It's nothing. It's meaningless[.] So why do these picture[s] grip you, anger you or please you or frighten you or seduce you? It's because of what I've been able to draw out of the sitter and put into the tension that

---

[63] Matt Damsker, "Richard Avedon: Photographer Seeks Essence of Working-Class Westerners with 'In the American West,'" *Hartford Courant*, March 14, 1999, sec. C.

[64] Paul Raideke, "Interview with Richard Avedon," *PhotoMetro*, July 1986, 18.

[65] Davis Douglas, "A 'View of the West,'" *Newsweek*, September 23, 1985, 82.

[66] Ibid.

actually *is* the photograph, the tension between myself and the person I'm photographing. That's the description of who I am.[67]

Avedon's portraits may indeed be more about himself than his subjects, as Boyd Fortin, who had posed for the photographer with a headless rattlesnake more than a quarter century before, explained in 2005:

> When I first saw my picture along with all the others I realized that Avedon's vision of the West was not more of the cowboys, cattle and horses['] portrait[s] in my mind - but rather he was after workers. Now when I look at it, I see an angry little boy, a 13-year-old who to me looks like he's kind of mad at the world. But I realize now that when you look at what Avedon got in all of his pictures, it was a sternness in everybody's face. Since mine was one of the earliest he shot, I like to think my expression helped lead to the look he wanted to capture...I'm very proud of this picture.[68]

Critic Peter Conrad contends that rather than exploiting his sitters through his artistic vision, Avedon elevated them to a higher level of meaning. The aesthetic style and taxonomic labeling treated all Avedon's subjects equally.[69] Despite the photographer's intent to identify not objectify his subjects, Avedon's portraits encourage the viewer to, in the words of Julian Stallabrass, "place the individual within the stereotype" assigned by their titles.[70] According to French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre an objectification of others occurs when labels are applied. A cowboy, for example, may be identified by his appearance and surroundings, but he is

---

[67] Raideke, "Interview with Richard Avedon," 18.

[68] Andrew Marton, "Avedon's Lone Stars," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, September 18, 2005, sec. G.

[69] Conrad compares the shirtless image of trucker Billy Mudd (5/7/1981) to the portrait of Andy Warhol showing his scarred stomach suggesting that Avedon raised the ordinary people – Billy Mudd – to the status of famous celebrities – Warhol – because of his aesthetic choices. In fact, Avedon's portraits of celebrities are titled identically as are the portraits of Warhol, *Andy Warhol, artist, New York City, August 20, 1969.* See Peter Conrad, "Avedon on the Naming of Modern American Myths," *Harpers and Queen*, November 1986, 348.

[70] Stallabrass, "What's in a Face?," 73.

objectified when he is labeled as such.[71]

Photographs accompanied by descriptive text often yield specific social knowledge.[72] Avedon's images of the West, typically provide the viewer with little more than a geographical location, occupation, and date. The lack of more detailed descriptions such as those that accompanied Edward S. Curtis's historical images permits great variation of interpretation based on the social and cultural knowledge of the viewer. Unlike Curtis, Avedon did not invent identities for his subjects.[73]

Roland Barthes contends that images acquire meaning based on textual information that accompanies them.[74] While viewers may evaluate images based solely on what they visually represent, the title given to each of his photographs injected meaning that changed the way it signified. In Barthes' mythological process, the signification of the image relies on both the viewer's social knowledge and the label content. The combination of the two is what permits photographs to signify mythologically and, according to Sartre, objectifies the subject.

Avedon's portrait titled *Benson James, drifter, Gallup, New Mexico 6/30/79* (fig. 3.7), for example, demonstrates the process by which a title acts to label and

---

[71] Richard M. Dubiel, "Richard Avedon's in the American West and Jean-Paul Sartre: An Existential Approach to Art and Value," *Art Education* 42, no. 4 (1989): 20.

[72] Stallabrass, "What's in a Face?," 73.

[73] For example, Curtis adds the following inscription to his photograph *Son of the desert—Navaho* (1905): "In the early morning this boy, as if springing from the earth itself, came to the author's desert camp. Indeed, he seemed a part of the very desert. His eyes bespeak all of the curiosity, all of the wonder of his primitive mind striving to grasp the meaning of the strange things about him." See Gidley, "Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952) and The North American Indian," http://curtis.library.northwestern.edu/curtis/aboutwork.html

[74] Roland Barthes, "To Signify," in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Second ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 34–38.

thereby objectify the subject. The preconceived notions of what characteristics stereotypically define drifters establish the viewer's perception of James and overshadow other identities suggested by his Native American ethnicity and cowboy style shirt. In accordance with Barthes' theory, the text amplifies "a set of connotations already given in the photograph"[75] intensifying the viewer's emotional response to James' disheveled and dirty appearance. Avedon's emphasis of such features elicited accusations of exploitation from the photographer's critics.

Most of the individuals that Avedon identified as cowboys, ranch hands, ranchers and rodeo performers possess physical characteristics connecting them to their "occupation." In the case of *Harrison Tsosie, cowboy*, *Navajo Reservation, Window Rock, Arizona, 6/13/79* (fig. 3.8), for example, the subject wears a cowboy hat, western-yoked shirt with pearl snaps, tooled belt and trophy buckle, leather chaps. A lead rope is thrown over his shoulder.

The subject of another portrait, *Milo Dewitt, cowboy, Payson, Arizona, 8/29/82* (fig. 3.9), appears hatless but also wears a cowboy-style shirt and belt and sports a horseshoe-shaped mustache.[76] Both men assume comfortable masculine poses and stare confidently at the camera. Tsosie hands rest lightly on his hips and Dewitt arms hang relaxed at his side. The men meet viewers' expectations of what cowboys look like, while subtly and ironically challenging the prevailing racial stereotype of the white cowboy hero.

In contrast to the photograph of DeWitt and Tsosie, Avedon's portrait, *Clifford*

---

[75] Roland Barthes, *Image - Music - Text*, 27.

[76] A number of the cowboys pictured by Avedon wear similar carved and tooled leather belts with "buck stitching"; a style common in the 1970s and 1980s. Usually the wearer's name was embossed on the back.

Feldner, unemployed ranch hand, Golden, Colorado, 6/15/83 (fig. 3.10) exacerbates

the socio-economic divide between subject and photographer, similar to how the

image of drifter Benson James signifies and acts to further objectify both subjects.

Pictured hatless, Feldner wears a light-colored button down shirt and work jacket

lacking specific markers of cowboy attire. He gazes directly at the camera, but with a

somewhat pained expression, lacking in the portrait of DeWitt and Tsosie. His brow is

furrowed, deep wrinkles mark his face and his shoulders slump slightly. Avedon's

portrayal might be read as accentuating the hardships of unemployment that his

subject has encountered. On the other hand, had Feldner simply been identified as a

ranch hand, the viewer may have assumed that his countenance was simply the result

of hard work. Nevertheless, Feldner's portrait demonstrates the hardship that many, if

not most, working cowboys experience; a circumstance at odds with stereotypical

representations of cowboys from popular culture, who appear inured to hardship.[77]

Avedon's titling system encourages viewers to make assumptions based on the

label text alone. Not only do the photographer's captions objectify his sitters, his

diverse designation of cowboys as ranch hands, ranchers, rodeo contestants and stock

contractors is sometimes problematic. For example, Tsosie is labeled as cowboy, but

his accouterments—the braided rein, chaps and trophy buckle—mark him as a rodeo

contestant and more specifically a bronc rider, rather than a working hand.[78] Two

other Avedon sitters, Joe College (fig. 3.11) and G.R. Cook III (fig. 3.12), on the other

---

[77] There are exceptions to this rule in such 1970s Western films as *Will Penny* and *Monte Walsh*, discussed in Chapter 2, which do portray down-and-out cowboys.

[78] Since the early 20th century, the Navajo tribe has developed a strong rodeo tradition that attracts many participants. See Peter Iverson, *Riders of the West: Portraits from Indian Rodeo* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999).

hand, may indeed be rodeo contestants, as the captions to their photographs describe them, but they lack convincing visual cues connecting them to this pursuit. College wears a white cowboy hat, satin shirt with pearl snaps, tooled leather belt and floral embossed buckle and Cook a plain black T-shirt, blue jeans, and a belt buckle sporting the image of a bronc rider—the only visual sign linking Cook to rodeo. Russell Laird (fig. 3.13), another of Avedon's subjects that looks the part of a cowboy on the surface is identified merely as a seventeen-year-old from Sweetwater, Texas. Pictured alongside a girl in a T-shirt bearing a school sports' logo, Laird, whose eyes are closed in the photograph, wears a cowboy hat, tooled leather belt and embossed buckle. A pack of cigarettes in the left pocket of his black long-sleeved shirt evoke the Marlboro Man, yet, he was not identified as a cowboy or even ranch hand, a title he bestowed on a shirtless, Clint Jones (fig. 3.5).

The titles to the aforementioned images imply that there are differences between rodeo contestants, cowboys, ranch hand and seventeen-year-olds. However, ascertaining the difference based on visual evidence is imprecise at best and may account, at least in part, for how mythological associations of cowboys affix themselves to images of all cowboy types. Consequently, the lack of consistency in identifying the subjects brings into question not only their accuracy but also their intended purpose.

According to historian Robert Silberman, *In the American West* "raises questions about photography as a medium for representing the West, and in particular, reveals the ambiguous relationship between a quasi-sociological documentary style of

image making and a fine arts approach."[79] Avedon's purpose was artistic not

ethnographic. Yet, many viewers and critics continue to perceive the project as

documentary. To be sure, Avedon's titles fostered such interpretation because they

align more with ethnographic captions than titling systems for art. Other critics

concluded that Avedon's depictions of the American West and its inhabitants were not

authentic. Unlike, the romantic, sepia-toned photographs of Edward S. Curtis that are

considered more "authentic" in the portrayal of their subjects than are Avedon's

portraits of his sitters, the latter's images do not fall within the conventional

parameters of representation set forth by Western cinema and popular culture. Craig

Edward Clifford, a vocal critic of *In the American West* drew upon such myths in his

reproach of Avedon:

> All of these folks – no, specimens is a better word – were photographed against a sheer white backdrop, no prairies, plains, mountains streams, or other Ansel Adams landscapes. No Monument Valley, no Alamo, no red wood forests, no cactus – nothing but meticulously selected dim and dismal-looking, defeated and deformed people of the West….he[Avedon] manipulates. There is no spark of humanity, no sense of human communion between photographer and subject. There is neither sympathy nor celebration – other than the celebration of dirt and deformity, and of Mr. Avedon's maniacally manipulative powers. I cannot help but think of the Native American fear that a photograph robs the subject of his soul.[80]

Craig's statement, like those of Henry Blanton in *The Last Cowboy*, exemplifies the

hold the mythic West continues to exert on many Americans and the discomfort some

feel in the challenge that Avedon's images pose to this ideal.

---

[79] Robert Silberman, "Contemporary Photography and the Myth of the West," *European Contributions to American Studies* 16 (1989): 313.

[80] Craig Edward Clifford, "Warped West," *Baltimore Sun*, December 22, 1985, sec. M, 1.

Critic Larry Thall suggests that it would be better "to see the show is simply as a group of portraits whose purpose is only visual, rather than political or moral."[81] Avedon's work is not about the subject, as it is in social documentary photography and traditional art of the American West, but rather the manner in which the subject is portrayed. For Avedon the subject is irrelevant and always interchangeable because each and every subject is portrayed with the same minimalist aesthetic. Avedon did not, therefore, capture an authentic or true representation of cowboys or the West, only his interpretation of it.

In his 1989 essay on photography and the myth of the West, Robert Silberman called Avedon's *In the American West* "an exposé, an unintentional if not unself-conscious revelation that photographic realism is the ultimate fiction, and that the burden of meanings placed on an image like the portrait of Wilbur Powell, a taut-faced rancher, is just too great to bear. Is Powell *the* Westerner? Just a rancher?"[82] According to Barthes, Powell's portrait connotes both as "*the* Westerner" and as "just a rancher" simultaneously because his image carries meanings associated with the cowboy of Western myth in addition to identifying a unique individual.

Avedon's description of his project for the Amon Carter Museum aptly relates to how images signify mythologically:

> This is a fictional West. I don't think the West of these portraits is any more conclusive than the West of John Wayne or Edward Curtis…The moment an emotion or fact is transformed into a photograph it is no longer a fact but an

---

[81] Larry Thall, "Avedon's 'In the American West' Fails to Make a Statement," *New City*, June 24, 1986, 6.
[82] Silberman, "Contemporary Photography and the Myth of the West," 313.

opinion. There is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth.[83]

It is important to recognize that all images of cowboys, including Avedon's connote mythologically. Nonetheless, Avedon's mythic West is not the same cowboy West perpetuated by Hollywood and other forms of popular media that would intrigue a group of late twentieth-century photographers known as the Pictures Generation.

---

[83] Richard Avedon, *In the American West, 1979-1984* (New York: Abrams, 1985), Introduction.
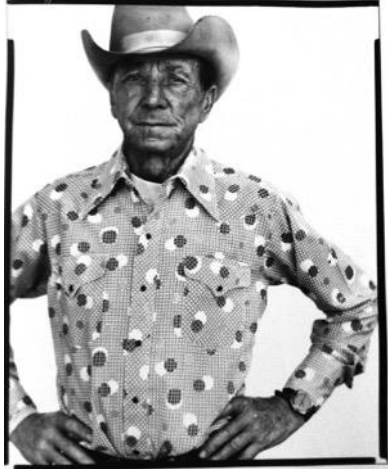
Figure 3.1
Richard Avedon, *Wilbur Powell, rancher*, *Ennis, Montana, 7/4/78*, Gelatin silver print, 56 x 45 inches (Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas). *In the American West*. Reprint ed. New York: Abrams, 2005, [151].

Figure 3.2
Richard Avedon, *Boyd Fortin, thirteen-year-old, Sweetwater, Texas, 3/10/79*, Gelatin silver print, 56 ¼ x 45 inches (Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas). *In the American West*. Reprint ed. New York: Abrams, 2005, [135].
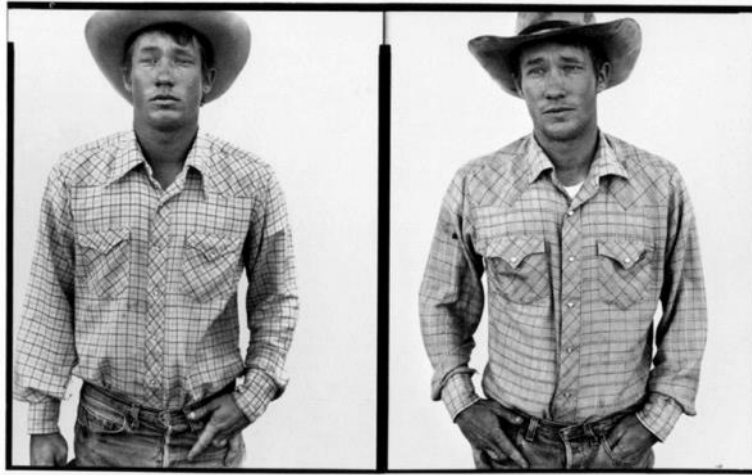
Figure 3.3
Richard Avedon, *Richard Wheatcroft, rancher, Jordan, Montana, 6/19/81 and 6/27/83*
Gelatin silver print, 93 ½ x 75 inches (Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort
Worth, Texas). *In the American West*. Reprint ed. New York: Abrams, 2005, [17-18].

Figure 3.4
Robert Frank, *Rodeo, New York City*, 1955, Gelatin silver print, 13 x 9 1/16 inches The
Metropolitan Museum of Art., New York, accessed March 24, 2015metmuseum.org
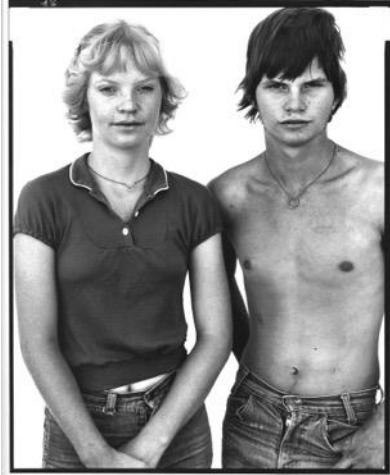
Figure 3.5
Richard Avedon, *Dawn Jones, waitress, Clint Jones, ranch hand, Rocky Ford, Colorado,* 8/23/80, Gelatin silver print, 47 ½ x 37 ½ inches (Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas). *In the American West*. Reprint ed. New York: Abrams, 2005, [40].

Figure 3.6
Richard Avedon, *Cotton Thompson, maintenance man Fat Stock Show, Fort Worth, Texas,, 2/2/811*, Gelatin silver print, 411/4 x 33 inches, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas. accessed March 24, 2015, avedonfoundation.org

Figure 3.7
Richard Avedon, *Benson James, drifter, Route 66, Gallup, New Mexico 6/30/79*,
Gelatin silver print, 46 ¾ x 37 ¼ inches (Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort
Worth, Texas). *In the American West*. Reprint ed. New York: Abrams, 2005, [2].

Figure 3.8
Richard Avedon, *Harrison Tsosie, cowboy*, *Navajo Reservation, Window Rock,
Arizona, 6/13/79*, Gelatin silver print, 19 x 15 1/8 inches (Amon Carter Museum of
American Art, Fort Worth, Texas). *In the American West*. Reprint ed. New York:
Abrams, 2005, [100].

Figure 3.9
Richard Avedon, *Milo Dewitt, cowboy*, *Payson, Arizona, 8/29/82*, Gelatin silver print, 47 x 37 ¾ inches (Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas). *In the American West*. Reprint ed. New York: Abrams, 2005, [37].
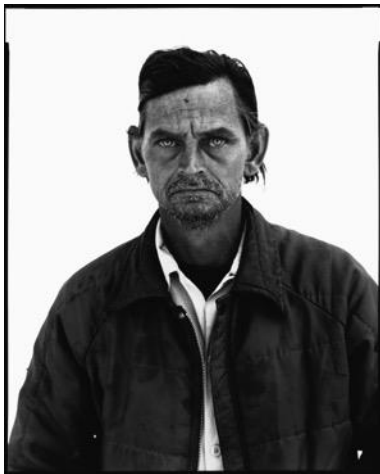
Figure 3.10
Richard Avedon, *Clifford Feldner, unemployed ranch hand, Golden, Colorado, 6/15/83*, Gelatin silver print, 56 ¼ x 45 inches, (Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas). *In the American West*. Reprint ed. New York: Abrams, 2005, [VII].
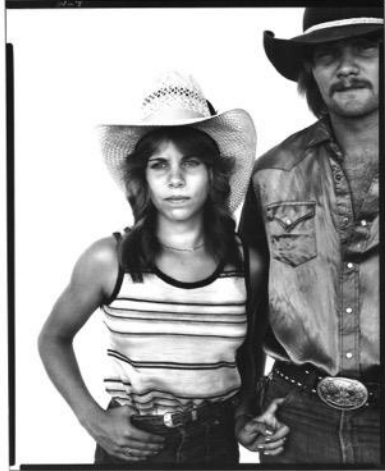
Figure 3.11
Richard Avedon, *Theresa Waldron, fourteen year old, Joe College, rodeo contestant*, *Sidney, Iowa, 8/11/79*, Gelatin silver print, 47 ½ x 37 ½ inches (Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas). *In the American West*. Reprint ed. New York: Abrams, 2005, [94].
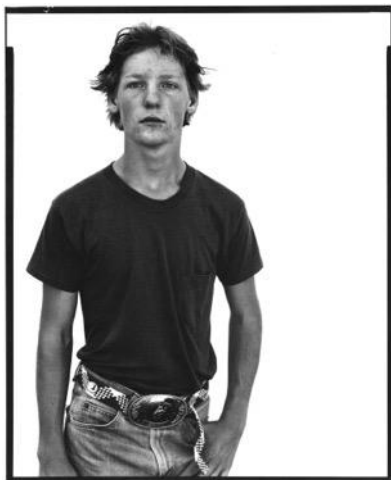
Figure 3.12
Richard Avedon, *G.R. Cook III, rodeo contestant, Douglas Wyoming,* 7/27/81, Gelatin silver print, 47 ½ x 37 ½ inches (Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas). *In the American West*. Reprint ed. New York: Abrams, 2005, [41].
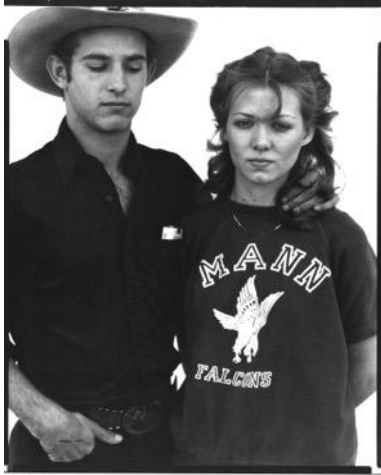
Figure 3.13
Richard Avedon, *Russell Laird, Tammy Baker, seventeen year olds*, *Sweetwater, Texas, 3/10/79*, Gelatin silver print, 47 ½ x 37 ½ inches (Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas). *In the American West*. Reprint ed. New York: Abrams, 2005, [98].

Chapter 4 - The Pictures Generation: Fabricating Cowboys

Part of a subgroup of photographers that emerged during the late 1970s and early 1980s, James Casebere, David Levinthal, Laurie Simmons, and Richard Prince created their own realities about cowboys and the American West by manipulating objects from American popular culture. Dubbed the Pictures Generation, these and other artists challenged the documentary character of photography by fabricating imaginary scenes that at times appear hyperreal. Art historian Merry A. Foresta, described the group as offering "a critical examination of both popular culture and fine art," in turn shifting the question asked from "'is it real?' to 'which reality is it?'"[1] This critical approach to art making was common among artists interested in concepts of simulacra and was inspired by postmodern theorists such as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard and Douglas Crimp. In fact, many of the Pictures Generation artists adopted the postmodern language when describing their artwork, further demonstrating the impact of the ideology on their artistic practice.

Members of the Pictures Generation emphasized the centrality of the image in their work. Borrowing cowboy imagery from popular film, television, popular music and magazines, these artists critically addressed what the imagery signified through appropriation and repurposing. The writings of Foucault and Barthes impacted their various approaches to art making. Perhaps the most significant was Barthes' challenge to conventional ideas of authorship and his belief that the meaning of images or texts is contingent on a number of mitigating factors. Barthes' assertion that "'The birth of

---

[1] Merry A. Foresta, "The Photographic Movement," in *The Photography of Invention: American Pictures of the 1980s, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C*, ed. Joshua P. Smith (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989), 4.

the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author,'" wrote curator, Douglas

Eklund, "was a call to arms for the artists of the Pictures Generation."[2] Although all

the artists connected with the group appropriated and manipulated familiar imagery

from popular culture, they arrived at variable artistic ends.

Solo exhibitions at Artist's Space in New York City in 1978 and 1979

launched the careers of Laurie Simmons and James Casebere. "Both chose

photography as their vehicle," Eklund recalled, "and both used miniaturized

architectural spaces shot with highly refined lighting effects to describe a twilight zone

of personal and collective memory."[3] Richard Prince gained drew critical attention in

the early 1980s by rephotographing magazine illustrations, thereby questioning

authorship. David Levinthal's contribution to the Pictures Generation came later when

his work was exhibited alongside that of Cindy Sherman and Laurie Simmons in the

1989 exhibit "Surrogate Selves" at the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

Among other topics, Casebere, Levinthal, Simmons and Prince explored the

signification of images of cowboys and the American West. Levinthal relied on the

nostalgia for Western cinema and fine art to create romantic, stereotypical images of

cowboys and Indians. Simmons created Western tableaus that focused on generic,

gender-based typecasting of cowboys and cowgirls; and Prince rephotographed and

repurposed images of cowboys from advertising and the covers of Western novels in

order to shed light on the fictitious nature of imagery.

---

[2] Douglas Eklund and Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.), *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984* (New York and New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art ; Yale University Press, 2009), 17.

[3] Ibid., 175.

James Casebere

James Casebere began his career as a sculptor, but after recognizing that people could experience art through photographs, began designing and constructing sculptural environments out of Styrofoam, cardboard and plaster and documenting them on film.[4] Photography allowed the artist to control the lighting and angle from which his small-scale models would be viewed.[5]

To reach a larger audience, Casebere printed his photographs as posters and plastered them all over Lower Manhattan. The mass distribution of these early works, whose diverse subjects ranged from suburban homes to landscapes of the Old West, blurred the line between fine art and advertising. As Casebere evolved as an artist, he began to produce full-scale gallery installations in addition to photographs displayed on light boxes.[6]

Although inspired by American history, Casebere relied on memory and avoided appropriating specific images or objects, when fabricating his sets. Walter Benjamin's theories regarding image reproduction guided his work as did the art of Russian Constructivist artists whose utopian ideals he adopted in his dioramas of American vernacular architecture. As Casebere tells it, Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966) prompted him, "'To think about architecture as a system of visual signs similar to how Douglas Crimp applied postmodern terminology to art that used popular conventions of picture making like photography,

---

[4] After photographing his constructions, Casebere would destroy them.
[5] Jeff Rian, "James Casebere," *Flash Art*, December 1998, 82.
[6] Walker Art Center and Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago, Ill.), *Cross-References: Sculpture Into Photography: James Casebere, Bruce Charlesworth, Bernard Faucon, Ron O'Donnell, Sandy Skoglund, Boyd Webb*, ed. James Casebere (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1987).

and used historical pastiche.'"[7] He was drawn to photography because it "tied into history, myth, and social identity – history being reconstructed time and again, and twisted to meet the needs of those writing it."[8] Casebere managed to reconstruct his own mythic view of history by combining architectural models and photography to create imaginative locations where American identities reside—in other words, the stage settings without the actors. In his Western themed work, Casebere relied on genre associations to make the viewer cognizant of a cowboy's presence, even though he is not depicted.

Forging views of the mythical American West, Casebere created imagery that explored "the elusiveness of truth in relation to historical events."[9] While having some foundation in history, Casebere's Western settings were more reflective of those found in popular culture. The artist drew from representations found in pulp fiction and early cinema; art forms he considered "imbued with mythical themes based on popular exchange and the desire of its audience."[10] Casebere's installation *Covered Wagons* (1985) (fig. 4.1) for example, mirrors scenes from the Howard Hawks film *Red River* (1948).

"Everything I photograph is a fabrication-there's nothing 'real' in my work", said the artist. "In this way I hope to draw attention to the artificiality of what we believe is actual and true and how we construct our subjective responses to life."[11] Art historian Marge Goldwater described Casebere's artwork as an "entirely synthetic

---

[7] William L. Hamilton, "An Artist's Novel Take on History: He Lets the Walls Talk," *The New York Times Sunday*, May 28, 2001, sec. E, The Arts/Cultural Desk.
[8] Rian, "James Casebere," 84.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Steven Vincent, "In the Studio," *Art + Auction*, November 2003, 40.

version of reality to demonstrate the deceptive way in which we have learned about ourselves and culture."[12] Casebere's images not only call attention to the constructed nature of history, but also how photographs manipulate the way in which places are remembered.

Void of inhabitants, Casebere's monochromatic photographs eerily evoke dystopian imaginings of Western ghost towns. Their intense chiaroscuro provides a stark contrast between architectural forms that are reduced to minimal shapes and dark voids within the compositions. They also aesthetically harken to the Surrealist paintings of Georgio de Chirico and the abstract landscapes of Georgia O'Keeffe. His silver gelatin print *Needles* (1985) (fig. 4.2), for example, recalls O'Keeffe's *Ranchos Church* (1930) (fig. 4.3). Intensely lit from the right, a series of vertical natural rock-like forms resembling the adobe architectural features in O'Keeffe's painting, stretch horizontally across the picture plane. The forms fade into shadows as the eye moves leftward. *Needles* brings together in a single construction not only the actual physical formations found at Utah's Needles-Canyonlands National Park but also O'Keeffe's architectural rendering. Similarly, *Arches* (1985) (fig. 4.4) revisits numerous photographs and paintings of the Natural Bridges National Monument in southern Utah. This image convincingly reconstructs the famous vista with smooth forms mirroring that of the natural landscape. Dynamic lighting directs the viewer to a recognizable arch in the far-left background of the image. Unlike Casebere's other images, where the onlooker plays the role of voyeur, observing scenes from a safe

---

[12] Walker Art Center and Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago, Ill.), *Cross-References*, 7.

distance, the viewer here feels a part of the constructed environment, looking out of the cave towards the brightly backlit arches.

Streets with Pots (1983-84) (fig. 4.5) and *Mission Façade* (1985) (fig. 4.6) imitate O'Keeffe's take on New Mexican architecture. Casebere selected these subjects because of their association with Western cinema where Spanish colonial architecture often abounds. Even though these photographs feature manmade objects, they also allude to the natural formations in Utah's Monument Valley.

Western Street (1985) (fig. 4.7) and *Covered Wagons* (1985) (fig. 4.8) portray western landscapes that suggest more human presence than is found in Casebere's other works. *Western Street* depicts a "Wild West" town situated at the base of a rocky outcrop and nestled among abstracted trees whose forms resemble those used in *Needles*. Light streaming through storefront windows suggests that people reside there, yet they remain unseen. An ominous feeling pervades the ghostly-lit streets, occupied by a single tumbleweed. The shadows of trees that fall on the structure in the right foreground add to the nightmarish effect. Casebere pictures the calm before the storm, or, in the realm of Western cinema, the moment before a pair of gunfighters face off in the street.

In comparison, *Covered Wagons* reveals the aftermath of a deadly Indian assault on a settler's wagon train. An overturned wagon rests on its side its contents strewn in the foreground. A Western saddle and cowboy hat lay among the debris. Arrows protruding from the wagon's canvas cover and assorted barrels provide evidence of the attack. Even when reduced to simple forms, these symbols—broad-brimmed hats and arrows—signify as cowboys and Indians. Again chiaroscuro draws

89

attention to key features; in this case, the array of arrows. Although parts of the story are implied, Casebere provides just enough visual evidence for the viewer to construct a narrative by recollecting common scenes in Western cinema and fine art.

Western Sculpture with Two Wagons and Cannon (1987) (fig. 4.9) demonstrates Casebere's shift from photographs of small-scale models to room-sized installations following the art trends of the era that favored installations and performance.[13] An assortment of objects, presumably left behind by their former owners, fills the gallery. Comprised of solid white abstracted forms, the life-size arrangement mirrors that of *Covered Wagons* with the addition of a cannon. Evenly lit, the remnants of the covered wagon resonate less emotion than when viewed with the dramatic lighting of the original photographic composition. Although the narrative of the Indian attack remains, its dramatic effect is diminished. In both of the scenes, Casebere portrayed the aftermath of a presumed altercation between cowboys and Indians, rather than the action itself. It is difficult not to make connections to films where cowboy heroes use overturned wagons to form protective barricades from an Indian assault. Again Casebere's scene is rooted more firmly in cinematic fiction than in historical fact.

Art critic James Lewis called *Covered Wagons* an "elegy to a long-gone past that continues to undermine the present."[14] The work hints at violence in the West, but as with too many historical accounts, lacks detail. In addition to making connections to Western cinema, Casebere also considered critical analyses by revisionist art

---

[13] In 1991, Casebere returned his focus to photography citing that "the money dried up in the museums for those kind of installations." Roberto Juarez and James Casebere, "James Casebere," *BOMB*, no. 77 (October 1, 2001): 31.
[14] James Lewis, "James Casebere," *ArtForum*, May 1993, 186.

historians in the 1980s, who began questioning the long held assumptions about art of American West as historical analogue.[15] In 1991, for example, the curators of *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, at the National Museum of American Art argued that fine art depictions of the "winning" of the American West did not accurately portray the social, political and economic realities of the eras depicted. Instead, the artworks glossed over the unseemly events in favor of the sublime and romantic and often served as propaganda to advance and justify Western expansion.

Several years earlier, art historian Hal Foster suggested that "the symbolic had somehow usurped the real" in Casebere's images as well.[16] The "made real" element of Casebere's work appeared more convincing in his monochromatic photographs than in the sculptural installations. The black and white images also connected visually to late-nineteenth century documentary photography, evoking the "seeing is believing" attitude commonly associated with the medium. The artist's aesthetic adds drama, but more importantly, links to the idea of memory.

Casebere's lighting techniques accentuated the negative and positive spaces of his compositions. Exhibited on light boxes, his photographs also drew attention to the fictional and fabricated nature of his constructions. (fig. 4.10) Such presentation gave the cinematic impression of projected light prompting the viewer make connections to Western film narratives. Negative space in the compositions represents the parts of the narrative that can no longer be recollected. In Casebere's constructions as well as in

---

[15] See William H Truettner et al., *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920.*

[16] Hal Foster, "Uncanny Images," *Art in America*, November 1983, 202.

many historic and fictional narratives about cowboys and Indians, only the conflict is remembered; the reasons behind it are often forgotten or hidden from view. The artist derives meaning in such works through the subtle rendering of seemingly benign objects that imply that historical interpretations are routinely based on artificial memories.

David Levinthal

In contrast to James Casebere's work focusing on the space that cowboys inhabit, David Levinthal placed the cowboy front and center by photographing miniature cowboy action figures, transforming small commonplace objects into large-scale glimpses of American culture. Levinthal's interest in photographing miniatures emerged when he and his fellow Yale classmate, Garry Trudeau, collaborated on *Hitler Moves East: A Graphic Chronicle, 1941-43* in 1977. Using toy soldiers produced by Louis Marx and Co., Levinthal recreated and photographed World War II battle scenes. The artist's interest in toys began as a child when received a set of German ceramic cowboy and Indian figures. Later, in college, he began to collect all types of hard-to-find historical toys and figurines.[17]

Levinthal's aesthetic was key to instilling the romantic and nostalgic feeling his images project. In the early 1980s, he began using a large-format Polaroid Land Camera that produced 20 x 24 inch prints with rich color saturation and clarity of details. The medium effectively disguised the size of the toys and, in the artist's

---

[17] David Levinthal, *The Wild West* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).

estimation, added "power to the images."[18] Polaroid's instantaneous processing capability also facilitated Levinthal's working method. "[B]eing able to work so quickly…," he explained, "enhances the sense of immediate discovery;"[19] thereby, allowing critical evaluation to occur simultaneously with the shooting process.

Inspired to photograph the West after seeing James Casebere's photographs of constructed Western locales, Levinthal purchased a set of Britains cowboy and Indian figures in 1985 and began shooting his *Wild West Series*[20] that recalled vivid memories of Western cinema from his of childhood. Although some observers referred to these western miniatures as "Karl May" figures, a reference to the prolific German writer of novels set in the American West, the artist suspected that they were inspired by the art of Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell instead. "It makes sense," Levinthal argued. "If you were in Germany and someone said to a toy manufacturer, 'Make me cowboy figures,' where else would you turn?"[21] While there is no specific evidence to support his claim, Levinthal's work was likely influenced by classic Western art. Levinthal sought figures with "articulated and alive" postures similar to those depicted in cowboy and Indian paintings of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[22]

Levinthal's signature photographic style, however, features shallow depth of field that removes any distinctness in the landscape or even sense of place in his work. Many of his compositions evoke action reminiscent of Charles M. Russell's art. His

---

[18] Vassar College and Mary-Kay Lombino, *The Polaroid Years: Instant Photography and Experimentation* (Munich: DelMonico books, Prestel, 2013), 136.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Levinthal, *The Wild West*, 8.
[21] Ibid., 12.
[22] Ibid.

photograph of an Indian warrior shooting an arrow at a running buffalo (fig. 4.11), for example, is nearly identical to Russell's oil *Indians Hunting Buffalo* (1894) (fig. 4.12) and his bronze *Buffalo Hunt* (cast 1905) (fig. 4.13).[23] The works of both artists depict the moment of elevated drama just before the hunter's arrow leaves the bow. Bare chested and wearing fringed leather leggings, his long hair adorned with feathers and beadwork, the "Indian" is the archetypal "noble savage." The chiaroscuro and blurred background of Levinthal's photographic version enhances the drama. The only point of sharp focus falls on the horse's shoulder.

Russell's painting by contrast, places the running figures in focus and blurs the herd in the background to create a sense of movement. Although the two images contain near identical subject matter, Levinthal's exhibits more of a cinematic than a painterly aesthetic. His photographs connect to film on levels that extend beyond basic characteristics of lens-based media, including the manner in which Levinthal's imagery emulates the Westerns of director John Ford.

Levinthal often watched Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) before working in the studio. Doing so not only inspired the artist but also served as a reminder of the film's tonality.[24] All of the *Wild West* images share the warm color palette of Ford's Technicolor Monument Valley. Levinthal also directly appropriated some of Ford's characters and framing conventions. One image in particular echoes the iconic scene at the end of *The Searchers* where John Wayne's forlorn cowboy character, Ethan Edwards, is framed in a doorway before walking off towards the empty desert landscape (fig. 14). In Levinthal's version, the perspective is reversed: a gunslinger

---

[23] All of Levinthal's photographs are untitled.
[24] Vince Aletti, "Valley of the Dolls," *Voice*, May 21, 1991, 95.

framed by a hazy interior faces the viewer. Another Levinthal photograph borrows a scene from Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946), in which Henry Fonda, as frontier marshal, Wyatt Earp, sits in a chair, on a covered storefront sidewalk, looking out to the street. Levinthal's version depicts a cowboy in silhouette standing between the overhang supports of a similar porch, facing away from the viewer (fig. 4.15). The backlighting of the scene conjures a setting sun.

Levinthal's images of horse-drawn vehicles and horseback cowboys also re-enact scenes from a number of Ford Westerns. Recalling the film *Stagecoach* (1939), one photograph features a toy coach traveling through a desert landscape (fig. 4.16). In another, Levinthal portrays a rifle-wielding cowboy shooting over his shoulder at a pursuing Indian, who carries a shield and spear and wears a grand feather-headdress (fig. 4.17). Only the cowboy's mount and the heads of the team pulling a nearby wagon are in focus.

Ford's classic chase scene in *Stagecoach* owed its inspiration to Frederic Remington's oil painting *Downing the Nigh Leader* (1907) (fig. 4.18).[25] Since Levinthal's depictions, like Ford's, perpetuate similar mythological representations of cowboys and Indians, they are no less than simulacra of simulacra.

In evoking the myths propagated by Western cinema and art, Levinthal did not want viewers to find his work less convincing than the scene he appropriated. Therefore, he chose not to title any of his Western images or to copy the scenes he

---

[25] For an in depth comparison of Ford's films to Western painters see William H Goetzmann and William N Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 379–385.

referenced directly so as to seem "too hokey or too literal."[26] Terrie Sultan, curator of

the *Savage Surrogates* exhibition of Levinthal's work at the Corcoran Gallery of Art,

explained that the artist did "not want his audience to have any preconceived notion

about his photographs other than the lexicon of filmatic images that the viewer brings

to them."[27] Interviewed in 1986, Levinthal recalled the famous line from Ford's *The

Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962): "when the myth becomes legend, print the

myth." Just as he misquotes the dialogue, the artist also distorts the myth.[28]

Levinthal emphasized the fabricated nature of Western heroism by

photographing toys rather than live models. In 1989, he explained how his work fit

within the postmodern discourse of the Pictures Generation. "I find that to me," he

told an interviewer, "there's something very intriguing about the ability to use toys for

fabricated selves to simulate a reality that is real in the sense that people respond to it

emotionally the same way, if not, in fact, more so, because it's more dramatic."[29]

Levinthal's explanation gets to the heart of the mythological West. Fictional

representations of film and popular culture often ring more true for audiences than the

historical reality. For Levinthal, toys are representative of the culture that creates

them.[30] The cowboy and Indian figures evoke nostalgia not only for the mythic

---

[26] Levinthal, *The Wild West*, 13.

[27] Corcoran Gallery of Art and Terrie Sultan, *Surrogate Selves: David Levinthal, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons,* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1989), 2.

[28] Character Maxwell Scott proclaimed when questioned if he would print the truth about who actually shot Liberty Valance, "No sir. This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." See John Ford, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Western, (1962).

[29] Corcoran Gallery of Art and Sultan, *Surrogate Selves*, 3.

[30] Sarah Boxer, "Hardly Child's Play: Shoving Toys to Darkest Corners," *The New York Times*, January 24, 1997, B edition, sec. The Living Arts.

American West but also for childhood memories of watching Westerns. Mimicking a child's imaginative roleplaying, Levinthal's scenes, not surprisingly, distort history in a manner similar to the Western films that inspired them.

Levinthal's blending of historical fact and fiction and mixing of figures and time periods have led some to criticize his visual fabrications. He used a piece from Marx's "Fort Apache" set, for example, as a Nazi guard tower in his series *Mein Kampf* (1996). Sarah Boxer, however, suggested in her review of a 1997 Levinthal retrospective at the Philadelphia's Institute for Contemporary Photography, that the mix-match of toys heightened the meaning associated with every image, particularly if the works were displayed simultaneously in the same gallery space. The artist may also have simply co-mingled figures out of practicality.

Boxer described Levinthal's *Wild West* as "simple and childlike," unlike the staged views of Nazi soldiers from the earlier series *Hitler Moves East* (1975-77) that she estimated to more convincingly link to the contrived nature of documentary photography.[31] Questioning the intent of Levinthal's Western scenes, she asked "Is he trying to equate the act of playing cowboys and Indians with the act of playing Nazi or Jew? Or is he trying to say that just as the Wild West was cultural myth so was the Holocaust?"[32] Boxer further suggested that Levinthal trivialized the Holocaust by turning it into "doll's play."

Curators leveled similar-criticisms at Levinthal's *Blackface* (1996), a series of photographs of African American "Mammy" caricatures. The Philadelphia's Institute

---

[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid. *Mein Kampf* (1996) stages Nazis shooting women and men or posing in front of the Brandenburg Gate.

for Contemporary Photography pulled the racially charged exhibition from its schedule.[33] Accused of being a racist, Levinthal responded: "I was not glorifying racism. I wanted to present these things in a complex way that was beautiful and horrifying at the same time."[34] Moreover, Levinthal's work was not unlike that of his feminist contemporaries – Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger – who similarly debunked stereotypes through exaggeration in the 1980s and 1990s.

It is clear why Holocaust imagery and blatant racist representations of African Americans incited controversy. Why stereotypical representations of Native Americans as "noble savages" in Levinthal's *Wild West* did not inspire similar criticism is unclear. To be sure, Native Americans have encountered as much racial and cultural injustice as Jews or African Americans. Furthermore, by the time Levinthal's Wild West series appeared, revisionist historians had been attacking the myth of the West for some time. Several factors, including the social climate and the timing of the release of these works, may account for the different critical reactions to Levinthal's *Mein Kampf* and *Blackface* series. *Blackface*, for example, had been slated for exhibition at the Institute for Contemporary Photography during Black History Month.

Despite continuing revisionist interpretations, the myth of the American West was largely responsible for a lack of demonstrable empathy towards Native Americans. The simulacra of the cowboy hero from Buffalo Bill to Western cinema

---

[33] The following year, the gallery selected several *Blackface* images for inclusion in a Levinthal retrospective. See Mark Singer, "Toy Stories," *The New Yorker*, January 20, 1997, 68.

[34] Richard B. Woodward, "Color Blind: White Artist + Black Memorabilia = No Show," *Village Voice*, June 25, 1996, 79.

provided a way for Americans to ignore the reality of how the West was actually

"won" and continue to exert a powerful influence on Americans' imagination. The

plight of Indians, still widely perceived as formidable and worthy adversaries of

cowboy heroes in traditional Western narratives, more often than not has been

overlooked, unlike Jews or African Americans who are consistently portrayed as

victims. This view may rationalize why images of cowboys and Indians fighting did

not appall Boxer and perhaps other critics, but a recreation of Holocaust scenarios did.

Prominent Métis scholar and Native activist Howard Adams observed that white

men's myths of the West had "become universal truths to mainstream society, and

[had] reduced Aboriginal culture to a caricature."[35]

Levinthal reiterates the traditional pulp and cinematic Western trope of Indian

as violent villains. In one image, a cowboy and Indian engage in hand-to-hand combat

(fig. 4.19). The figures are blurred; yet, the feathered headdress clearly identifies the

Indian raising a battle-ax as if ready to strike. In another image, a horseback cowboy

throws his hands up as if in surrender as an arrow pierces his right side (fig. 4.20).

Despite most of the compositions being almost entirely blurred, the symbols of the

transgressor—battle-ax and arrow—are delineated with sharp focus. Levinthal's

aesthetic manipulation unmistakably defines good and evil, adhering to stereotypical

representations of Native Americans and cowboys in popular culture. While the

Indian's actions are in defense of his culture and homeland, in the myth of the

American West, he stands in the way of progress, making his resistance mute in the

---

[35]Quoted in Michael Yellow Bird, "Cowboys and Indians: Toys of Genocide, Icons of American Colonialism," *Wicazo Sa Review* 19, no. 2 (October 1, 2004): 39. From original source Howard Adams, *A Tortured People: The Politics of Colonization* (Penticton, BC: Theytus Books, 1995)

larger scheme of things and serving only to antagonize the cowboy hero. For the myth to be effective, one cannot exist without the other.

The Western myth culturally programs society to privilege one race over another. "This distorted reality," writes Howard Adams, "is one of the most powerful shackles subjugating Aboriginal people. It distorts all Indigenous experiences, past and present, and blocks the road to self-determination."[36] Suggesting that the West has vanished, historical distance from the depicted subjects permits the viewer to see the image with fond nostalgia. No doubt, Levinthal's toy figures, warm lighting, and evocation of childhood memories reinforce the nostalgia of his scenes. It is likely that the difference in viewer response to Levinthal's Wild West images compared to those of the Holocaust and African Americans links directly to issues of colonization. As writer Ward Churchill once observed, "white domination is so complete that even American Indian children want to be cowboys. It's as if Jewish children wanted to play Nazis."[37] Nevertheless, Levinthal has maintained a celebratory tone consistent with traditional art and cinema of the American West. Therefore, while viewers instantly question Levinthal's photographs of blackface memorabilia and Nazi atrocities, such reactions are not part of the conditioned response many have to cowboy and Indian imagery.

In 1986, Levinthal's connection to popular culture came full circle when he was commissioned by Absolut vodka to create an advertisement that borrowed directly from one of his cowboy images. Accompanied by the tagline "Absolut Levinthal," a

---

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., 33; See also Ward Churchill, *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema, and the Colonization of American Indians* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998).

photograph of a lasso toting toy cowboy and a rearing model horse flank a liquor

bottle crowned by a white cowboy hat (fig. 4.21 and fig. 4.22). Absolut's website says

Levinthal's work shows "us how we can be presented with overly simplified

cartoonish images of thoughts, desires, and ideas that are in reality incredibly

complex. Levinthal shows us that we are prone to accepting and embracing the

media's simplistic surface level narratives over the complexities of reality.[38]

Interestingly, the vodka ad reiterates the conceptual nature of Levinthal's

appropriation of imagery that initially sold the Western myth through fine art, and is

now used for corporate advertisement. In the essay "Selling the Myth: Western Images

in Advertising," historian Elliott West describes why advertising that evokes the

Western myth of the nineteenth century continues to sell products and define

American values more than a century later:

> Western-related art forms of this century have been powerfully nostalgic.
> Movies, songs, art, and illustrations often have hearkened back to an earlier
> imagined time when Americans supposedly lived by virtues – among others,
> an unswerving integrity, a spit-in-your-eye individualism, and a simple and
> unsullied honesty with others and themselves that have disappeared in our
> modern age of soft living, conformity, dollar chasing, and moral drift.[39]

By creating a sense of nostalgia regarding the American West, advertisements not only

recall but also reinforce the myth of the West. Nostalgia conjures sentiments of loss

and/or longing for the past that no longer exists if it ever did. While the West has

changed, cowboys, their images and ideology associated with them signify

mythologically.

---

[38] "Absolut Art Collection," *Absolute Art Collection*, accessed March 9, 2014, http://www.absolutartcollection.com/#.

[39] Elliott West. "Selling the Myth: Western Images in Advertising." *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 46, no. 2 (1996): 46.

The mythic associations in Levinthal's *Wild West* are compounded by perpetuation of stereotypical Western iconography and very nature of the objects he photographs. Toy cowboys and Indians sold the western myth to American youths of another era, who were also consumers of the cinema and the toys those films inspired. By combining a cinematic aesthetic with objects that are physical manifestations of the Western characters, Levinthal effectively sold his version of the Western myth.

Laurie Simmons

Like Levinthal, Laurie Simmons photographed cowboy action figures. Her artworks blurred the lines of reality in constructions that situated dolls in interiors, or amid famous landmarks, or nondescript landscapes, to address gender issues and question perceptions of reality. Drawn to photography though conceptual art, Simmons creates images that are in her words "psychological, political, [and] subversive."[40] She began photographing dolls and dollhouses, in order to distort space as a means of concealing the scale of actual objects. At the same time, she held fast to accurate scale and perspective, hoping to make the scenes believable.[41] Even though the objects she photographed were small, Simmons wanted to convince viewers that they were "very large and very real" despite making no attempt to disguise the artifice she captures.[42]

Over time Simmons' oeuvre moved beyond photographing children's dolls in fabricated settings to producing short films. Simmons created her work in series; yet,

---

[40] Linda Yablonsky and Laurie Simmons, "Laurie Simmons," *BOMB*, no. 57 (October 1, 1996): 20.

[41] Ibid., 21.

[42] Dave Hickey, Laurie Simmons, and Sarah Charlesworth, "Laurie Simmons Interviewed by Sarah Charlesworth," in *Between Artists: Twelve Contemporary American Artists Interview Twelve Contemporary Artists*, ed. Lucinda Barnes et al. (Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1996), 204.

whether still or moving, none of the images, followed a linear narrative, nor did they tell a story.[43] Simmons once described her photographs as "dumb looking" and similar to snapshots taken by amateur photographers who place subjects center frame, awkwardly facing the camera. Fond of the simplicity of such images, Simmons adopted this "dumb" framing convention for early works depicting dolls and toy cowboys.[44] Photographing toy figures in this way simplified the composition and removed each character from a narrative construct. Often the figures appear randomly placed with no relationship to the environments they inhabit.

Simmons' early work focused on gender issues associated with the domestic sphere of women. Her first photographic project, comprised of dolls and dollhouses, explored the role of the housewife in American culture. In 1979, however, she shifted her emphasis from depictions of women to men in the exhibition, *Cowboys*, mounted at PS1 in New York City. Comprised of a series of cibachrome prints,[45] the show objectified men in a manner similar to 1950s representations of housewives. For Simmons, cowboy characters from popular television shows fit the bill, because their formulaic attire easily identified their gender. Unlike her earlier constructions, the *Cowboys* series was shot outdoors conjuring thoughts of a Wild West beyond the control of figures who inhabit it. Simmons' cowboys, the childhood toys of her husband, were photographed at a country property in Connecticut.[46] Manufactured by

---

[43] Yablonsky and Simmons, "Laurie Simmons," 21.
[44] Sheila Heti, "Laurie Simmons," *Interview*, March 2014, 150.
[45] Cibachrome or ilfochrome is a unique process that creates a photographic print from color slide film. The process results in prints with intense color saturation and sharpness.
[46] *Laurie Simmons and Carroll Dunham Joint Lecture*, mp4 (Anderson Ranch, Colorado, 2011), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yAedxx5cEbc&feature=youtube

Hartland Plastics in the 1950s, the Western themed figures used in the photographs

capitalized on the popularity of Western television stars like Roy Rogers and Dale

Evans and historical characters such as William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody. The

manufacturer equipped individual figures with arms that moved removable hats and

guns, and often a horse.[47] The manner in which Simmons photographed these toys,

however, tended to remove narrative associations with their onscreen counterparts.

In the photograph *Brothers/Horizon* (fig. 4.23), for example, two protagonists

wearing identical tight-fitting light blue Western outfits with masks reminiscent of the

Lone Ranger ride black horses across a tall grass range. It is unclear if we are seeing a

masked hero, like the Lone Ranger, or a pair of villains. The vague setting offers no

clues as to the figures' identity or purpose in the four slightly different compositions

that feature them. The framed sequences do not allude to action or motion, but merely

reposition the cowboys as if they were props rather than autonomous men of action.

Simmons' titles reinforce a notion of generic interchangeably by referring only to

compositional arrangement and point of view (ie. *Brothers/Aerial View* (fig. 4.24) or

Brothers/*Hay* (fig. 4.25)). The figures thus become taxonomical objects rather than

unique characters. In fact, these twin "brothers" are Lone Ranger figurines modeled on

actor Clayton Moore's likeness. In Simmons' photographs both are missing their hats,

a sign that often indicates whether a character is good (white hat) or evil (black hat).

By removing their hats, the artist contributes to the ambiguity of the characters and

_gdata_player.
[47] Hartland also produced popular sports figures as well. However, in the late
1970s, business declined and the original ownership closed the company. See Craig
Blankenship, "Hartland History," *Craig Blankenship's Hartland Figurines & Sports
Memorabilia*, March 19, 2014, http:/www.hartlands.com/history/html.

scene. The Lone Ranger's steed, Silver, a white stallion, has been replaced with a black horse;[48] a further effort by the artist to distance her cowboys from the original character. This splitting up and disguising of characters was completely in line with Simmons' non-narrative aesthetic in which storytelling was inconsequential.

Simmons' cowboy photographs lack the romanticism of Levinthal's compositions because she places the figures in nondescript scenes and does not rely on photographic effects beyond the limitations of her point-and-shoot style camera. Created in series, her fabricated scenes often appear as if she has taken random snapshots akin to those of a tourist. Simmons sees her photographs as "moments you happen upon; somebody standing somewhere, or riding somewhere."[49] Each image captures a brief moment that is void of narrative context. Nevertheless, the images are laden with meaning derived from the viewer's cultural knowledge of the subjects portrayed.

In *Man/Blue Shirt/Red Barn* (fig. 4.26), a cowboy on horseback rides towards the viewer with an ordinary red barn in the background. In another photograph, *Woman/Green Shirt/Red Barn* (fig. 4.27), a cowgirl replaces the cowboy, riding the same toy horse framed in the identical setting but with the horse and figure positioned parallel to the viewer. The switch indicates that the archetypical representation of the cowboy persona can accommodate women as well as men. However, Simmons' not so subtle switch also suggests that gender roles are socially contrived, similar to the fabrications she designs. The cowboy used in *Man/Blue Shirt/Red Barn* is a generic

---

[48] There were actually two Silvers used in the filming of the series. Silver #1 was a Tennessee Walking Horse and Silver#2 was half Arabian and half Saddle Breed. Silver #1 was favored for public appearances for his gentle composition.
[49] Yablonsky and Simmons, "Laurie Simmons," 21.

cowboy figure packaged with a palomino. The cowgirl in *Woman/Green Shirt/Red Barn* is Dale Evans, although her horse is white, it is not Evans' based on real-life buckskin, Buttermilk. Once again, Simmons obscures narrative associations in her figures.

Three images feature a cowgirl on horseback with a cowboy standing nearby. The figures represent two popular television characters of the 1950s, Annie Oakley (also a historical figure) and Christopher Colt, both known for their marksmanship. Such skill seems of little importance to Simmons. In two scenes Colt stands at the nose of a white horse directly facing Oakley. In *Horizontal/Man/Woman/Horse* (fig. 4.28), the horse faces to the right. For *Man/Woman/Horse Water* (fig. 4.29), Simmons merely flips the orientation with a slight change in setting, the former on gray gravel and the later in a pool of shallow water. In the third image, *Vertical/Man/Woman/Horse* (fig. 4.30), Colt stands below Oakley, facing her with his left hand raised in a gesture as if holding hands.

In the latter sequence, Oakley is mounted, situated above Colt. Oakley's stiff posture mimics the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius in Rome (fig. 4.31). Just as Aurelius' posture indicates he is addressing his troops, Oakley's body language suggests she may be dictating orders to Colt. Yet, in the third image she takes Colt's hand in a composition that resembles James Earle Fraser's 1939 bronze of Theodore Roosevelt (fig. 4.32). Simmons' relies on the viewer's art historical knowledge of equestrian portraiture to make the visual connection. Just as Fraser portrayed a Native American and an African American in subservient roles to Roosevelt, so too is Colt submissive to Oakley. Colt's gun is holstered, another detail placing Oakley in a

106

position of power and dominance. Oakley does not carry a weapon, but she still manages to keep Colt's masculinity in check without the aid of phallic symbolism—a pistol. Simmons' composition addresses the constructed nature of gender by subtly reversing historical artistic representations of power.

Similar in composition and theme, *Woman/Man/Two Horses* (fig. 4.33), features a different cowboy/cowgirl couple—movie and television cowgirl, Dale Evans, and a generic cowboy in a red shirt. Both horseback figures stand on a light colored wood tabletop. Although this is the only photograph in the cowboy series situated indoors, the change of setting appears to be of little if any significance. The backgrounds in all of the photographs featuring couples eliminate reference to place, thus drawing attention to the figures placed center frame. Evans and the cowboy share identical postures holding the reins; yet, Evans' slightly advanced position indicates that she is in the lead. Combined with nondescript settings, the figural arrangement of Simmons' couples reverses the stereotypical portrayals by placing women in masculine, rather than strictly feminine, roles.

Two other Simmons' photographs depict nearly identical cowboys wearing empty gun belts and occupying similar spaces. In *Man/Sky/Puddle/Second View* (fig. 4.34), Christopher Colt stands in a shallow puddle reflecting a fence and sky. *Man/Puddle* (fig. 4.35), in comparison, places the figure of James Hardie, another television gunfighter, along the bank of a mud puddle. Both men are reflected in the water, but the bottom edge of each frame crops the figures' reflections at the waist, highlighting the anatomical region below the belt. The empty holsters and compositional focus suggests men shorn of masculinity.

Simmons' renderings of these and other plastic figures embody meaning, even if that meaning is uncertain. In *Cowboy Pattern* (fig. 4.36), for example, figures representing George Armstrong Custer, Roy Rogers, Wyatt Earp, George Washington, Cochise, Tonto, Matt Dillon and Josh Randall, among several other recognizable characters from history and television, seem to lose their individual identities and, as consequence, revert to mere toys. All are bow-legged so they can be readily placed astride horses and, despite variations in attire, exhibit more similarities than differences. There is significance also in the fact that all the figures are portrayed unarmed and thereby rendered impotent. Yet, to viewers with a knowledge of these legendary western characters, the myriad plastic figures attached to white weathered board are not a miscellaneous assortment. Identification of individual characters personalizes the viewer's experience, conjuring up memories associated with each. The mixing of historical and fictional personalities speaks to the constructed nature of historical memory and mirrors the blurring of the lines between fact and fiction in cinema and television.

Cowboys differs from Simmons' other toy series, in that her alterations do not exaggerate culturally defined gender specific roles, but switch them. She brings into question accepted gender conventions by reworking key narrative components—guns and horses. Since Simmons' aesthetic emphasizes the physical objects she pictures, the meanings inherent in the objects can be more significant than the photograph she creates. Theorist Jacques Maquet contends that, "meanings are not inherent to the object…or ascribed by the designer. They are given by the group of people to whom the object is relevant. This is why meanings may change and usually do, when the

audience changes."[50] The change of meaning in the action figures Simmons portrays,

permits her to signify more in regards to gender than to cowboys or the West,

especially when viewed by an audience more familiar with her work rather than with

Western cinema and television. However, because the cowboy hero has become

symbolic of the United States, those associations are also connoted. Such symbolism

is intercultural and has become so ubiquitous that it does not usually require an insider

to interpret the message.[51] Whether one perceives the symbol as positive or negative,

however, is another matter.

Richard Prince

Unlike his counterparts in the Pictures Generation, Richard Prince appropriates

existing images rather than objects and is best known for borrowing photographs from

popular culture. He rephotographs what he considers "authorless" images from

magazines, has them lab processed, creates limited edition prints, and exhibits them as

his own as limited editions.[52] From the onset, Prince acknowledged that his

photographs were not original. "I 'pirate' them, 'steal' them, 'sample' them,"[53] he

once admitted. In most cases, he selected relatively banal and ubiquitous photographs

and by cropping and re-framing them, altered what they signify.

---

[50] Jacques Maquet, "Objects as Instruments and Signs," in *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture*, ed. Steven D. Lubar and W. D. Kingery (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 35.
[51] Ibid., 37.
[52] Jeff Rian and Richard Prince, "In the Picture: Jeff Rian in Conversation with Richard Prince," in *Richard Prince*, Contemporary Artists (London and New York: Phaidon, 2003), 12.
[53] Ibid.

"The ultimate statement of the rephotography," art historian Rosetta Brooks points out, "[is that] 'these pictures exist.'"[54] Such images no longer simply resonate their original purpose, but also signify their own structures. As Douglas Crimp explains, it "becomes imperative to understand the picture itself, not in order to uncover a lost reality, but to determine how a picture becomes a signifying structure of its own accord."[55] Crimp called Prince's appropriations "auteur photography," in contrast to Laurie Simmons, who "implicitly attacked auteurism by equating known artifice of the actress in front of the camera with supposed authenticity of the director behind it."[56]

Prince draws attention to mass produced imagery by changing the context from advertisement to exhibition. Because his stolen imagery is considered "outlaw art" by many, cowboys, who are often perceived as living outside the law, are perfect subjects. Prince started rephotographing magazine advertisements featuring cowboys in 1980.[57] These photographs of photographs represented a figure that does not exist in reality: the Marlboro Man, an emblematic icon of the Phillip Morris Company from the late 1950s to the 1980s, and one of the most successful American advertising symbols of all time.

---

[54] Rosetta Brooks, "A Prince of Light or Darkness?" in *Richard Prince*, Contemporary Artists (London and New York: Phaidon, 2003), 28.

[55] Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," Art Journal, *X-TRA*, Fall 2005, http://x-traonline.org/article/pictures/. Reprint of the original essay written by Douglas Crimp for Pictures at Artists Space in New York (September 24 – October 29, 1977).

[56] Douglas Crimp and Louise Lawler, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 135.

[57] Karen Rosenberg, "Artist: Richard Prince," *NYMag.com*, accessed October 31, 2014, http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/art/11815/.

The Marlboro Man functions as an icon because he is a type: a non-specific cowboy, who is predominately depicted in photographs. As a fictional character the Marlboro Man is often pictured with horses but rarely with cattle. The equestrian portrayal not only implied a sense of speed, strength and endurance but also the conquest of nature and male sexuality. This image promoted and reinforced the mythical connotations of cowboy that the Marlboro Man embodied. He invariably appeared in long-sleeved shirts (usually red), jeans, boots, and cowboy hat, stereotypical work attire and a modern version of clothing worn by cowboys in documentary photographs of the Old West and later adapted for Western films and television programs. The bright yellow rain-slicker that appears in some of the images, further connotes a man ready to take on anything, including inclement weather and uncontrollable acts of nature (fig. 4.37).

The manner in which the Marlboro Man was photographed also alludes to documentary imagery. Whether wrangling horses or riding the range, Marlboro ads appear to capture a candid moment rather than a staged photo shoot. They bear a striking similarity to the work of such modern day photographers as Bank Langmore, William Allard and Kurt Markus who were photographing cowboys and ranches during the same era. Langmore's photograph *Looking for Strays* (fig. 4.38), featuring three working cowboys riding through the snow on the Montana range, offers a good comparison.[58] Their-outfits resemble that of the Marlboro Man and one of the cowboys smokes a cigarette. Adopting the aesthetic and subjects of what many consider documentary cowboy photography, images of the Marlboro Man carry

---

[58] Bank Langmore, *The Cowboy* (New York: Morrow, 1975), 194–195.

similar connotations. The fact that most of the Marlboro Men were, in fact, real cowboys, lent authenticity to the advertisements. Yet, this fact seems inconsequential, because there is little apparent difference in the imagery whether the cowboys are "real" or "actors." As with so much cowboy imagery, it is difficult for the casual viewer to distinguish the genuine from the copy. In terms of mythological signification both real and fictional cowboys typically signify the same.[59]

Whereas, the Marlboro Man was a generic cowboy portrayed in a typical Western environment, Prince's appropriations deconstructed pre-existing notions of the mythical cowboy hero as a symbol of freedom, strength, solidarity, and white male superiority.[60] Prince built upon the existing romantic connotations of cowboys by re-contextualizing the uber-romanticized cowboy of Marlboro. Art historian Nancy Spector described his work as "stolen but original, ironic but sincere, illusionary but real."[61] By cropping out logos and the U.S. Surgeon General's warnings about smoking, nothing remained but the romantic ideal of the cowboy. However, the Marlboro Man's ubiquity in popular culture automatically linked the image of cowboys to cigarettes, thereby raising the question: what exactly is a cowboy? Is he emblematic of Marlboro, the product he represents, or is a cowboy just a man who works cattle as a trade? Is he a symbol of America's ideological identity? Prince

---

[59] For more discussion of mythological signification of "real" cowboys versus fictional see Melynda J. Seaton, "Pure Country: Pure Strait: Pure Myth - The Myth of Texas Cowboy," in *Contemporary Westerns: Film and Television since 1990*, ed. Andrew Patrick Nelson (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013), 135–48.

[60] Carol Squiers, "Is Richard Prince a Feminist?," *Art in America*, November 1993, 119.

[61] Nancy Spector et al., *Richard Prince* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2007), 22.

creates a representation of the cowboy that raises questions about the relationship of other images of cowboys to image conventions and real life.

The advertisements (ca. 1970-1990) rephotographed by Prince used the image of the cowboy to symbolize a man who survives not only the perils of the environment in which he works, but also the hazards of smoking. For today's audience the use of this image to market cigarettes no longer exemplifies its initial intentions. In fact, smoking is now considered harmful; the Marlboro Man now reads negatively and is symbolic of an unhealthy and dangerous lifestyle.[62] Prince's timing in beginning his series may in fact be a commentary about the change of opinion regarding smoking. He picked up the topic right after the death of the original Marlboro Man, an actor, died from cancer,[63] and after the Marlboro Man ad campaign was abandoned. As Prince explained, "without him—Marlboro Man—as an identifying factor it was easier to present these pictures as something other than they were. I think that's the way I felt at the time anyway."[64]

The artist described his images of advertisements disseminating images of an actor playing a cowboy, authentic portrayals of American identity, as "convincing: picture-perfect dissimulations."[65] Through this ruse, Prince created an image that embodies the romanticized ideal of what cowboy is, perpetuating pre-existing myths of the cowboy, and allowing the image to be read as a type, non-specific to Marlboro. Applying Barthes' theory of myth, Prince's cowboy photographs assume a second

---

[62] Brooks, "A Prince of Light or Darkness?," 27.
[63] Eklund, *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984*, 302.
[64] Lisa Phillips, *Richard Prince* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), 95.
[65] Ibid.

order of signification in relation to the Marlboro Man of the advertisements, which serve as a first order. The advertisements are first order signifiers not just because they are the source for Prince's photographs but also because they are rooted in the past.

Exhibited as pristine works of art in privileged spaces, such as galleries and museums, Prince's cowboy photographs enhance the myth of cowboy and add a new value to his image of the cowboy and that of the Marlboro Man. Such exhibition elevated the image of the Marlboro Man from the realm of mass production to an elite form of high art, thus validating it as an important cultural artifact worthy of critical discourse. The transformation of the Marlboro Man from advertising to art also became part of the mythological process, because the change permitted the image to take on meaning larger than its initial function. Prince's appropriation and manipulation of the image of the cowboy bolstered his reputation as a notable artist of the postmodern era. As he raised questions about the status of the cowboy his artwork increased in value.

Since the 1990s Prince's cowboy works have evolved from simple rephotography to more involved and noticeable forms of manipulation. Technological developments enabled Prince to digitally alter images in Photoshop to remove text or edit scenes. As a result he describes his later works as more cinematic.[66] *Untitled (cowboy)* from 2001 (fig. 4.39) illustrates this stylistic shift.[67] The Marlboro man throws a lasso from horseback against a blurred background, produced by digital manipulation. The blurring simulates cinematic movement and not only emphasizes

---

[66] Rian and Prince, "In the Picture: Jeff Rian in Conversation with Richard Prince," 24.

[67] Ibid.

the action of the rider, but also adds a painterly quality to image. It appears as if paint splatters, reminiscent of blowing snow, run the length of the horse. Other Prince-manipulated cowboy images from the late 1990s and early 2000s feature a similar effect.

In the late 2000s, Prince added literary cowboys to his repertoire. In lieu of rephotographing images, he began appropriating tangible objects—novels, photographs, and sketches—a sort of reinvention of Marcel Duchamp's readymade.[68] *Untitled (almost original)*, 2006 (fig. 4.40), for example, includes a pencil sketch for a Marlboro advertisement and a photograph taken as part of the brand's advertising campaign, neither of which were included in a published ad. Prince acquired the artifacts at auction and had them framed together, side-by-side. There is no manipulation of either image beyond the recontextualization of display. The Museum of Modern Art in New York, which owns this artwork, explains that by, "Pairing the images within a frame, Prince imbues these objects—never meant to be viewed as artworks—with new meaning."[69]

The artist's repurposing of the images as fine art not only questions concepts of authorship, but also hints at the fabricated nature of "Marlboro Country." The iconography of the drawing and the photograph in *Untitled (almost original)*, is quite different. The sketch depicts a smoking cowboy shaking out a loop on horseback,

---

[68] The novels, photographs and sketches selected by Prince resemble found objects. For example, Duchamp's *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, 1964 elevated the status of snow shovel from utilitarian object to fine art. Prince's framing of a novel, mirrors Duchamp's recontextualization of the snow shovel when he signed it and hung it on a gallery wall.

[69] Richard Prince, "Untitled (almost Original)," *Moma.org*, accessed April 17, 2014, https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/richard-prince-untitled-almost-original-2006.

while the photograph portrays a tiny silhouette of rider galloping beside a sunlit rock cliff wall. Since the images appear to have no direct relationship with each other (beyond portraying cowboys), the viewer may not notice the connection between the two as part of the advertising process. Prince selects such disparate imagery because he expects the viewer to mistake the advertisement for reality, thereby demonstrating how easily ~~an~~ advertising fiction muddles the distinction between authentic and fake.

In *Untitled (original)*, 2009 (fig. 4.40), Prince takes the idea of the "almost original" to another level. The artwork frames an original illustration next to a paperback book with the same imagery reproduced on the cover. Prince's repurposing draws attention to the simulacra of the cowboy from Owen Wister's famous Western novel, *The Virginian* (1902).[70] The illustration lacks the title and associated blurb and appears to have been changed slightly for the book cover. In both, a cowboy wearing a red bandana around his neck, defiantly faces the viewer. In the original illustration, however, the bandana has been extended to cover lower half of the cowboy's face. The image of the cowboy signifies the same regardless of the easy-to-miss alteration. Not only does the cover cowboy suggest the generic Western hero, the inclusion of the book title amplifies the signification to connote character traits of the fictional "Virginian," the very embodiment of that hero since 1902. In Barthes' terms, the book cover is both a first order signifier, "the language object," because it informs Prince's work and also a second order signifier in that communicates the myth of text. Prince's

---

[70] Robert Rubin, *Richard Prince: American Prayer* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2010), 457.

treatment appropriates both aspects of the myth and becomes both the signified and the sign. [71]

The artist's reframing and juxtaposing of original artworks also can be considered a type of collage because he displayed the imagery together. Nor did he limit his appropriation solely to ephemera related to the American West. Art critic Walter Robinson suggests this was a strategic move by Prince because, "By presenting not copies but the original objects themselves, he sidesteps the copyright problems that have haunted him and so many other artists."[72] Moreover, creating a type of collage adheres to accepted art historical means of appropriation that evades current copyright laws. Over the years Prince has been plagued by accusations of copyright infringements including complaints from the original Marlboro photographers after the artist's cowboy imagery started to bring high prices on the art market.[73] Prince argued successfully that the cigarette advertisements were authorless, because the original photographers' names did not appear in the ads.[74] Through appropriation he became the author and, in turn, the photograph's connotation changed from low-brow advertisement to high-brow fine art.

---

[71] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Noonday Press, 1972), 115. The actual narrative text of *The Virginian* is a first order signification, "the language object." The narrative is "the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system."

[72] Walter Robinson, "See Here: Judging an Artwork by Its Cover at Richard Prince's New Gallery," *Artspace*, accessed April 17, 2014, http://www.artspace.com/ magazine/interviews_features/judging_an_artwork_by_its_cover_at_richard_prince_n ew_gallery.

[73] Eklund, *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984*, 303.

[74] Ibid.

Later, French photographer, Patrick Cariou, brought suit against the artist and

his gallery, who were cleared of copyright infringement after a lengthy court battle. [75]

Despite his victory in court, Prince's artistic practice still toes a fine line in regards to

authorship.

Prince's most recent cowboy works introduce an entirely new process to the

mix. He now rephotographs Western novel covers, which he calls "frontier books,"[76]

prints inkjet enlargements onto canvas, then paints over them with acrylic, obfuscating

most of the cover text in the reproductions. Prince retains bits of information that

bleed through the paint in some images.[77] These works follow a trajectory towards a

more painterly aesthetic that began with his digitally manipulated images in the late

1990s. Rather than just faking brushwork, Prince literally paints the canvas. Although

landscape was essential to his early photographs, the backdrops of his later works are

either abstracted or omitted altogether. The cowboys in Prince's most recent works

emerge from a wild, untamed environment akin to the turbulent Romantic landscapes

of J. M. W. Turner in scenes that lack the realism of his Marlboro series.

Similar to the cowboys in the cigarette ads and on the paperback covers,

Prince's newfangled cowboys are familiar, but not as easily recognizable. The

---

[75] Brian Boucher, "Landmark Copyright Lawsuit Cariou v. Prince Is Settled,"
Online magazine, *www.artinamericamagazine.com*, March 18, 2014,
http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/landmark-copyright-
lawsuit-cariou-v-prince-is-settled/; For more information regarding the legal case see
Henry Lydiate, "Fair Use?," *Art Monthly*, October 13, 2013, 41; Adam Yokell,
"Photographer Prevails in Prince Copyright Infringement Action: Court Takes Finm
Stance on Appropriation Art and Fair Use; Defendants Appeal.," *IFAR Journal* 12, no.
3 (2011): 8–12.

[76] Gagosian Gallery, "Richard Prince: Cowboys," accessed April 29, 2015,
http://www.gagosian.com/exhibitions/richard-prince--february-21-2013.

[77] Jan Tumlir, "Richard Prince: Gagosian Gallery," *ArtForum*, Summer 2013.

majority were taken from covers of Louis L'Amour books. As in the previous example, Prince's recent paintings signify the paperback narratives as well the associations of cowboy in general. *Untitled (Cowboy)*, (2012) (fig. 4.41),[78] for example, features the cover for the 1970s paperback *The Man Called Noon* (fig. 4.42). Other than hiding the cover information behind a blue, pink and orange painted sky; the artist makes relatively few changes to the original design. The original image depicts the black silhouette of a gunslinger standing over a prostrate body with a railcar in the background. Even without the sales pitch: "A gunslinger's bullet left Noon without a past, without a friend – and danger for a future!" the image conjures memories of a classic Western showdown.

Another of Prince's paintings features the cover of L'Amour's *The Rider of Lost Creek*, a cowboy riding at full speed with pistol in hand (fig. 4.43 and fig. 4.44). Prince's selection of L'Amour novels is key because L'Amour remains as the best known and most popular Western novelist since Owen Wister, Zane Gray and Max Brand. Such ties to popular culture make the mythological associations more readily apparent. Since several of L'Amour's novels became television movies or mini-series, Prince's paintings connote like *The Virginian*, continuing the mythological chain of signification by adopting both the cover imagery and the narrative text. Prince advances the simulacrum chain again in his appropriation of *The Rider of Lost Creek* in a 2013 cover by recycling a scene from his 1989 *Untitled (cowboy)* (fig. 4.45). The artworks are nearly identical except the Marlboro Man carries a lasso instead of the pistol wielded by the L'Amour cowboy.

---

[78] Richard Prince and James Frey, *Richard Prince: Cowboys*, ed. Ken Maxwell and Alison McDonald (Beverly Hills: Gagosian Gallery, 2013), 109.

Combined with romantic colors of abstracted landscapes and associations to the Western novel, Prince's latest cowboy series signifies more as fiction than his earlier Marlboro cowboys. The mythological signification is exaggerated in the L'Amour cowboys whose unique personalities make the Marlboro Men appear generic in comparison. Gagosian Gallery's press release for Prince's 2013 *Cowboys* exhibition, however, downplays the "cowboy" aspects of the artist's recent work:

> At a glance, the Cowboy paintings are ironic appropriations intended to deconstruct both a regressive stereotype and the truth of uninhibited artistic gesture. But on closer scrutiny, there is an undeniable element of complicit pleasure in Prince's masterfully casual renderings of figure and ground where the powerful male gunslingers are little more than pretexts or catalysts for free experimentation with paint.[79]

Prince and Gagosian want the viewer to believe the work is not about cowboys, but the process of painting. Nevertheless, the cowboy remains central to the artist's work, and is likely there to help sell it, just as it once sold cigarettes.

Prince continues to return to the imagery instrumental to his initial success as an artist. Some argue that his Marlboro images actually owe their success to the originals. Art critic Peter Schjeldahl, for instance, contends that Prince's, "gorgeous prints of the cowboy photographs in Marlboro ads, a stock-in-trade since 1980, stick us with the fact that those pictures are beautiful."[80] Yet, few devotees of the work of Prince and his contemporaries would probably ever collect "original" or even quasi-documentary photographs of cowboys or the West. And while his work may indeed have nothing to do with cowboys it does enliven the discourse about cowboy imagery in the twenty-first century. By repurposing existing images of the Marlboro Man and

---

[79] "Richard Prince: Cowboys," *www.gagosian.com*
[80] Peter Schjeldahl, "The Joker," *New Yorker* 83, no. 31 (October 15, 2007): 90.

cover art from Western novels, Prince fashions his own documents of American popular culture. In her monograph about Prince, Nancy Spector suggests that "By selecting and re-presenting the already contrived image as carefully cropped and framed artwork, he brings us closer to the its essential fiction, making it more real in the process."[81] Pointing out the artifice of cowboy imagery seems to be central to Prince's aesthetic. He creates, in his words, "a reality that has the chances of looking real, but a reality that doesn't have chances of being real."[82] Art historian Kate Linker connects the "real" aspect of Prince's work to Baudrillard's theories regarding hypereality. In the world of media images, "various signs for reality have come to substitute reality."[83] Though simulation, or in the case of his rephotography, Prince creates a "real without origin or reality…by functioning as a simulator, by remaking and thereby intensifying signs that are already fabricated from existing material and techniques, he acts to expose (literally, 'set forth') the extent to which our reality has been invaded by fiction."[84]

In Prince's early cowboy images, the half-tone dots of the magazine printing process are clearly visible. The artist does not hide the fact he has copied existing images, but do these representations reflect an authentic type, since the Marlboro man is basically a facsimile of an earlier prototype? The ads and pulps are simulacrum. The problem with cowboys is finding the point where the simulacrum of cowboys began.

---

[81] Spector et al., *Richard Prince*, 23.
[82] Prince quoted in Ibid., 27.
[83] Kate Linker, "On Richard Prince's Photographs," *Arts Magazine* 57, no. 3 (November 1982): 121; See also Jean Baudrillard and Sheila Faria Glaser, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
[84] Linker, "On Richard Prince's Photographs," 121–122.

Prince's work suggests that with cowboy imagery it may not possible to determine the original from the copy.

Conclusion: Appropriated Cowboys

When discussing the nature of her photographs, Laurie Simmons explained, "every postmodern effort is an attempt to reclaim and recontextualize an earlier moment, put on new twist on something done before."[85] For the postmodern artist, visual construction became more significant than the original object or image they appropriated. Through photographs, David Levinthal and Laurie Simmons repurpose Western action figures in new contexts that evoke memories of make believe of not just American children but of Western cinema, an important vehicle in mythologizing the Western frontier. The photographs of Richard Prince turned iconic images of cowboys into objects, almost fetishizing them in a way in which children or collectors obsess over cowboy toys. For Levinthal, Simmons and Prince it is not subject matter, but artistic intent that sets them apart from traditional artists of the American West, whose representations celebrate and preserve mythological representations. This new generation established "an aesthetic of fabrication rather than of realism"[86] that called attention to the artificially constructed recollections of the American West perpetuated throughout American popular culture.

---

[85] Yablonsky and Simmons, "Laurie Simmons," 22.
[86] Levinthal, *The Wild West*, 62.

122

Figure 4.1
James Casebere *Covered Wagons*, 1985, Gelatin silver print, 20 x 16 inches & 40 x 30 inches, accessed July 12, 2014, jamescasebere.com

Figure 4.2
James Casebere, *Needles*, 1985-86, 13 x 9 1/16 in print, (diptych), 20 x 75 inches, accessed July 12, 2014, jamescasebere.com
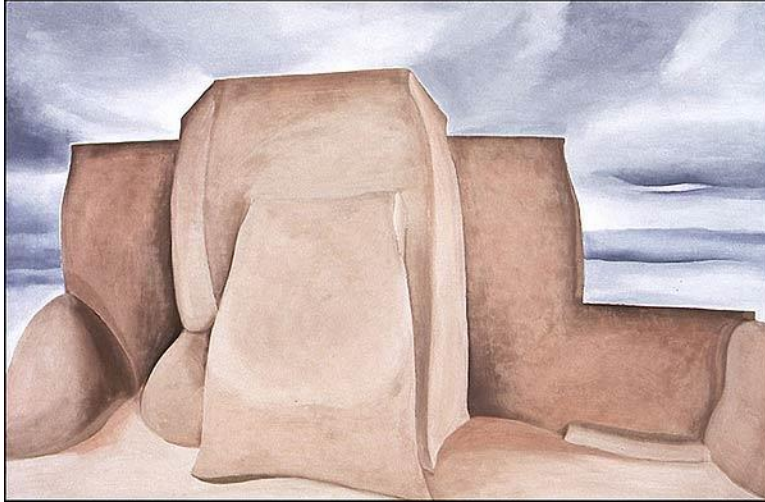
Figure 4.3
Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986), *Ranchos Church, New Mexico*, 1930–31, Oil on canvas, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, accessed July 12, 2014, cartermuseum.org

Figure 4.4
James Casebere*, Arches*, 1985 Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 inches & 30 x 40 inches, accessed July 12, 2014, jamescasebere.com

Figure 4.5
James Casebere, *Street with Pots*, 1983-84, Gelatin silver print, 30 x 24 inches, accessed
July 12, 2014, jamescasebere.com

Figure 4.6
James Casebere, *Mission Façade*, 1985, Gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 inches, accessed
July 12, 2014, jamescasebere.com

Figure 4.7
James Casebere, *Western Street*, 1985-86, Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 inches & 30 x 40 inches, accessed July 12, 2014, jamescasebere.com

Figure 4.8
James Casebere, *Western Sculpture*, 1987, mixed media installation. (Walker Art Center and Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago, Ill.), *Cross-References: Sculpture Into Photography: James Casebere, Bruce Charlesworth, Bernard Faucon, Ron O'Donnell, Sandy Skoglund, Boyd Webb*, ed. James Casebere (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1987), 48.

Figure 4.9
James Casebere, Installation at Bucholtz Gallery, accessed July 12, 2014,
jamescasebere.com

Figure 4.10
David Levinthal, *Untitled*, 1985, Polaroid Polacolor ER Land Film, 20 x 24 inches
David Levinthal, *The Wild West* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press,
1993), 46.

Figure 4.11
Charles M. Russell, *Indians Hunting Buffalo (Wild Men's Meat; Buffalo Hunt)*, 1894, Oil on canvas, 24 1/8 inches x 36 1/8 inches, Sid Richardson Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, accessed July 12, 2014, sidrichardsonmuseum.org

Figure 4.12
Charles M. Russell,, *Buffalo Hunt*, 1905, Bronze, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, accessed July 12, 2014, cartermuseum.org

Figure 4.13
David Levinthal, *Untitled*, 1985, Polaroid Polacolor ER Land Film, 20 x 24 inches
David Levinthal, *The Wild West* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 25.

Figure 4.14
David Levinthal, *Untitled*, 1985, Polaroid Polacolor ER Land Film, 20 x 24 inches
David Levinthal, *The Wild West* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 17.

Figure 4.15
David Levinthal, *Untitled*, 1985, Polaroid Polacolor ER Land Film, 20 x 24 inches
David Levinthal, *The Wild West* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 37.

Figure 4.16
David Levinthal, *Untitled*, 1985, Polaroid Polacolor ER Land Film, 20 x 24 inches
David Levinthal, *The Wild West* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 59.

Figure 4.17
Frederic Remington, *Downing the Nigh Leader* (1907), Oil on canvas, 10 ½ x 18 inches, Whitney Western Art Museum, Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming, March 22, 2015, http://www.collections.centerofthewest.org/treasures/view /downing_the_nigh_leader

Figure 4.18
David Levinthal, *Untitled*, 1985, Polaroid Polacolor ER Land Film, 20 x 24 inches
David Levinthal, *The Wild West* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 41.
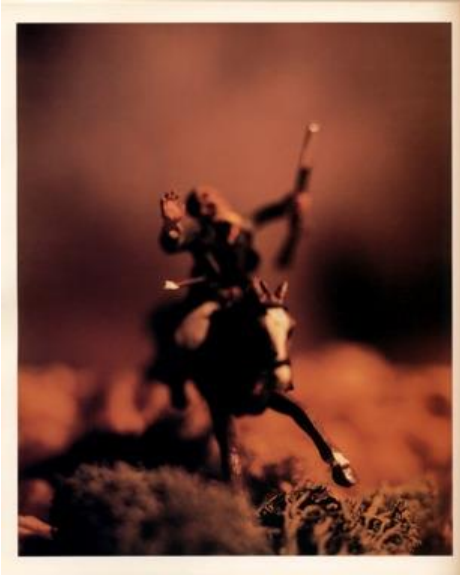
Figure 4.19
David Levinthal, *Untitled*, 1985, Polaroid Polacolor ER Land Film, 20 x 24 inches
David Levinthal, *The Wild West* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 40.
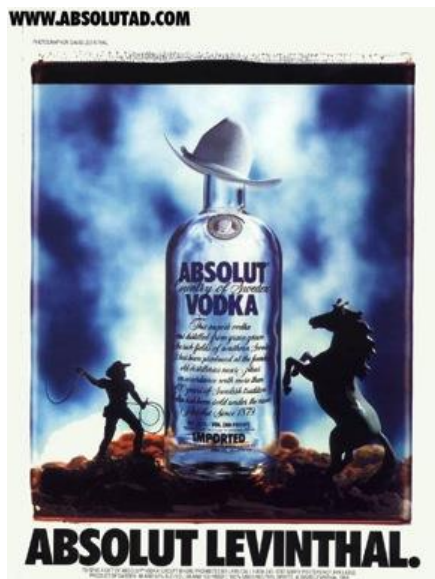
Figure 4.20
David Levinthal, *Ad for Absolut Vodka*, 1986, accessed March 23, 2015, http://www.absolutad.com
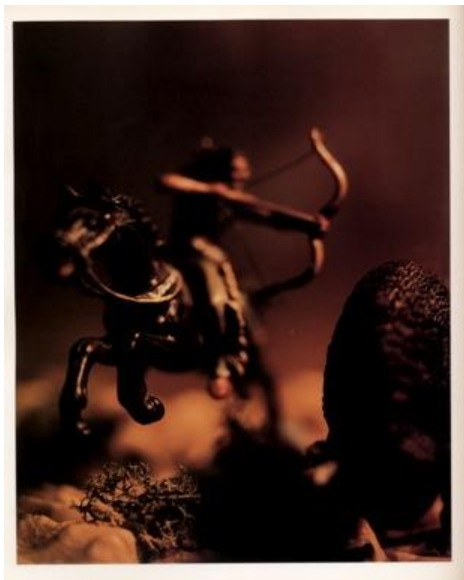
Figure 4.21
David Levinthal, *Untitled*, 1985, Polaroid Polacolor ER Land Film, 20 x 24 inches
David Levinthal, *The Wild West* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 15.

Figure 4.22
Laurie Simmons, *Brothers/Horizon*, 1979, Cibachrome, 5 x 7 ¼ inches Edition of 7, 16 x 20 inches, Edition of 3. Laurie Simmons.com, accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.lauriesimmons.net/photographs/cowboys/

Figure 4.23
Laurie Simmons, *Brothers/Aerial View,* 1979, Cibachrome, 5 x 7 ¼ inches Edition of 7, 16 x 20 inches, Edition of 3, Laurie Simmons.com, accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.lauriesimmons.net/photographs/cowboys/

Figure 4.24
Laurie Simmons, *Brothers/Hay,* 1979, Cibachrome, 5 x 7 ¼ inches Edition of 7, 16 x 20 inches, Edition of 3, Laurie Simmons.com, accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.lauriesimmons.net/photographs/cowboys/

Figure 4.25
Laurie Simmons, *Man/Blue Shirt/ Red Barn,* 1979, Cibachrome, 5 x 7 ¼ inches Edition
of 7, 16 x 20 inches, Edition of 3, Laurie Simmons.com, accessed March 24, 2015,
http://www.lauriesimmons.net/photographs/cowboys/

Figure 4.26
Laurie Simmons, *Woman/Green Shirt/ Red Barn,*1979, Cibachrome, 5 x 7 ¼ inches
Edition of 7, 16 x 20 inches, Edition of 3, Laurie Simmons.com, accessed March 24,
2015, http://www.lauriesimmons.net/photographs/cowboys/

Figure 4.27
Laurie Simmons, *Horizontal/Man/Woman/Horse,* 1979, Cibachrome, 5 x 7 ¼ inches
Edition of 7, 16 x 20 inches, Edition of 3, Laurie Simmons.com, accessed March 24,
2015, http://www.lauriesimmons.net/photographs/cowboys/

Figure 4.28
Laurie Simmons, *Man/Woman/Horse Water,* 1979, Cibachrome, 5 x 7 ¼ inches Edition
of 7, 16 x 20 inches, Edition of 3, Laurie Simmons, http://www.lauriesimmons.net
/photographs/cowboys/, (accessed March 24, 2015)

Figure 4.29
Laurie Simmons, *Vertical/Man/Woman/Horse*, 1979, Cibachrome, 5 x 7 ¼ inches
Edition of 7, 16 x 20 inches, Edition of 3, Laurie Simmons.com, accessed March 24,
2015, http://www.lauriesimmons.net/photographs/cowboys/

Figure 4.30
Equestrian Sculpture of Marcus Aurelius c. 173-76 C.E., bronze, Capitoline Museums,
Rome, accessed March 24, 2015, flicker.com

Figure 4.31
James Earle Fraser, *Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt,* 1939, bronze, American Museum of Natural History, New York City, New York, accessed March 24, 2015, ansmagazine.com

Figure 4.32
Laurie Simmons, *Woman/Man/Two Horses*, 1979, Cibachrome, 5 x 7 ¼ inches Edition of 7, 16 x 20 inches, Edition of 3, Laurie Simmons.com, accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.lauriesimmons.net/photographs/cowboys/

Figure 4.33
Laurie Simmons, *Man/Sky/Puddle/Second View*, 1979, Cibachrome, 5 x 7 ¼ inches
Edition of 7, 16 x 20 inches, Edition of 3, Laurie Simmons.com, accessed March 24,
2015, http://www.lauriesimmons.net/photographs/cowboys/

Figure 4.34
Laurie Simmons, *Man/Puddle,* 1979, Cibachrome, 5 x 7 ¼ inches Edition of 7, 16 x 20
inches, Edition of 3, Laurie Simmons.com, accessed March 24, 2015,
http://www.lauriesimmons.net/photographs/cowboys/

Figure 4.35
Laurie Simmons, *Cowboy Pattern,* 1979, Cibachrome, 5 x 7 ¼ inches Edition of 7, 16 x 20 inches, Edition of 3, Laurie Simmons.com, accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.lauriesimmons.net/photographs/cowboys/

Figure 4.36
Richard Prince, *Untitled (cowboy)*, 1990-91, Ektacolor photograph, 50 x 73 5/8 inches, accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.slideprojector.com

Figure 4.37
Bank Langmore, *Looking for Strays* 1973-75, Bank Langmore, *Cowboy* (New York: Morrow, 1975), 194-195.

Figure 4.38
Richard Prince, *Untitled (cowboy)*, 2001, Ektacolor photograph 50 x 74 inches, accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.photography-now.com

Figure 4.39
Richard Prince, *Untitled (almost original)*, 2006, Pencil on paper and magazine illustration in artist's frame, 44 x 46 inches, Museum of Modern Art, New York, accessed March 24, 2015, moma.org,

Figure 4.40
Richard Prince, *Untitled (original)*, 2009, One original illustration and one book, 37 x 33 inches, Richard Prince, accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.richardprince.com

Figure 4.41
Richard Prince, *Untitled (cowboy)*, 2012, Inkjet and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 451/8
inches, Richard Prince, accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.richardprince.com
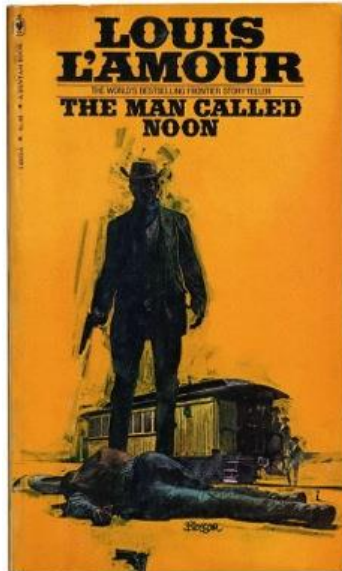
Figure 4.42
Cover, Louis L'Amour, *The Man Called Noon* (New York: Bantam, 1970).

Figure 4.43
Richard Prince, *Untitled (cowboy)*, 2013, Inkjet and acrylic on canvas, 47 x 28 inches, Richard Prince, accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.richardprince.com
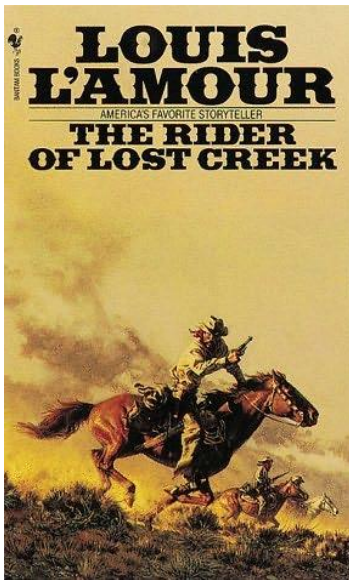
Figure 4.44
Cover, Louis L'Amour, *The Rider of Lost Creek* (New York: Bantam, 1976).

Figure 4.45
Richard Prince, *Untitled (cowboy)*, 1989, Ektacolor photograph, 50 x 70 inches, Richard Prince, accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.richardprince.com

Chapter 5 - Corbijn's Cowboys

The emergence of Music Television (MTV) in the early 1980s established the music video as an important marketing tool for the recording industry. From their conception, music videos were designed to promote and sell compact discs and concert tickets. The new medium also offered artists an opportunity to blend visual arts and music. A number of still photographers, were attracted by technology that permitted them to transform static imagery into a series streaming of images and forms with creative possibilities that extended beyond film. Photographer, videographer and filmmaker, Anton Corbijn, one of those who embraced this new media frontier, found a novel way to recycle and reinvent the cowboy image for new audiences in such videos as "Personal Jesus" (1989) by Depeche Mode, and the Killers' hit song "All These Things I've Done" (2005).

Corbijn's career as a photographer commenced around the same time as the artists of the Pictures Generation, although his original ambitions veered in a completely different direction. He began photographing punk and new wave bands in the early 1980s, not because he was necessarily interested in photography but because security at concerts usually allowed photographers closer to the stage than other concertgoers. In time, several of the bands he admired hired him to do free-lance work for their albums. One of his most famous photographs, taken on location in the California desert, graced the cover of U2's now famous *Joshua Tree* (1987) album.

Shooting his subjects at distinct locations in natural light, Corbijn developed a gritty aesthetic that resulted in images that were monochromatic, high in contrast

and grainy. His approach to still photography carried over to his early music videos for which he soon began to receive critical acclaim.

In the first decade of the new millennium, Corbijn also began making feature films. One of his most celebrated works, *Control* (2007), provided an intimate portrait of Ian Curtis, lead singer of Joy Division, a band he had photographed early in his career. Curtis had committed suicide in 1980 on the eve of the group's departure to tour America.

In *Control*, Corbijn explored the theme of loneliness and the "romantic idea" of loners, subjects that continued to stimulate his oeuvre.[1] His fascination with solitude and isolation helps explain his appropriation of the cowboy image and the landscape of the Desert Southwest in the music videos "Personal Jesus" and "All These Things I've Done." In these videos, Corbijn stylized the iconography of Western film and built upon the myth of the cowboy, adding layers of meaning by the manner in which he constructed the imagery for each video. Unlike the plastic, one-dimensional cowboys who appeared in country music videos of the era, Corbijn's treatment abstracted and queered the cowboy image in inventive ways.[2]

As an artist, Corbijn understood that the nature of the media changed the meaning and the truth of what was being depicted and he took full advantage of this knowledge.[3] His videos recontextualize and expand the mythological context of the

---

[1] Belinda Luscombe, "Dutch Master: The Director of Philip Seymour Hoffman's Last Film Soldiers on," *Time*, July 28, 2014, 47.

[2] Comprised of a montage of rodeo footage interspersed with a performer on stage, George Strait's "Amarillo by Morning" (1982) exemplifies the realism typically portrayed in country music videos.

[3] Anton Corbijn and Groninger Museum eds**.**, Anton *Corbijn:Werk*. (München: Schirmer/Mosel, 2000), vi.

West and the signification of the cowboy not only through simulacra but also by how music videos function as a medium. The repeated use of desert landscapes and the presentation of new connotations and constructs of the cowboy as a type in his Western-related videos, layered the existing cowboy myth with new meaning.[4]

The combination of song and image in the music videos "Personal Jesus" and "All These Things I've Done" also affects how the appearance of cowboy and Western landscape function as myth. While music videos often employ or adapt cinematic elements, they may in fact have more in common with visual art. They share, for example, a common motive for production: a desire to affect rather than inform. Unlike traditional motion pictures, whose impact typically depends upon a lengthy narrative, music videos require the creation of mood and emotion in a comparatively short time span.[5]

Music itself is quite proficient in setting a mood and filmmakers often capitalize on this fact to enhance the emotive impact of visual images. In music videos, image and melody converge to create a specific response from the viewer. Lacking narrative drive, meaning is derived from a combination of sound and imagery that may have no coherence or pre-established relationship with each another. Corbijn's videos, however, established a distinct relationship between the visual art of motion photography and the audial impact of music. Music videos also proved a viable media for disseminating ideas and transmitting myths to large audiences

---

[4] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 10.
[5] Nicolas Chamber, "Pictures Came and Broke Your Heart," in *Video Hits: Art & Music*. (Queensland, Australia: Queensland Art Gallery, 2004), 45.

through repeated play on MTV and online venues such as YouTube, band websites, and streaming services.[6]

In music videos, image and sound are both processual and transitory rather than static.[7] The meaning of each continually changes and aims, according to film theorist Carol Vernallis, "to project permeable and indefinite rather than clearly defined boundaries."[8] Image works with sound to produce a meaning that is more understood through phenomenological experience. Sound, in this case music, is not separate from the visual environment and works with it to create new meaning.

Corbijn focused primarily on the music when developing imagery for his videos. He uses the music's rhythm and sound to guide its visual portrayal. In "Personal Jesus", for example, band member Andrew Fletcher, playing cowboy, rides a child's rocking horse and keeps time with the music (fig. 5.1). For Corbijn, who describes the music in his videos as film-like, the lyrical elements of the song come second to the melody.[9] This scene also conjures up the movies of singing cowboys like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers who often sang in the saddle while riding along.

In both "Personal Jesus" and "All These Things I've Done", the videographer not only borrows a host of visual cues from Western cinema, particularly Italian

---

[6] In the 1980s and 1990s MTV repeatedly showed music videos and for a time was the only venue for the medium.

[7] Carol Vernallis suggests that music videos operate in two modes: "one largely taxonomical and the other more processual." These modes are analyzed according to how the musical and visual codes function in a temporal flow. See Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 177.

[8] Ibid.

[9] *Depeche Mode: The Videos 86-98*. Dir Sven Harding and Martyn Atkins. Warner Brothers, 1999.

Westerns, but also from American exploitation films[10] integrating elements from traditional readings of each genre to construct new interpretations of the formulaic Western. Fresh meaning is derived not only through the combination of visual, musical and lyrical elements but also specific qualities that characterize each band. In the music videos he made for Depeche Mode and the Killers, Corbijn demonstrated a consciousness of, and an appreciation, for the traditional connotations of the cowboy image and strictly adhered to some of the stock visual elements of Western film while inventing and manipulating others.

Until the 1960s the standardized nature of the Western film genre, distinguished the cowboy and his image as a type. In the Barthesian sense, that image communicated a message that signified a new, second order of meaning established by pre-existing signs; in turn based on historical and fictional elements of film. In "Personal Jesus," however, Corbijn, chose imagery associated with unconventional American Westerns such as *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and Andy Warhol's *Lonesome Cowboys* (1967), both of which sexualized the cowboy hero and played against type. In like manner the videographer accentuated the eroticism and sex appeal of Depeche Mode's "cowboy" look with tight fitting pants, leather jackets, sun glasses and bare skin.[11]

---

[10] In the 1960s and 1970s, a series of low budget films exploited a societal trends, niche and controversies—such as sex, violence, or drug use. Sexploitation films, the subgenre that inspired Corbijn, featured scenes of nude or semi-nude women. *Faster Pussy Cat Kill! Kill!* (1965) and *Supervixens* (1975) by director Russ Meyer are two of the best known of the genre.

[11] In a survey of 212 psychology students, three characteristics most associated with cowboys included, masculinity, aggressiveness and eroticism. See John A Popplestone, "The Horseless Cowboys," in *The Sexual Scene* (New York: Adline Publishing Company, 1970), 77-78.

Western films are typically identified and defined by their geographical setting and characters, which contribute to the mythical representation of the region and the cowboy hero. Because the Western genre was rooted in historical reality, such films present a stylized reality. Corbijn's devotion to the standard cinematic representation of cowboy, defined by dress and environment, automatically evoked the myth of the West. It was no mere coincidence that "Personal Jesus" was filmed in the Tabernas desert outside the city of Almeria, Spain, the same location used in the production of many Spanish and Italian Westerns.

Just as Americans in the early twentieth constructed a new myth of the American West with the closing of the frontier, so too the Western movie genre, declared dead by most film critics in the 1970s, was revived for a time by revisionist adaptations, foreign and domestic. Corbijn drew heavily upon the look and presentation of this new type of Western film in both "Personal Jesus" and "All These Things I've Done." In the latter video, Corbijn used a contemporary Western setting and historical characters to convey the environment of a disappearing culture. Staging some scenes in the YESCO Boneyard (fig. 5.2), a junkyard near Las Vegas containing discarded neon signs and other architectural remnants of the past, the director recalled an era in which Mafia brutality and lawlessness defined that Nevada community. The song's visual imagery borrowed stock narrative components of traditional Western films, including a classic showdown. The director enhances the drama of the scene by a "slow and deliberate walking approach between the conflicting figures"[12] that emulates cinematic portrayals of the famed gunfight at the OK Corral.[13]

---

[12] William Indick. *The Psychology of the Western: How the American Psyche*

Critic John Mansfield suggested that Corbijn's video captured the essence of Las Vegas "with a little sliver of desert and a trailer park,"[14] without direct reference to casinos. More authentic than constructed, the director's take on Las Vegas may be one reason why the Western and cowboy myths are conveyed so effectively in this video—Las Vegas is a *real* place.[15]

Corbijn utilizes geographic locations in both his Western works to enhance the dichotomy between man and nature. The bands in both "All These Things I've Done" and "Personal Jesus" perform in a bleak desert region manipulated by Corbijn's visual aesthetic. The high contrast between light and dark in the videos is accentuated by grainy, filtered imagery that adds a rugged, aged feel to the whole and exaggerates the divide between man and his environment. Shot entirely in black and white, the aesthetic of "All These Things I've Done" recalls documentary photography of cowboys and director John Ford's early Western films. [16]

Historian William Indick contends that the decline of the Western genre may have been hastened by the changing tastes of the American audience whose "MTV-formed attention span, which requires a cut every two seconds, a million edits a minute and a cluttered frame" did not favor the "long silences and panoramic shots"

Plays Out on Screen. (North Carolina: Mcfarland, 2008), 195.

[13] Notable films featuring showdowns at the OK Corral include *My Darling Clementine* (1946)*, The Gunfight at the OK Corral* (1957)*, Tombstone* (1993) and *Wyatt Earp* (1994).

[14] John Mansfield. "Nevada and The Killers," *The Millennial Star*, December 8, 2008, http://www.millennialstar.org/home-has-meant-nevada-to-some/

[15] Douglas J. McReynolds. "Alive and Well: Western Myth in Western Movies." *Literature Film Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (January 1998): 47.

[16] In "Personal Jesus," Corbijn alternates between color and black and white.

found in the classic Western.[17] Indick's assessment suggests that Corbijn's reinvention of the genre through the medium of music video and MTV style editing more adeptly addressed the needs and desires of a postmodern audience.

The melding of song and image in Corbijn's Western videos align with the unusual musical scores that distinguished 1970s Italian Westerns from their American counterparts. Some critics found the soundtracks of foreign-made Westerns to be "idiosyncratic, intrusive and overblown."[18] In fact, the scores for Sergio Leoni's Italian Westerns may have been the reason why many reviewers regarded his films as "not quite right."[19] In "Personal Jesus" and "All These Things I've Done", Corbijn combined Western scenes with songs unrelated to cowboys in a manner that reflects the discordance between score and image of the Italian Westerns.

"Personal Jesus" is a strange mixture of historical and contemporary references to the cinematic West. The video begins with the band members arriving at an isolated Spanish villa, two in a green pickup truck, representing the present and two on horseback, representing the past. Scenes alternate between color and black and white exaggerating the temporal dichotomy established by the modes of transportation. As the band approaches the village, a woman in a red dress runs across an empty courtyard toward a church, perhaps recalling scenes of townspeople fleeing attacking brigands in such traditional Westerns as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960).

---

[17] Indick, 143.

[18] Ibid., 190

[19] William McClain. "Western, Go Home! Sergio Leone and the 'Death of the Western' in American Film Criticism." *Journal of Film and Video* 62, no. 1–2 (April 2010): 58.

The band's fringed-leather attire mimics Warhol's *Lonesome Cowboys* more than it does the cowboys of the Spaghetti Westerns. Lead singer Dave Gahan is bare chested under his leather jacket and the addition of Rayban Wayfarer sunglasses popular in the late 1980s, adds to the campiness of his attire (fig. 5.3). Depeche Mode, much like the Warhol's "cowboys," is simply playing dress up.

As the song progresses, members of the band signify as edgy and revisionist cowboy heroes, out to conquer and dominate the females in the video. Portrayed at first as alluring savages requiring subjugation, the women pose provocatively in a traditional movie saloon-bordello set. When confronted by the band, however, they appear adversarial and in control of their own sexuality. Although there is little obvious physical contact between the men and women, a scene played out in shadow suggests that band leader Dave Gahan, succeeds in his sexual conquest, emerging from the bedroom as the lone hero and one woman's own "personal Jesus."

Although the action unfolds in a setting that clearly pre-dates the music, in several instances modern objects appear alongside historical accoutrements. A band member rides a horse through the desert, for example, "to pick up the receiver" [20] of a telephone attached to a lone utility pole (fig. 5.4). The phone's odd placement creates an interesting juxtaposition of past and present, akin to the band's novel method of entering the village. Such associations allow Corbijn's imagery to simultaneously recall Western cinematic narratives set in the nineteenth century as well address the constructed nature Westerns filmed in Europe in the late-twentieth century. The

---

[20]The action reflects a rare instance where the visual codes link with the words of the song.

videographer's treatment also asserts the pure fiction of Westerns and the myths such films tend to perpetuate about the cowboy West.

In "All These Things I've Done" Corbijn draws again on the battle of the sexes with the Killers facing off against a group of women called the Killersluts, an irreverent reference to the band members' girlfriends in the video. During a group of scenes shot out of sequence and varying in length, the women, similar to "ring girls" at boxing matches, take turns displaying numbered signs before each segment. Beginning with "0," the video opens with the Killers' lead singer, Brandon Flowers, lying face down in a mud puddle. In the scene that follows (#4), the Killersluts, riding in a white Cadillac convertible, pull a black trailer past the band in a neatly manicured trailer park. Mounted atop the trailer is a long wooden sign embellished with light bulbs spelling out "The Killersluts."

Taunted by the passing women, the mustached bandsmen, dressed in cowboy attire, including long dusters of the sort prominent in such films as *Tombstone* (1993) and *The Long Riders* (1980) and a poncho recalling Clint Eastwood's distinctive costume in Sergio Leoni's Dollars Trilogy, steal the sign and, with their boot heels, stamp out all the bulbs, except for those forming the letters K-I-L-L-E-R-S. This act heightens the conflict between the two groups.

The reason for the discord is revealed in the next scene (#1) when Flowers, now clean-shaven and without his cowboy hat, enters a trailer house with a lipstick kiss on his cheek and is slapped by his girlfriend, the ringleader of the Killersluts. The action shifts to the bathroom where Flowers slips in the shower while washing off the lipstick. In the following scene (#3) the band, again in the role of tough cowboys,

strides down a paved drive of the trailer park. They pause while Flowers mounts a miniature burro in the presence of a diminutive figure in a cowboy hat, who conjures up memories of the 1937 western spoof *The Terror of Tiny Town*. In the faintly humorous scene that follows, the singer lacks the equestrian prowess of the cinematic cowboy he imitates, thus reinforcing the notion that the band members are not "real" cowboys but simply role-players.

In the showdown that follows (#6), the Killersluts face off against the band. Flowers carries the women's wooden sign over his shoulder as if it is a cross to bear (fig. 5.6). Taking the initiative, the women step forward confidently in time with the music as the men retreat backward before fleeing amid a hail of boomerangs launched by the women. All hit their targets, except Flowers, who deflects the projectiles with the sign before defiantly planting it in the ground and withdrawing.

A hide-and-seek scenario (#5) follows, with the men cowering among abandoned casino signs and other remnants of old Las Vegas in the YESCO Boneyard. The search goes unresolved, however, before the Killers, literally drop out of the sky in the next scene (#1) and land dazed and confused on a gravel yard in the trailer park. In the video's final segment (#7) Flowers is struck in the back by a boomerang thrown by his girlfriend and falls face down in the same puddle of water seen in the first scene of the video. From there the camera shifts to a final shot of the illuminated "Killer's" sign.

The cowboy hero/villain dichotomy dictates the action in "All These Things I've Done." In this scenario, however, women hold the power and are cast as heroes seeking retribution for the wrong done by the cheating Flowers. The Killersluts ride

156

into "town" in a *white* Cadillac, analogous to the white horse of art and literature, long symbolic of the hero. Despite donning the outfit of the cowboy hero, the Killers are less than convincing in the role and their leader looks silly in the saddle on a miniature burro.

Although the weapons employed in the showdown are boomerangs, instead of the pistols usually associated with cinematic Western gunplay, the women's aim is deadly and the violence evident as the men experience physical pain in retaliation for the emotional hurt inflicted by Flower's infidelity. The boomerang is not only an effective weapon but also a tangible and humorous representation of the popular expression "what goes around, comes around." With the women victorious in the final showdown, Corbijn has turned the classic myth of the cowboy hero upside down.

Through the sequencing of the video and random scene devices, Corbijn simultaneously permits the imagery to be read on a number of mythological levels. Replaying Flowers facedown in a puddle at the video's beginning and end, for example, speaks to the formulaic nature of early Western films. Not only are the narratives repetitious, so are the settings, costumes, plot and characters.

But "All These Things I've Done," is no classic retelling of the cowboy myth. The power clearly lies with powerful females, who, despite their wanton sexuality declare metaphorically that "there's a new sheriff in town. Brandon Flowers, who, signifies like a hero through his dress, turns out to be a villain and falls victim to the woman he wronged.

In Corbijn's cowboy-related videos, the carnal battlefield is the American West and through stock characters and costumes, the director effectively evokes elements of

classic Western films both domestic and foreign-made. The erotic depictions of

women and sexual warfare, particularly in the Killers' video, also resemble the plot

device and female characters of Russ Meyer's exploitation film *Faster Pussycat Kill!*

Kill! (1965) (fig. 5.7).[21] Corbijn employs Meyers' provocative styling both to express

"something illicit and forbidden"[22] and to disrupt the typical gender roles of classic

Western films. In both videos, for example, women play the part of "the other," a role

usually reserved for Indians or outlaws.

Corbijn's portrayal of the West also emphasizes specific aspects of Western

cinema that redefine how and what cowboys signify. Appropriating the conventions of

the Western and exploitation film genres to convey meaning through the medium of

music video permits certain images to act mythologically in new and different ways.

While Corbijn allows the image of cowboy to be read as myth, he at the same time

questions its truth through the recontextualized images in his videos.

The viewer of "Personal Jesus" Or "All the Things I Have Done," might

presume that he/she is watching a retelling of the past via conventions of Western

film, while at the same time being provoked to question the truth and meaning of the

imagery on display. Since the band members are not actually cowboys, only imitators,

Corbijn manipulates what the cowboy not only represents in Western film but also

what it signifies in culture and society. Does he still represent the hero or is he just a

---

[21] According to film historian Allan Havis, in *Faster Pussycat Kill! Kill!*,
Meyer is "signaling his vision of disguised sexual warfare." See Allan Havis. "Faster,
Pussycat! Kill! Kill! (1969)." In *Cult Films: Taboo and Transgression* (Lanham, MD:
University Press of America, 2007), 50.
[22] Ibid., 51.

composite of pre-established signs that are easily subverted and lack any coherent meaning in postmodern society?

Assuming that that the assessment of critic John Montgomery is correct and the Killers' video is not meant to "mean" anything; it is possible that even if the West still exists as a geographic location, the imagery has been re-appropriated to such a point that the simulacra of the American West no longer even connotes an ideology. In a larger context, however, the videos discussed here, continue to communicate meaning through the basic cowboy myth. The decision to depict the British band, Depeche Mode, as cowboys, for example, was carefully calculated to promote the group to an American audience and bolster sales of albums and concert tickets. In similar fashion, the music video "All These Things I've Done" helped reconnect the Killers, more popular in Europe at the time, with its American audience and foreshadowed the mood of the group's next CD, *Sam's Town*.[23]

Through the re-contextualization of images, Corbijn's videos question what ideology the West signifies in a manner similar to that of the photographs produced by artists of the Pictures Generation. His merging of genres—Western and exploitation—and combining of sound and image compares in approach to Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* cycle as well. Beyond merely appropriating Western tropes for the new postmodern medium of video, Corbijn introduced a new type of cowboy that differed significantly from the previous celluloid version. His aesthetic manipulation redefined the Western myth, and managed to keep the cowboy relevant for the MTV generation.

---

[23]"All These Things I've Done" appeared on the bands debut CD *Hot Fuss* (2004).

Figure 5.1
Still of Andrew Fletcher on rocking horse from "Personal Jesus,"accessed March 24, 2015, http://31.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_m4gcckYvHp1rstjlro1_500.gif

Figure 5. 2
YESCO bone yard, Las Vegas, Nevada, accessed December 2, 2010, http://www.typegoodness.com/wp-content/uploads/

Figure 5.3
Still of Dave Gahan from "Personal Jesus", accessed November 28, 2010,
http://www.theinspirationroom.com/daily/musicvideos/2007/7/david-gahan-personal-

Figure 5.4
Still from "Personal Jesus", accessed March 24, 2015,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1xrNaTO1bI

Figure 5.5
Still from "All These Things I've Done", accessed November 28, 2010,
http://i3.ytimg.com/vi/sZTpLvsYYHw/0.jpg

Figure 5.6
Still of "faceoff" from "All These Things I've Done", accessed March 24, 2015,
http://3.bp.blogspot.com/4sZCLH7MqM/THm6UAoj3I/AAAAAAAA3c/UN1o23xcl
zc/s320/The+Killers+-+All+These+Things+That+I've+Done61.jpg

Figure 5.7
Poster for *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!,*accessed November 28, 2010,
http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_0CMdWUUD4ro/R0qOpCDwtYI/AAAAAAAAABs/TMecr
dI-NyQ/s320/, ()

Chapter 6 - *Cremaster 2* – Matthew Barney's Gothic Western

Imagine a synthesis of the work of film directors David Lynch and John Ford and you arrive at *Cremaster 2* (1999), Matthew Barney's self-described "Gothic Western." This experimental film melds aspects of art cinema with stereotypical visual devices associated with Hollywood Westerns to create a world that is familiar, yet foreign. An analysis of how *Cremaster 2* fits within the Western cinematic genre explains how the film's main character, portrayed in the guise of a cowboy, and landscape signify in relation the myth of the American West.

Cremaster 2 is one of a series of films that serve as a mechanism by which Barney explores the biological creation process. The series title is derived from, "cremaster," a clinical term for the muscle whose primary function is to raise and lower male reproductive organs in response to temperature. The development of this muscle in the fetal stages of the human life cycle determines gender. Of the five different films that comprise the *Cremaster* cycle, *Cremaster 2* introduces conflict, which, on a biological level corresponds to the phase of fetal development when sexual division begins.

The film's narrative introduces sub themes of Mormonism, murder, and the life of bees and features "western" locales ranging from the Canadian Rockies, to the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah, to the 1893 Columbian World's Fair. Loosely biographical, the film revolves around a central historical character, Gary Gilmore, who received the death penalty for murdering a gas station attendant and a hotel clerk in Utah in July 1976 and, subsequently, was executed by firing squad at his own request just six months later.

In *Cremaster 2*, Barney adopts the conventions of Western cinema by portraying Gilmore as a cowboy-outlaw figure in the mold of Billy the Kid. Coincidentally, Gilmore's real-life automobile, a 1966 Ford Mustang, bears the name of a type of horse long associated with cowboys. The film's protagonist is not a traditional Western-hero, nor a typical anti-hero, even though he appears as a cowboy. The reason the artist cast Gilmore as such remains unclear; nevertheless, Barney's distortion of the Western hero raises questions as to what the cowboy signifies for audiences of not only performance art but also Western cinema.

To comprehend *Cremaster 2*, one must first understand its creator and his working process. Matthew Barney is a performance artist who achieved critical acclaim in the late 1990s. Barney's personal history is both reflected in and intertwined with his artworks. Growing up in Boise, Idaho, he excelled as a football player and was recruited to play at Yale. However, he soon abandoned team sports to explore "the transcendence of physical limitations in a multimedia art practice that include[d] feature-length films, video installations, sculpture, photography, and drawing." [1] Most notable are the five films that comprise the *Cremaster* cycle. Barney once described them as "'strange, nonverbal, and sometimes impenetrable stories…narrative sculptures or maybe sculptural narratives.'"[2] He told an interviewer

---

[1] "Cremaster 2," accessed October 16, 2012, http://www.cremaster.net/crem2.htm.

[2] Calvin Tomkins, *Lives of the Artists* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2008), 116.

in 2002 that he viewed the cremaster as a "stand-in for conflict" and that his goal was to portray "violence sublimated into form."[3]

Art critic Charmagne Picard suggests that each film in the *Cremaster* cycle "exploits a distinctive recognizable film genre: the Hollywood Musical Extravaganza [#1], the Gothic Western [#2], the Gangster film [#3], the Car Chase/Road movie [#4], and an Opera set in five acts [#5]."[4] Barney explains that although some autobiographical elements exist in the films; he is more interested in developing a rudimentary understanding of life.[5] Every aspect Barney's films entail multiple levels of symbolic significance ranging from the casting of characters to filming locations. For example, Barney envisioned each cast member as inherently embodying unique qualities that adds to "a predetermined biological role, to do what they were programmed to do, and conflict or emotion comes from a combination of these roles rather than any single one." [6] His selection of the cast had "more to do with their persona or essence" because each actor brought his or her personal history to each role.[7]

In *Cremaster 2,* for example, Barney cast Norman Mailer as Harry Houdini, a character that appears in several of Barney's films. Mailer authored *The Executioner's Song* (1979), the biography of murderer Gary Gilmore, and impetus for the *Cremaster 2,* itself. The book suggested that Houdini may have been the father of Gary's father-

---

[3] From Barney interview in Marion Cajori, *Art 21*, DVD, vol. Consumption, 2002.
[4] Charmagne Picard, "The Eternal Return: Matthew Barney: Zone of Potential," *Art Nexus* 2, no. 49 (August 2003): 101.
[5] Cajori, *Art 21*.
[6] Barney quoted in Francis McKee, "Matthew Barney Tap-Dancing Through the Pier," *Sight and Sound* 12, no. 1 (December 2003): 23.
[7] Ibid.

Frank Gilmore.[8] Barney described how his interpretation of *The Executioner's Song* led him develop a plot where Mailer, Gary Gilmore and Harry Houdini connect on a paternal level, making the choice to cast Mailer as Houdini obvious.[9] Mailer as Houdini signifies a paternal figure on two levels – Mailer as literally the author of the narrative and Houdini as symbolic of family lineage.

Restraint is a central theme in many of Barney's artworks, including *Cremaster 2* where Gilmore's existence unfolds as an act of resistance against the system of his creation. The artist's childhood fascination with Houdini accounts for the magician's repeated appearance as a central character in his artworks. Houdini-esque characters first appeared in his *Drawing Restraint* series 1-6 beginning in 1987.[10] For Barney, Houdini's escape acts represent "a self-imposed resistance" because of the very physical nature of his magic and illusion.[11] Just as Houdini restrains himself for performance, so too does Gilmore, who, portrayed as a prison-rodeo cowboy ties himself to a bull in a fateful ride to his death.

---

[8] According to Mailer's account based on interviews with Gilmore's mother. Gary's father was conceived during a chance encounter between his grandmother, Baby Fay La Foe, and Harry Houdini. See Norman Mailer, *The Executioner's Song*, 1st Vintage International ed. (New York: Vintage International, 1998), 324.

[9] Barney explained: "Mailer became paternal to Gilmore as the author of the book…Mailer looked an awful lot like Houdini when he was young, but the issue of likeness was not really the point at all in this. It had to with that paternal constellation, and with the legacy of a kind of physicality that both Mailer and Houdini possessed." In addition to being cast as one of the few characters in the Cremaster cycle with dialogue, Mailer also assisted with film's editing. The complete cycle of films includes only twelve lines of spoken text. See Matthew Barney and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *Matthew Barney*, Vol. 27, The Conversation Series (Köln: W. König, 2013), 21–22.

[10] *Drawing Restraint* is a series of artworks incorporating installation, performance and filmmaking that began in 1987 and continues today. It is in the first *Drawing Restraint* performance that "cremaster" from takes form in the shape of the harness worn by Barney. The act of restraint references Houdini's escape tricks.

[11] Barney and Obrist, *Matthew Barney*, 27.

Every narrative twist, filming technique, and visual component of *Cremaster 2* is laden with symbolism, which cannot be completely understood by viewing alone. The catalog that accompanied the original exhibition, Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*, and artist interviews, provide additional clarification, although Barney's discourse on the film's iconography is often as difficult to follow as its narrative. The artist's explanation of the relationship between the beehive imagery of the Mormon faith and the Utah Salt Flats is a good example of the convoluted nature of Barney's symbolic associations:

> The Mormons have great philosophies about the tribes and …Deseret is the Mormon basin in Utah, southern Idaho. Deseret describes the beehive - as they were migrating the symbol of the bee became important to them. Their only strength was the adhesive between the individuals as a group rather than the strength of the individual. Which interests me a lot in terms of the way that sculpture can be built by creating systems. The beehive's a useful model for me as well.[12]

Even iconography that on the surface appears straightforward is not. A brief analysis of *Cremaster* 2, for example, reveals how sometimes a saddle is not just a saddle.

Cremaster 2 commences with a long reverse zoom from an extreme close up of an upside down Western stock saddle adorned with tiny rectangle-shaped silver mirrors and suspended in a black void (fig. 6.1). Organ music grows louder and increasingly discordant as the shot widens to reveal the saddle in its entirety. The reverse zoom alludes to the temporal arrangement of the film that possesses neither a

---

[12] Jonathan Jones, "Lonesome Cowboys: Matthew Barney," Spring 2000, http://www.postmedia.net/.

definitive end nor beginning, but instead progresses forward in time to later move backward.[13]

Once the entire saddle comes into focus, the imagery shifts back and forth between shots of the Canadian icefields (fig. 6.2) and the Bonneville Salt Flats (fig. 6.3) before finally settling on a "séance" that includes psychic Baby Fay La Foe (Gary Gilmore's paternal grandmother and an amateur spiritualist who may have seduced magician Harry Houdini[14]) and Frank and Bessie Gilmore (Gary's parents) (fig. 6.4). Marking the origin of Gary Gilmore's life cycle, the next sequence graphically depicts an act of copulation between Frank and Bessie, accompanied by the presence of live bees. This act culminates in Frank's death, thus, mirroring the life cycle of a bee drone that dies after mating with the queen.

Art historian Nancy Spector, the author of the exhibition catalog, explains that through copulation, "Frank creates another drone: his son Gary. From the moment of inception, then, Gary's destiny is sealed."[15] Gilmore's conception is linked with the life cycle of a bee colony symbolic of Mormonism to suggest that his fate is pre-destined. Iconographic objects—a silver cowbell, part of a bull rider's rigging, and bee's wax, another visual connection to Mormonism—appear in the background, foretelling events that transpire later in the film.

The same abstracted motif associated with the bee colony continues in scenes of a music-recording booth where the beat of a black-leather clad rock drummer matches the hum of bees. In an adjacent room, a man dressed in black and covered by

---

[13] Nancy Spector, *Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2002), 31.
[14] Ibid., 32.
[15] Ibid., 36.

bees is seated on a couch yelling indecipherable lyrics into a telephone receiver (fig. 6.5).[16] This "Man in Black" symbolizes famous country musician Johnny Cash, who spoke to Gilmore on the telephone the night before the execution.[17] No stranger to prison, Cash made several albums featuring cowboy ballads and Gilmore's fascination with the singer may account, in part, for why Barney portrayed Gilmore with a cowboy persona.[18]

The next segment introduces Gary Gilmore, played by Barney disguised with facial prosthetics that transform him into a likeness of the convict. Gilmore struggles in a cocoon-like tunnel that links two Ford Mustangs parked on opposing sides of pumps at a Sinclair gas station and facing in opposite directions (fig. 6.6, 6.7 & 6.8). These vehicles serve as avatars for Gilmore and his girlfriend Nicole Baker, who was a central figure in Gilmore's life but was portrayed in *Cremaster 2* only in abstracted forms. Coincidently, both Gilmore and Baker both owned the same model Mustang, one white and one blue.[19] The white tunnel constructed out of material reminiscent of honeycomb runs between the gas pumps connecting the two cars. These frames are eerily illuminated stark white by overhead lamps contrasted against an empty

---

[16] The drummer is Dave Lombardo, formally a member of Barney's favorite heavy metal band Slayer. Steve Tucker, lead vocalist for death metal band Morbid Angel, plays the "Man in Black." Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 37. See Mailer, *The Executioner's Song*, 907 for details regarding the telephone conversation.

[18] Cash is also pictured as an outlaw or perhaps cowboy hero in the accouterment of 1950s film cowboys on the covers of the albums. Johnny Cash, *Sings Ballads of True West*, Audio CD (Sony, 1965); Johnny Cash, *Ride This Train*, Audio CD (SBME SPECIAL MKTS., 1960, 2002).

[19] Mailer, *The Executioner's Song*, 215-231. During this sequence of events, Baker's younger sister April accompanies Gilmore. Despite being questioned repeatedly about shooting the gas station attendant, Gilmore could not explain what exactly incited his actions. However, he and Nicole had recently split up and Gilmore alluded that he needed some type of release or he would kill Nicole.

blackness, much like the silver saddle in the film's opening sequence. A lone attendant services Gilmore's car and routinely looks in the windows attempting to view its occupant. The sequence ends with a grisly re-enactment of Gilmore's real life shooting of the attendant in the station's bathroom.

Next a montage of scenes shift the location from the gas station to the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City (fig. 6.9); which according to Barney is symbolic of the judgment for Gilmore's crime. Organ music and a choir of voices accompany shots depicting the interior of the structure. Shot from a bird's eye view, the first images of the tabernacle resemble the design of a rodeo arena – a partial oval with tiered seating surrounding an inner courtyard. Focus drifts to the organ and choir loft, flanked by two large American Flags, then to the light blue ceiling that marks the start of another montage series between the temple and the Bonneville Salt Flats. The blue of the ceiling mirrors that of the Great Salt Lake reflecting both the sky and distant mountains. Creating a visual connection between the two spaces, the same overhead perspective that introduces the tabernacle moves quickly over a vast, empty landscape to an arena made from piled white salt.

The horseshoe shaped ring, described by Barney as a grandstand and defined by a turquoise inner circle, incorporates four white beehive shaped finials paired at both ends (fig. 6.10). Men and women mounted on horseback, riding Western stock saddles and dressed in police uniforms and hats resembling those worn by Canadian Mounties, visually reference the recreational riding groups called "sheriff's posses" that often parade at rodeos and fairs (fig. 6.11 & 6.12). Two riders carry American flags, another two carry Canadian flags and 10 others bear flags containing Hebrew

171

lettering, representing each of the 10 lost tribes of Israel, and a monogram consisting of two interlocking G's for Gary Gilmore.[20] The riders subsequently discard their flags and engage in synchronized horseback choreography similar to that of the grand entry at rodeos. Meanwhile, Barney as Gilmore is led from his cell down a narrow corridor by other uniformed officers wearing cowboy hats and a white-haired man in a suit (fig. 6.13).[21]

Gilmore ceremoniously receives an engraved silver belt buckle from an individual who may symbolize the priest who performed the last rites at the execution (fig. 6.14). Two interlocking "G"s, resembling the monogram on the flags carried by the riders in the arena, and the dates 1893—the Columbian World's Fair—and 1977—the year of Gilmore's execution—adorn the buckle which completes Gilmore's rodeo attire. The gesture also implies that he is a top hand and/or that has already won the event in which he participates.[22] Perhaps the buckle also serves as Gilmore's ticket to heaven by making the atonement implicit in the bull riding sequence.

---

[20] The tribes are significant to Mormon doctrine and Barney makes reference to them again with a ring of bison. In exhibition catalogue presented by the Walker Art Center each chapter begins with a plate of each tribe's flag titled in English. Matthew Barney and Richard Flood, *Cremaster 2*, (Minneapolis: New York: Walker Art Center ; Distributed Art Publishers, 1999), [3, 15, 25, 31, 37, 53, 73, 87, 95, 101].

[21] A number of witnesses to Gilmore's execution wore cowboy hats, in particular Ernie Wright, Director of the Utah board of corrections. Mailer described him as "gallivanting with his big white cowboy hat, looking like a Texas bureaucrat." See Mailer, *The Executioner's Song*, 981.

[22] This belt buckle connects to the narrative of *The Executioner's Song*. Larry Schiller was the key figure instrumental in securing the interviews with Gilmore that Mailer used to write the text. While a presenting a guest lecture on his involvement with Gilmore, a student questioned Schiller, "can you please tell me why you're wearing a Gary Gilmore belt?" Schiller then realized he was wearing a Gucci belt buckle and had to explain that the interlocking G's were nothing more than a brand symbol. It is not likely by coincidence that Barney appropriated that symbol for *Cremaster 2*. The same design appears on the flags in the film. In rodeo, belt buckles

Portrayed as a "dead man walking," Gilmore is dressed in a blue and white-striped prison jumpsuit with Western-style pockets and a white cowboy hat. He carries a bull rope in his gloved right hand and leather chaps hang over his right shoulder. Attached to the bull rope is the engraved silver bell first introduced in the opening séance scene. This object, combined with prison walls that resemble the interior of a beehive, creates a visual connection to the cyclic nature of life while maintaining a symbolic link to Mormonism.

Meanwhile, three mounted officers have, with difficulty, wrangled a roped Brahma bull toward the arena (fig. 6.15), moving to the kind of snare drum-punctuated background music that Western movies and television shows often used to elevate the tension of a scene. As Gilmore and his entourage continue to walk down the narrow hallway, the bull is filmed moving through an alley comprised of white honeycomb walls. This progression also alludes to the vaginal passage, where Gilmore and the bull, as his vehicle, advance to the next life cycle. The configuration of the bucking chute and arena evident in the aerial shots supports the idea that the arena is a womb and the elongated entrance, a vaginal passage. Whether intentional on Barney' part or not, the selection of a Brahma bull also references Hindu reincarnation beliefs where the sacred cow is the avatar for Brahma, the creator of life.[23] According to Gilmore's letters and interviews, he did believe that he would find atonement and some type of

---

are often awarded to the winner in lieu of a trophy. See Mailer, *The Executioner's Song*, 876.

[23] Brahman/Brahma does appear in the exhibition glossary, however, the entry only addresses how the breed found its way to the United States and its general characteristics. See Neville Wakefield, "The Cremaster Glossary," in *Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2002), 96.

afterlife through execution.[24] During this sequence, a solo horseman rides across the

Salt Flats (fig. 6.16). The lone rider evokes images of the cowboy hero riding into the

sunset and perhaps serves as a precursor for Gilmore's approaching spiritual journey.

Next, in the same manner as a rodeo rider, Gilmore mounts the bull in a chute

(fig.6.17), grips the rigging handle and adds rosin to the bull rope before wrapping it

around his gloved hand, effectively strapping himself to the animal. Just before the

chute gate, which is adorned with Gary Gilmore's double "G" monogram opens,

Gilmore nods his head cowboy-like and announces, "let's do it;" a significant

proclamation on two levels. First, the statement is one of the relatively few spoken

lines in the entire *Cremaster* cycle. Second, these were among the last words spoken

by Gilmore at his execution.[25] A defining moment for Gilmore both in life and in

Cremaster 2, this act exhibits a stoicism characteristic of the cowboy hero, who

chooses to die with dignity or in other words, with his boots on. Two mounted officers

and 2 medics witness the event.[26]

As the scene progresses, Gilmore skillfully rides the bull for approximately 50

seconds (fig. 6.18), until it stops bucking and kneels in the center of the arena. As the

bull resigns, so does Gilmore, whose bowed posture mirrors that of the bull. The

waving of an American and a Canadian flag signal a shift in geography from Utah to

the Canadian Rockies settling on a scene of Houdini being locked in a wax box, his

---

[24] Mailer, *The Executioner's Song*, 833.
[25] Ibid., 984. "Let's do it" was Gilmore's response to the warden; however, his final words were in Latin said to Father Meersman who performed the last rites, "Dominus vobiscum," the Lord be with you.
[26] Although in reality, Gilmore was wearing tennis shoes when shot. Also, note all the officers who appear in scenes with the bull wear cowboy hats. This may be to visually link to prison rodeos as well as to the witnesses at the Gilmore's execution.

head is bowed in resignation, marking the moment when he and Gilmore's pre-destined fates collide. Back in the arena, two mounted officers, lower an engraved silver pole to the ground in front of the bull (fig. 6.19 & 6.20). They have witnessed the execution and symbolically record the exact time of Gilmore's death.[27] Next, a protective ring of bison magically appear facing outward from the prone figures encircles Gilmore and the bull (fig. 6.21). According to Barney's interpretation of Mormonism, the ring of bison symbolizes the ten lost tribes of Israel and Gilmore's lifeless body represents salvation.[28]

Embracing the Mormon doctrine of Blood Atonement as payment for his crime, Gilmore *chose* death by firing squad as his method of execution. By a self-willed spilling of his own blood, Gilmore believed he would find redemption.[29] Just as Houdini escaped from self-created confinement, for Gilmore his execution "was the ultimate great escape."[30]

From the bison the camera cuts to images of a woman's sidesaddle covered with tiny gold-hexagon shaped mirrors suspended upside down in the center of circular room adorned with golden walls embossed with hexagons and bees.[31] The camera then pans in a counter clockwise direction creating a montage of the lake vista

---

[27] Spector, *Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle*, 40.
[28] Despite Gilmore's sin "as a Mormon murderer of Mormons," the possibility for atonement was still achievable with adequate sacrifice. According to the doctrine, "There are sins that can be atoned for by an offering on an alter…and there are sins that the blood of a lamb, or a calf, or of a turtle dove, cannot remit. They must be atoned for by the blood of a man." See Jones, "Lonesome Cowboys: Matthew Barney."
[29] Mailer, *The Executioner's Song*, 953.
[30] Flood, *Cremaster 2*, [2].
[31] Hexagons reference a honeycomb created by interlocking hexagon shaped cells.

and the interior room before finally focusing on a couple dressed in boots and jeans and cowboy hats, dancing a two-step in a counter-clockwise direction to a country and western melody (fig. 6.22). Zooming in and out following the rhythm of the music and the steps of the dancers, the *mise en scène* reflects the path of the film's narrative revealing Gilmore's life to be a "chronological two-step—a movement forward only to go back (and vice versa) in a perpetual rhythm that embodies the looping chronology of the story, which moves forward in order to revert backward, like the course of slowly retreating glacier fields."[32] The dancers' pace hastens as the voice of folksinger Patty Griffin fades in and out. She sings a song similar to the one that accompanied the episode at the Sinclair gas station and concluded just prior to the fatal shooting. The lyrics of both songs are derived from poems penned by Nicole Baker and mailed to Gilmore while he was imprisoned awaiting execution.[33]

Baker's abstracted presence marks a transition from the Utah Salt Flats to the Canadian Rockies and the two-step returns Gilmore to "the space of his alleged grandfather."[34] In a strange exhibition hall where objects from modern industry are interspersed with relics of the past, Houdini escapes from the bee's wax box and silently converses with Baby Fay (fig. 6.23). Barney's stages his interpretation of the 1893 Columbian World's Fair at the Columbia Icefield Glacier. The location marks the geographical beginning of the Rocky Mountains that spread south to the

---

[32] Spector, *Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle*, 83. Art historian Arthur C. Danto interpreted the dance sequence differently than Spector suggesting the scene is a fantasized representation of Gilmore's afterlife. See Arthur C. Danto, "Matthew Barney's Cremaster Cycle," in *Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap Between Art and Life*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2005), 238.

[33] Spector, *Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle, 83*.

[34] "Cremaster 2," accessed October 15, 2014, http://www.cremaster.net /crem2.htm.

Bonneville Salt Flats and links Gilmore to his kinsman Houdini. Richard Flood

explains, "It is not an accident that places Fay and Houdini in the fertile vastness of

the glaciers and Gary in the fragile ecology of a dead lake."[35] This final scene

concludes the narrative with a primordial beginning. As a means of retracing

Gilmore's paternal heritage, the narrative arcs backward from conception to death to

conception. Barney completes the film with a full cycle as the closing scenes return to

an image of the golden-sidesaddle suspended in empty space, signaling the end of this

particular cycle (fig.6.24). The shape of the saddle resembles that of an anatomic

model of the cremaster muscle, a form that first appeared in *Drawing Restraint* in

1987 as the harness worn by Barney. The gendering of the saddles, male at the

beginning of the film and female at the end, signal a sexual difference corresponding,

if only abstractly, to Barney's visualization of the fetal development phase of sexual

division.

  In addition to the narrative and sculptural symbolism, landscape and

geographic locations are also key signifiers, not only in *Cremaster 2* but also other

films within the cycle. "Geography was the spur—a longitudinal arc stretching from

west to east, with five points of entry, each one rich in autobiographical meaning," [36]

Barney explained that each location depicted in the cycle relates to the artist on some

level. In high school he played football at Bronco stadium at the University of Idaho

(*Cremaster 1)*; in junior high he accompanied his father on a five day bike tour of the

Canadian Rockies and ice fields (*Cremaster 2)*; he lives in Manhattan (*Cremaster 3)*;

his ancestry links to Ireland (*Cremaster 4*); and Budapest (*Cremaster 5)* is the

---

[35] Flood, *Cremaster 2,* [2].
[36] Tomkins, *Lives of the Artists*, 127.

birthplace of Harry Houdini, Barney's alter ego in the films.[37]

In 2000 Barney told English journalist Jonathan Jones, *Cremaster 2* was "about landscape."[38] The film's geographical location in the West is one aspect that permits it to be read as a Western. The Utah Salt Flats that serve as the backdrop for the execution scene, for example, echo the desolate landscape of Monument Valley, a remote location whose natural landforms enticed Western filmmakers to situate many films there. In fact, Barney's long shots of the Salt Flats mirror those that director John Ford included in such Westerns as *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Searchers* (1956). Barney situates *Cremaster 2* within the wide-open landscape of Western myth representing the untamed frontier. Film critic Thomas Schatz points out that "the Western depicts a world of precarious balance in which the forces of civilization and savagery are locking in a struggle for supremacy."[39] Particularly in films by John Ford, characters in Westerns:

> flesh out values and contradictions basic to contemporary human existence…Often they are on the periphery of the community and somehow at odds with its value system. Perhaps the most significant conflict in the Western is the community's demand for order through cooperation and compromise versus the physical environment's demand for rugged individualism coupled with a survival-of-the-fittest mentality.[40]

In *Cremaster 2,* Barney portrays Gilmore as a man on the fringes of society and "at odds with its value system."[41] In the scene at the gas station, for example, Gilmore struggles to escape the confines of the two vehicles, possible metaphors for societal

---

[37] Ibid., 127–128.

[38] Jones, "Lonesome Cowboys: Matthew Barney."

[39] Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 47.

[40] Ibid., 50.

[41] Ibid., 47.

restraints and a romantic relationship gone bad. In the end, he rebels by killing the service attendant who stands in as the purveyor of societal values and who attempts to assert them by trying to see who is occupying the vehicles.[42] Later, the scene of the convict riding the bull depicts the struggle of man to overcome nature, but in the end both Gilmore and the bull both ride to the death. The bull represents Gilmore's struggle with societal norms. In Barney's scenario, neither prevails.

In both the gas station and bull riding scenarios Barney emphasizes dichotomies of good versus evil, wild versus tame, and male versus female by positioning his sculptural constructions – grandstand and car tunnel – amid empty Utah vistas. Such dichotomies are central to Western cinema, where the cowboy hero is constantly battling with nature and/or an evil adversary. For Barney, the dichotomy signifies as resistance defined by Gilmore's symbolic battles against societal constraints, which in the film, are often presented as female. For example, the tunnel between cars connotes womb-like confinement. Later, the prison hallway and bucking chute act similarly as a birth canal. Gilmore resists his predestined path during his encounters with these sculptural forms. Such resistance draws attention to the opposition between man and nature found in the landscapes of Western cinema.

Nancy Spector, curator of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, argues that a central theme in all the *Cremaster* films is passage and she cites film theorist Teresa De Lauretis's contention that a hero who undertakes a mythical passage is stereotypically male:

The picture of the world produced in mythical thought since the very

---

[42] Max Jenson, had just completed service as a Mormon missionary and was supporting a young wife and child. See Mailer, *The Executioner's Song*, 207–216.

179

beginning of culture would rest, first and foremost on what we call biology…
the fundamental opposition between boundary and passage; and if passage may
be in either direction, from inside to outside or vice versa, from life to death or
vice versa, nonetheless all these terms are predicated on the single figure of the
hero who crosses the boundary and penetrates the other space. In doing so the
hero, the mythical subject, is constructed as human being and as male; he is the
active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of
differences.[43]

Since Gilmore is the figure that embarks on the passage of life in *Cremaster 2*, he

then, can be identified as the hero. Not only is the journey marked by passage of time

afforded by the time-based film format, but also Gilmore literally passes through the

car tunnel as well as a hallway on route to execution. Gilmore's donning of western-

style garb (hat, prison shirt with Western pockets and trophy buckle) permits his

image to signify as the cowboy hero. In the typical Western, the cowboy hero is the

bearer of salvation, eliminating evils that plague society. In *Cremaster 2,* Gilmore also

arrives at salvation, not for the betterment of others lives, but a personal redemption.

His death also eradicates evil, permitting Gilmore to be hero and villain concurrently.

Gilmore is not unlike "The Man with No Name" from *The Good, the Bad and the*

Ugly (1966), a character whose description by film historian William McClain sounds

a lot like Gilmore: a man who "'stood' for nothing—his victories and defeats were

purely personal…he was simply not a traditional Western hero, not even a true

antihero as critics understood them; he was just a man with a talent for killing, and the

opportunity to do so."[44] In the grand scheme of the *Cremaster* cycle where the

characters embark on mythical journey lacking any control over their circumstances,

---

[43] Spector, *Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle*, 79.
[44] William McClain, "Western, Go Home! Sergio Leone and the 'Death of the Western' in American Film Criticism," *Journal of Film and Video* 62, no. 1–2 (April 2010): 62.

Gilmore only needed to follow the trajectory predestined by his biological existence. Therefore, he exhibited no free will or evident motive for his actions.

Coupled with geography, *Cremaster 2* features iconography in a way that questions formulaic portrayals of such imagery in Western cinema. For example, Gilmore wears a white hat, a symbol that stereotypically designates the "good guy," suggesting that Barney perceives Gilmore as the film's hero by portraying him as a cowboy. In fact, one of the women who transcribed taped interviews with Gilmore described his voice as "sounding like a cowboy."[45] Consequently, Gilmore's mindset, physical characteristics and the opinions of him by others, suggest why Barney may have chosen to cast Gilmore in the guise of a cowboy. Yet, it is difficult to reconcile what Gilmore as cowboy hero represents because he is a murderer, because there is no justification for the violence Gilmore inflicts on others, nor did his victims antagonize him.

In the typical Western, the cowboy hero is the harbinger of salvation, eliminating evils that plague society. Gilmore's salvation, however, is for himself not for others, which is the cowboy hero's credo. Barney envisioned the death scenes as Gilmore's attempt at salvation obtained through the Mormon concept of "blood atonement, the spilling of the sinner's blood on the earth."[46] Gilmore's blood was literally spilt when he was executed via firing squad. However, it remains unclear how this translates to the bull-riding scene where the spilling of blood is absent.

Although none of Barney's work is literal, a connection does exist between the sport of rodeo and prison inmates. The catalog for the *Cremaster* exhibition at the

---

[45] Mailer, *The Executioner's Song*, 1047.
[46] Spector, *Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle*, 36.

Guggenheim Museum in 2003 includes a glossary of terms associated with images from all of the cycles. "Prison rodeo" is referenced in connection to the Texas State Prison in Huntsville, where such events were held every Sunday in October between1931 and 1986.[47]

In 2000, Barney explained that the bull ride was intended to represent "Gilmore as a paternal reflection of himself."[48] For Barney, all of the film's characters are a reflection of one another and he perceived the ride as "an elegant way to solve that problem in the way that the piece deals with reflection."[49] Barney's "problem" was the portrayal of Gilmore's internal struggle.

It is possible that the artist connected bull riding with prison executions because, at one time, both events took place in Huntsville, and also at prisons in Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Yet, there may be more to it. Just as Barney's portrayal has Gilmore strapped to a bull, so too was Gilmore strapped to a chair for his execution. The fact that Gilmore, ties himself to the beast in the *Cremaster 2* sequence, perhaps serves as a metaphor for his method of execution.

The locale of the execution scene situates the narrative's central conflict of life and death within a barren landscape often associated with Western films, simultaneously melding the natural world with a synthetic one. Charmagne Picard explains that, "Barney's conceptualization of space allows these patterns and locations to become enclosed systems and permits him to think of these spaces as formally

---

[47] Wakefield, "The Cremaster Glossary," in Spector, *Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle* , 109; and "Texas Prison Museum," accessed November 29, 2012, http://www.txprisonmuseum.org/articles/rodeo_history.html.
[48] Jones, "Lonesome Cowboys: Matthew Barney."
[49] Ibid.

constructed objects."[50] The rodeo arena that Barney manufactures from salt

exemplifies this concept of space as a formally constructed object in lieu of a natural

formation. Through this construct, the artist suggests that the landscape of Western

film is an artificial environment.

For Barney, sculptures are among the most significant aspects of his films,

"I'm an object maker, that's what I am interested in," he said during an interview in

2013, "That goes for my interests in performance. Performance for me has always

been about the object, it's never been about theater…It was about creating a story, out

of which I could make narrative sculpture."[51] According to Barney, the dense, three-

dimensional tale that he constructed in *Cremaster 2* moves "slowly and requires that

one move around it to understand it, and to visit it repeatedly."[52] Barney's discussions

of the film reinforce the idea that the sculptures that appear were not conceived as

separate objects, "I think that from the beginning, the *Cremaster* series was trying to

take on a cinematic language that I had not dealt with before," he explained. "I wanted

to see how this sculptural project could align itself with cinematic form, and still come

out as a sculptural project."[53]

That Barney viewed the landscape as sculpture throughout the *Cremaster*

series is evident in a 2002 interview while working on the project:

> It is possible to describe a sculptural form starting with the glacier field in the
> Canadian Rockies, and on the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah. This cleft in the
> landscape was left behind by one massive glacier. This is the stadium or opera

---

[50] Picard, "The Eternal Return: Matthew Barney: Zone of Potential," 103.
[51] Barney and Obrist, *Matthew Barney*, 27.
[52] Barney quoted in Spector, *Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle*, 76.
[53] Barney and Obrist, *Matthew Barney*, 27.

house which contains the *Cremaster 2* narrative, just as the island was to *Cremaster 4*, and the bridge and bathhouse were to *Cremaster 5*.[54]

Barney's manipulation of the Salt Flats into a sculptural grandstand also alludes to Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), located on the northern edge of the Great Salt Lake. The connection to *Spiral Jetty* further reinforces the conflict between manmade forms and the natural landscape, perhaps demonstrating that the conquering of one may lead to the demise of the other. The site or place specificity key to Barney's concept of landscape as sculpture, further connects to the environmental works by Smithson and others as the artist described:

> I think that the *Cremaster* ambition felt aligned with the earthwork ambition: to go out into the landscape and make a work that would integrate the entire landscape. In my case it was narrative, it was about going to a place and pulling the local mythologies into this form that would take place in that place, so the *Cremaster* chapters were place-specific works maybe more than they were site-specific. An the notion of the non-site, I think, is very relevant for the way I define the sculpture that come out of the *Cremaster* narratives; they are narrative sculpture that have been drawn out of that story that was place-specific. So they are similar to Smithson's displaced objects that way.[55]

Barney interjects the narrative of Gary Gilmore as cowboy into the Bonneville Salt Flats. While Gilmore's execution did not take place at the Salt Flats, the story of the murder's life and that of Mormon mythology have direct connections to the region. The arid, wide-open space permits Barney to not only link to Western cinema and cowboys but also to Mormon mythology.

Barney's staging of Gilmore's execution on the Salt Flats also links to the historic associations of the Western frontier's expansive landscape as sublime, signifying as God's country. Film historians Diane M. Borden and Eric P. Essman also

---

[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid., 28.

contend that in Westerns films the landscape "represents potentiality and freedom on the one hand, borders and boundaries on the other."[56] Both ideal and transcendental, the land also divides the domestic from the wild.[57] Barney exaggerates such divisions by scarring the pristine landscape with a manmade structure. In *Cremaster 2*, the arena as womb plays a female role and represents the domestic sphere. It confines Gilmore, preventing him from freely entering into the wild expanses of the landscape on one hand, but also marking the place where he atones for his sins and transcends to heaven on the other. Drawing from an art historical tradition of romanticizing the Western landscape, Barney adapts Western cinematic conventions to create a unique setting that visually mythologizes the West.[58]

In addition to the centrality of landscape as sculpture in *Cremaster 2*, cultural objects of all kinds are integral to the film's aesthetic and help it to signify as a "western." This is especially true of the rodeo arena cast of salt, the his and hers saddles and even the attitude of Gilmore's body, slumped in death aboard a prostrate bull, mimicking the pose of the Indian warrior in James Earle Frasier's iconic sculpture *The End of the Trail*.[59] Other, more generic sculptural objects, such as the tunnel connecting two cars in the gas station scene, help dictate the path of the film's narrative as well.

Robert Storr, former senior curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of

---

[56] Diane M. Borden and Eric P. Essman, "Manifest Landscape/Latent Ideology: Afterimages of Empire in the Western and 'Post-Western' Film," *California History* 79, no. 1 (2000): 36.

[57] Ibid., 37.

[58] Ibid., 36.

[59] James Earle Fraser, *The End of the Trail*, plaster, 1893, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, http://www.nationalcowboymuseum.org /education/lesson-plans/Fraser/Fraser.aspx.

Modern Art in New York, however, expressed reservations regarding the sculptural quality of Barney's work, "'The sculptures are less compelling than they ought to be,'" he told an interviewer. "'Stage props or film props have to be read at a distance, and the camera does something to make them fascinating, horrible, and so on, but, when you see his objects in an exhibition, they lose some of their impact. Matthew's work rarely becomes an independently fascinating object.'"[60] Storr suggests that when placed within the larger contexts of the films, the sculptures' signification is exaggerated. To be sure, encountering the saddles, cowbell and other sculptures in a gallery does not embody the same aura as when they are viewed in the films. Somehow meaning is diminished once the objects are removed from the cinematic context, even if the film is screening nearby or in the same room as where the sculptures occupy space within a gallery.

In *Cremaster 2: The Drones' Exposition* installation at the Walker Art Center in 1999, photographs of the Utah Salt Flats and the Columbia Icefield Glacier hang alongside flags that appeared in the rodeo precession. Objects from the film are arranged to create a sculpture titled *slug* (fig. 6.25).[61] The sidesaddle hangs suspended upside-down from the ceiling on a single shaft. The embossed silver pole, used in the film to mark Gilmore's time of death, lays nearby, alongside a mass resembling a glacier.[62] However, the links to Western cinema, particularly the vastness of the landscape, are muted in this gallery setting. It is the combination of these objects within an iconic Western landscape that make them signify as part of Barney's

---

[60] Storr quoted in Tomkins, *Lives of the Artists*, 137.
[61] "Cremaster 2," http://www.cremaster.net/crem2.htm.
[62] An object resembling incense burner lays on its side on the glacial mass is perhaps symbolic of the purification.

Western narrative.

The cinematic quality of *Cremaster 2* also marks a change in spectatorship regarding the relationship between the viewer and artwork. For example, a static image, like a painting or a sculpture, will remain the same regardless of how long a viewer examines it. However, for time-based artworks in gallery settings, the viewer can only assert control of the viewing experience by leaving the space.[63] In the film, Barney manipulates and controls not only how the sculptural elements are viewed, but also their spatial relationships to the actors and the duration that the spectator can observe each sculptural form. Barney simulates the long panning shots of landscape that appear in many Westerns such as the opening sequences of *How the West Was Won* (1963) making the sculptural objects resonate as part of the genre. He reinforces this connection by also providing a birds-eye view to preview scenes of action similar to how such sequences are portrayed in stereotypical Westerns.

Barney's artistic control may explain why the sculptural objects tend to lose their visual impact when viewed in a static form removed from the context of the film's narrative. As installations, the sculptures merely "inform one's meaning of the film," in manner similar to how photographs of the films published in books function.[64] No longer intertwined within the stereotypical Western vistas and actors on horseback, the sculptures fail to signify in relation to the Western genre.

Nonetheless, it is the sculptural components combined with cinematic genres that permit the *Cremaster* cycle to exist as something more than film. In part, Barney's

---

[63] Stuart Comer and Christopher Eamon, *Film and Video Art* (London: Tate Pub., 2009), 119.

[64] Barney and Obrist, *Matthew Barney*, 27, 30.

fame also attributes to how the films signify. When applying the auteur theory of film historian Alexander Astruc, Barney's films become a "vehicle of thought" by which he can construct "tangible allusions" through a combination of sculpture, *mise en scène* and narrative.[65] Barney encompasses the role of not just the screenwriter, director, but also that of the film star.[66] Barney acquired the status of an "art star" in part because his real-life persona has become integrated with the films he produces. Charmagne Picard suggests, "An undeniable mythology has also developed around Barney himself. With a history as a football player, pre-med student, Yale graduate, male fashion model, and now contemporary art star, it seems that Barney has the Midas touch."[67] Despite Barney's reclusive nature regarding his private life, his public persona has somehow merged with his cinematic/artistic portrayals. Additionally, critic M. Sladen describes Barney's public persona and stardom: "He is a true star and like all true stars he gives very little away -- there is an absence at the centre which allows others to project their fantasies upon him but which resists actual

---

[65] Alexandre Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Stylo," in *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Reading*, ed. Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011), 353. In 1948, Alexander Astruc argued that cinema was a "new means of expression analogous to painting or the novel." Francois Truffaut writing in *Cahiers du cinema* asserted that "new film would resemble the person who made it, not so much through autobiographical content but rather through the style, which impregnates the films with the personality of its director." See Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 83.

[66] Calvin Tomkins claims, "Barney soon gained a following as new kind of auteur, one who uses autobiographical material, landscape, biology, architecture, dramatic actions, private fantasies, classical myths, elaborate costumes, prosthetic devices, and transforming makeup to create worlds that are unlike any you'll see at the multiplex." See Tomkins, *Lives of the Artists*, 116.

[67] Picard, "The Eternal Return: Matthew Barney: Zone of Potential," 101.

assimilation."[68] This description mirrors that of Hollywood films stars and the connection might be explained by Barney's constant inclusion as the central character of his films. In fact, for all the films in the *Cremaster* cycle, Barney plays the main character of each which in most cases also accentuates his body.[69]

Barney's recurrent roles in his performances share some commonality with John Wayne's celebrity status in Western cinema. The characters that Wayne portrayed allowed his image to characterize the actor as something more than just a Hollywood star as audiences became more attracted to the man himself than to the fictional characters he portrayed. As historian Joy S. Kasson proposes, "Wayne convinced audiences that, whatever the narrative he engaged in, he himself was the spectacle they had come to see."[70] Although the extent of Barney's celebrity pales compared to that of John Wayne, the analogy is still appropriate –Barney's celebrity is often what attracts viewers to his work. The artist's persona also makes it easier for audiences to perceive him as the cowboy hero, just as they did Wayne. And whatever the role, Barney, like Wayne, always plays the protagonist.

Barney uses his body as an object of emphasis similar to performance artists such as Chris Burden whose body was the focus of many of his influential performances.[71] His performance relies on his physical prowess thus permitting his

---

[68] M. Sladen, "Unspeakably Beautiful: The Fantasy World of Matthew Barney," *Art Monthly - London*, no. 217 (1998): 1–6.

[69] Richard Dyer, "From Stars," in *Critical Visions in Film Theory : Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011), 403.

[70] Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular*, 267.

[71] *Shoot*, 1971, where a friend shot Burden in the arm is of most famous performances. However, the artist's introduced concepts that promoted the body as

body to become the central component of the work. Barney's manipulation of his body, by both physical exertion and/or manipulation via prosthetic disguises and costumes, as in *Cremaster 2*, contributes importantly to the thematic narrative. Film historians Alexandra Keller and Frazer Ward contend that Barney's body is more "more akin to the iconic status of the movie star's onscreen body—that is, absorbed into a mythologizing system of representation… performance here is not so much what the body does and how it is mediated but what the body can do so that it can be (pleasingly) mediatized."[72]

Barney is always in control of his body, even in the most athletic scenes in *Cremaster 2,* riding the bull. The sequence is carefully choreographed so that the bull eventually gives up the fight and kneels at the arena's center; Barney's body slumped atop him. The artist's athletic build, Western attire and riding style mimic those of seasoned bull riders and make the scene more convincing, thereby making it easier for the Barney as Gilmore to signify as a cowboy hero.[73] Placing emphasis on the artist's body is similar to how the Western hero's physical prowess and stature define him as a stereotypical type.

Barney definitely has developed a subgenre, perhaps not the blockbuster genre of Hollywood, but the kind of art exhibition blockbuster that has become quite

---

medium. For a brief overview of Burden's work see Peter Schjeldahl, "Performance," *The New Yorker*, May 7, 2007, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/05/14/performance-2.

[72] Alexandra Keller and Frazer Ward, "Matthew Barney and the Paradox of the Neo-Avant-Garde Blockbuster," *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 2 (2006): 3–16.

[73] Similarly, John Wayne made a more convincing cowboy because he learned the tricks of the trade from stuntman Yakima Canutt, a world champion rodeo cowboy. Canutt taught him to slouch in the saddle, throw a lariat, and, presumably, the cowboy walk. See James T. Campbell, "'Print the Legend': John Wayne and Postwar American Culture.," *Reviews in American History* 28, no. 3 (September 2000): 466.

prevalent in museums. However, the concept remains the same, much like the special

effect laden movies, Barney's films create a spectacle to attract large audiences. The

paradigm with the *Cremaster* cycle is Barney's ability to obfuscate the concept of a

blockbuster to make it strange, yet alluring, which permits its possible categorization

as art cinema.[74] Barney-viewed his films as projects that "could live inside a known

story and still remain abstract. [The sculptures are] not so different from the way

Cremaster pieces align themselves with a cinematic genre and use the genre to

transform into something else."[75] Interestingly, Barney melds the aspects of art cinema

with familiar genres. This melding of genres is what allows *Cremaster 2* to be read as

a Western, horror film and art performance simultaneously.

In *Cremaster 2* Barney subtly mixes the Gothic and horror genres with art

---

[74] See Timothy Bordwell, "The Art Cinema as A Mode of Film Practice," in *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Reading* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011), 561-62 . Bordwell's theories offer a means for understanding Barney's films in regards to art cinema. Bordwell contends that art cinema's narrative evolve around two principles: realism and authorial expressivity. Realism is defined by the use of real locations. In the case of *Cremaster 2*, the Utah salt flats as well as other physical locations in the film establish a sense of realism. Barney's characters are indeed psychologically complex, another "realistic" feature described by Bordwell, however, Barney takes that complexity to an extreme. Furthermore, the *Cremaster* cycle elicits a subjective response from the viewers by the way in which the narrative is organized. Bordwell explains that "art cinema is less concerned with action than reaction; it is a cinema of psychological effects in search of their causes." Due the obtuse structure of the films, a subjective response based on the psychological effect of the imagery is the only way in which a viewer can react. Bordwell's viewpoints on the importance of the author in that that "the author becomes a formal component, the overarching intelligence organizing the film for our comprehension" most aptly relates to Barney. However, I would argue that in the case of Barney, comprehension for the viewer is trumped in favor of personal expression, a feature that Bordwell contends is significant: "the author is the textual force "who" communicates (what is the film *saying*?) and "who" expresses (what is the artist's *personal vision*?). Lacking identifiable stars and familiar genres, that art cinema uses a concept of authorship to unify the text."

[75] Barney and Obrist, *Matthew Barney*, 12.

cinema and Westerns in an amalgamation that, like his other films, share a common

reworking of linear narratives, blurring the line between right and wrong. By centering

on death and exploring deviance and the macabre erotic, Barney's psychologically

charged film matches genre theorist Gilda Williams's definition of Gothic and adheres

to Henry Jenkins's belief that "horror generates its own aesthetic discourse,

positioning itself in opposition to the ideological and aesthetic norms of dominant

cinema."[76]

In *Cremaster 2*, Barney deliberately confuses the idea of good and bad by

casting Gilmore, a murderer, in the role of the cowboy hero. Barney recalls the

conventions of Western cinema as a means of establishing the mythic journey of the

hero and draws on the audience's pre-conceived notions of how the story will end.[77] In

the classic Western, the cowboy hero vanquishes evil to set all right with world.

Killing the villain is always a justifiable act approved by society. Gilmore's actions,

however, defy explanation and the grotesque portrayal of the gas station attendant's

death is more in line with horror/Gothic genre than a traditional Western.

In Barney's *Cremaster 2*, the traditional Western morphs into a much different

form that functions as performance art as well as a multi-discursive space that speaks

to differing groups who simultaneously recognize conventions of Western, Gothic and

---

[76] Gilda Williams, *The Gothic*: *Documents of Contemporary Art*. (London : Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007) 4; and Henry Jenkins, "Monstrous Beauty and Mutant Aesthetics: Rethinking Matthew Barney's Relation to the Horror Genre," in *The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 47.

[77] Thomas Schatz, "Film Genre and the Genre Film," in *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Reading* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011), 460; and Dyer Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic/Pragmatic Approach to Genre," in *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Reading* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011), 489.

horror films. However, the number of viewers who "speak" Barney's genre are few. In fact, Barney conceded that the audience is unlikely to understand the film's narrative as he conceived it. "I wouldn't expect them [the films] to function that didactically," he conceded. "They don't, I know they don't."[78] While the books, photographs, sculpture and film all fit together in a single narrative for the artist, viewers are not likely to make the same seamless connections as it impossible to interpret the synthesis of media forms in their entirety.

Nonetheless, because Barney appropriated from a number of genres and "could be understood in different ways by different audiences," the *Cremaster* films connect to a diverse viewership.[79] "What operates as an abstract notion for one audience," he pointed out, "can function as a more charged cultural icon for another. I want both reading to be simultaneously possible, but I am more concerned with preserving the former because that quality is much more elusive and fragile."[80] Although Barney provides a range of signs, he leaves it to the audience to determine how each signifies. The film's obtuse nature notwithstanding Barney's unique aesthetic creates striking imagery that entices audiences into a visually challenging world that reworks the idea of Western film and the cowboy hero. In *Cremaster 2*, Barney uses the viewer's comfortable familiarity with the Western and Gothic horror genres to increase the sense of dislocation. In the same fashion that the saddles hang suspended, Barney has turned the Western upside-down.

---

[78] Jones, "Lonesome Cowboys: Matthew Barney."
[79] Barney quoted in Jenkins, "Monstrous Beauty and Mutant Aesthetics: Rethinking Matthew Barney's Relation to the Horror Genre," 42.
[80] Ibid.

Figure 6.1
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Opening scene. Matthew Barney and Richard
Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [127-28].

Figure 6.2
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Canadian Icefields, Matthew Barney and Richard
Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [92].

194

Figure 6.3
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Bonneville Salt Flats. Matthew Barney and Richard Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [81].

Figure 6.4
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Séance. Matthew Barney and Richard Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [24].

Figure 6.5
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Man in Black. Matthew Barney and Richard
Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [36].

Figure 6.6
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Gilmore in car, Matthew Barney and Richard
Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [44].

Figure 6.7
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Sinclair Gas Station, Matthew Barney and
Richard Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [39].
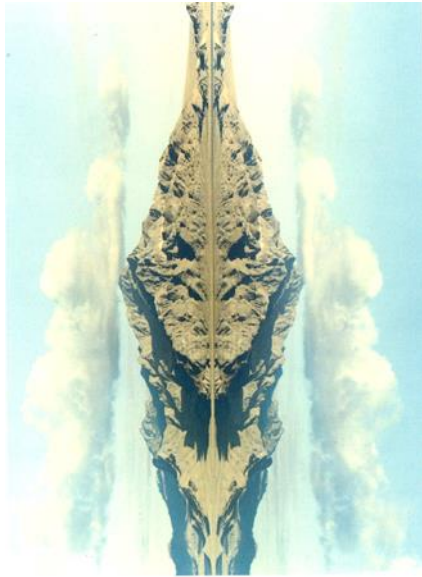

Figure 6.8
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Ford Mustangs, Matthew Barney and Richard
Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [47-48].

Figure 6.9
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, screen shot of Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, accessed March 20, 2015, from https://youtu.be/-6cDx8d-3kQ

Figure 6.10
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Grandstand, Matthew Barney and Richard Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [89].

Figure 6.11
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Grandstand, Matthew Barney and Richard Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [67].

Figure 6.12
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Rodeo ceremony, Matthew Barney and Richard Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [68].

Figure 6.13
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Dead Man Walking, Matthew Barney and
Richard Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [70].

Figure 6.14
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Belt Buckle, Matthew Barney and Richard Flood,
Cremaster 2 (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [71].

Figure 6.15
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Bull Wrangle, Matthew Barney and Richard
Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [69-70].

Figure 6.6
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, screen shot of single horsemen, accessed March
20, 2015, https://youtu.be/-6cDx8d-3kQ

Figure 6.17
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Bull chute, Matthew Barney and Richard Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [77].

Figure 6.18
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Bull ride, Matthew Barney and Richard Flood, , *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [81 inner-fold].

Figure 6.19
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Moment of death, Matthew Barney and Richard
Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [84].

Figure 6.20
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, detail embossed bar, Matthew Barney and
Richard Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [82].

Figure 6.21
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Ring of buffalo, Matthew Barney and Richard Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [86].

Figure 6.22
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Golden dance hall, Matthew Barney and Richard Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [91].

Figure 6.23
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Colombia's World's Fair, Matthew Barney and
Richard Flood, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [115-16]. -

Figure 6.24
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2*, 1999, Final scene, Matthew Barney and Richard Flood,
Cremaster 2, *Cremaster 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), [129-30].

Figure 6.25
Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2: The Drones' Exposition*
1999, Walker Art Center, 2000, accessed March 20, 2015,walkerart.org, ()

Chapter 7 - Conclusion

The question of authenticity is a prevalent and recurrent theme when considering who cowboys are and what images of them mean. Yet, for the mythological signification of cowboy images, whether they are "real" or media driven is inconsequential. The image of the cowboy entered the American imagination primarily through publication and performance. From the mid-nineteenth century onward, cowboys increasingly inhabited novels and short stories, performed in Wild West shows and rodeos, and appeared in early cinema. During the late 20th century, they also posed for Marlboro cigarette advertisements and quasi-documentary photographic projects, such as Richard Avedon's *In the American West.* Along the way, what began and continues as an object of consumption also became a symbol of American ideals. Still a potent marketing tool, today the cowboy image sells everything from consumer products to political candidates.

Artists of the postmodern era, such as Richard Avedon, Mathew Barney, Anton Corbijn and members of the Pictures Generation brought a new sensibility to signifiers of the West and the cowboy. By manipulating the mythological and cultural associations of cowboy imagery in photographs and videos, these artists reveal through artistic interpretation the contrived nature of historical memory.

In 2007 art historian Henry Jenkins argued that many postmodern artists took empty signifiers and infused them with meaning in order "to see a postmodern collage or pastiche as a memory palace, with each appropriated element bearing complex layers of meaning and association of those familiar with the genre traditions from

which it originated."[1] Art critic Jerry Saltz's observation in *Art in America* regarding Matthew Barney's appropriation of elements from horror films overlooks the importance of cultural knowledge and genre in understanding the meaning of postmodern artworks.[2] Jenkins faults such criticism that implies that "for an artist to innovate, he or she must exist outside of genre altogether."[3] In the case of Barney and the other artists examined herein, genre, be it expressed in literature, cinema, photography or fine art, is what permits the mythological aspect of the cowboy image to connote meaning for the audience. Viewers may not be aware of where they have encountered a given likeness before, but they do recognize what such imagery signifies because of genre associations and cultural knowledge. Artists, in turn, depend on such conventions to provide context for their work.

Both Richard Avedon and Mathew Barney relied on cultural memory and genre associations with of the American West to create fictions loosely based in fact. Richard Avedon's *In the American West* combined documentary image making with his signature style of fashion photography and Matthew Barney merged Western and Gothic motifs in *Cremaster 2*. Avedon and Barney peddled their version of the American West as auteurs. "In '91," Barney explained, "I started to become interested

---

[1] Henry Jenkins, "Monstrous Beauty and Mutant Aesthetics: Rethinking Matthew Barney's Relation to the Horror Genre," in *The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 44.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

in telling stories rather than telling the truth of documenting real-time action."[4] In *Cremaster 2*, Barney's creative lens and cowboy backdrop frame Gary Gilmore's story. Avedon, too, affirmed that he was not only documenting the West through photographs of its people, but also expressing an opinion on the subject, not necessary a documentary truth.[5]

Anton Corbijn also relied heavily on genre associations in the music videos he directed for alternative rock bands the Killers and Depeche Mode in the 1980s and 1990s. While such videos were a creative outlet for Corbijn, their main purpose was to promote the groups and sell records. In their portrayal as cowboys in several videos, these bands joined Wild West show cowboys, Owen Wister's Virginian and actor Clint Eastwood, among many others as cultural commodities. Furthermore, the new mythological connotations associated with these latter-day images impact all other contemporary images of cowboys thereby adding to the cultural memory regarding what cowboy signifies. The continued appearance of the cowboy in popular culture helps explains why the subject is of interest to fine artists, particularly those exploring the meaning of images.

Artists James Casebere, David Levinthal, Laurie Simmons and Richard Prince of the Pictures Generation began their careers during a time when photography was becoming a more conceptual and cultural medium. Through a repurposing of imagery

---

[4] Matthew Barney and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *Matthew Barney*, vol. 27, The Conversation Series (Köln, Germany: W. König, 2013), 7.
[5] Richard Avedon, *In the American West, 1979-1984* (New York: Abrams, 1985), Introduction.

from popular culture and fine art, these artists brought the idea of reality into question. Casebere, Simmons and Levinthal turned dolls, toys and other items into images that resonated as Western. The *concept* of these objects surpassed the reality of the objects themselves with the medium merely serving as a tool by which the artists explored a concept and/or expressed an idea. Photographing cowboy action figures, for example, offered Simmons a means of exploring representations of gender and enabled Levinthal to create romantic cinematic-like re-enactments that drew attention to racial stereotyping. Casebere's chiaroscuro environments, in turn, shed light on the constructed nature of historical memory. Prince reversed the process, turning photographs into tactile art objects, either by rephotographing or recontextualizing the original image**.** In so doing Prince altered the meaning associated with popular culture artifacts associated with cowboys.

For the Pictures Generation, the process of making photographs was significant to the aesthetic of their work. While some aspects of the photographic image are contingent on the subject, art historian Richard Shusterman contends that "the photographer's mise-en-scene of himself, his camera, and his subject within the photographic context and process" is the most critical component of artistic creation.[6] Therefore, the process is performative and includes both the staging as well as the interaction between the artist and object(s). In short, the appropriation *is* the performance.

---

[6] Richard Shusterman, "Photography as Performative Process," in *The Media of Photography*, ed. Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Lopes (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 68.

The utilization of lens-based media by artists is essential for such performances. "Besides generating the further novelty of cinema," Shusterman explained, "photography's powers of mechanical reproduction 'transformed the entire nature of art' by shifting art from its original essentially ritualistic use (with its auratic cult value of the authentic original) to an 'absolute emphasis on its exhibition.'"[7] Capturing images voids the aura of the original object according Walter Benjamin's theory. However, when the photograph becomes an art object it also possesses an aura albeit different from the original source. Prince's renditions of Marlboro Man advertisements, for example, now possess auras as art objects.

The artists and artworks examined in this dissertation all question the aura, authorship, and value of originality. According to Douglas Crimp:

> Through reproductive technology, postmodernist art dispenses with the aura. The fiction of creating subject gives way to a frank confiscation, quotation, excerption, accumulation, and repetition of already existing images. Notions of originality, authenticity, and presence, essential to the ordered discourse of the museum, are undermined.[8]

Through the appropriation of cowboy and other Western American imagery, the definitions of fine art are called into question. Moreover, the artworks under consideration raise questions in regards to what the cowboy signifies, not only in terms of American national identity, but also in terms of the traditionally accepted methods by which such icons are portrayed.

---

[7] Ibid., 67**.** Shusterman is quoting Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 219, 225, 227.

[8] Douglas Crimp and Louise Lawler, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 58.

Contemporary artists with more traditional approaches to depicting the American West appropriate and interpret cowboy imagery with substantially different motives from the artists discussed in this text. They often utilize the subject matter and mimic the aesthetic realism found in the work of earlier painters and sculptors of the region. More than a few of today's artists of the American West are content to perpetuate the stereotypical portrayals of their nineteenth century predecessors. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. However, this generalization illustrates the role artistic intent plays in determining how artworks depicting the American West signify. For artists of the American West, the art *is* all about cowboys and myth making. For Avedon, Casebere, Levinthal, Simmons, Prince, Corbijn and Barney, their work as a whole is *not only* about cowboys, but also about American identity, masculinity, gender, American consumerism, and historical memory. Yet, despite more than a generation of artistic intent given to questioning the myths of the American West, the postmodern cowboys portrayed by these artists still resonate mythologically in similar ways other artworks and images of the subject do.

Bibliography

"Absolut Art Collection." *Absolute Art Collection*. Accessed March 9, 2014.
    http://www.absolutartcollection.com/#.

Adams, Howard. *A Tortured People: The Politics of Colonization*. Penticton, BC:
    Theytus Books, 1995.

Ainsworth, Ed. *The Cowboy in Art*. Second. New York: Bonanza Books/World Pub
    Co, 1968.

Aletti, Vince. "Valley of the Dolls." *Voice*, May 21, 1991.

Allen, Michael. *Rodeo Cowboys in the North American Imagination*. Reno: University
    of Nevada Press, 1998.

Altman, Rick. "A Semantic/Syntactic/Pragmatic Approach to Genre." In *Critical
    Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Reading*, edited by Timothy
    Corrigan, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj, 487–95. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's,
    2011.

Altschul, David. "The Mystery of the Missing Ad Icons." *Brandweek*, September
    2004.

"In the American West: Photographs by Richard Avedon." Amon Carter Museum of
    Art, Fort Worth, TX, June 1, 1985. Typescript.

Anders, John. "Avedon's Art Breaks down Our Defenses." *Dallas Morning News*.
    October 9, 1985, sec. Today.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of
    Nationalism*. London; New York: Verso, 2006.

Anderton, Judy. "Avedon's Portfolio." *Portfolio*, May 1979.

Aquila, Richard. *Wanted Dead or Alive: The American West in Popular Culture*.
    Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996.

Ashton, Dore. "The Silent Theater: The Portrait Photographs of Richard Avedon's 'In
    the American West.'" *Arts Magazine*, September 1985.

Astruc, Alexandre. "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Stylo." In *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Reading*, edited by Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj, 350–53. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011.

Atkins, Robert. "Frontier: On Richard Avedon's Vision of the American West." *Arts Magazine*, April 1986.

Avedon, Richard. *In the American West, 1979-1984*. New York: Abrams, 1985.

———. *In the American West*. Reprint ed. New York: Abrams, 2005.

———. "The Family 1976: Richard Avedon." *Rolling Stone*, October 21, 1976.

Bader, Graham, ed. *Roy Lichtenstein*. October Files 7. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009.

Barnes, Lucinda, Miyoshi Barosh, William S. Bartman, and Rodney Sappington, eds. *Between Artists: Twelve Contemporary American Artists Interview Twelve Contemporary American Artists*. Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1996.

Barnathan, Joyce. "The Cowboy Who Roped in Russia." *Business Week*, June 21, 2004.

Barney, Matthew, Isabelle Dervaux, Adam Phillips, Klaus Kertess, Céline Chicha, Marie Minssieux-Chamonard, Roni Horn, Pierpont Morgan Library, and Bibliothèque nationale (France). *Subliming Vessel: The Drawings of Matthew Barney*. New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications, Inc., 2013.

Barney, Matthew, and Richard Flood. *Cremaster 2*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999.

Barney, Matthew, and Hans-Ulrich Obrist. *Matthew Barney*. Köln, Germany: W. König, 2013.

Barthes, Roland. *Image - Music - Text*. Edited by Stephen Heath. New York: Noonday Press, 1990.

———. *Mythologies*. New York: Noonday Press, 1972.

———. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Second ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.

Baudrillard, Jean, and Sheila Faria Glaser. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Baumann, John. "On A Western Ranche [sic]," *The Fortnightly Review*, No. CCXLIV (April 1, 1887): 516-545.

Belt, Byron. "Unbeautiful People by Avedon." *The Sunday Republican*, March 23, 1986, sec. F.

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1986.

———. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." In *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Reading,* edited by Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj, 229-51. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011.

Berger, Martin A. *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Bird, Michael Yellow. "Cowboys and Indians: Toys of Genocide, Icons of American Colonialism." *Wicazo Sa Review* 19, no. 2 (October 1, 2004): 33–48.

Blankenship, Craig. "Hartland History." *Craig Blankenship's Hartland Figurines & Sports Memorabilia*. Accessed March 19, 2014. http:/www.hartlands. com/history/html

Blessing, Jennifer. *Rose Is a Rose Is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photography*. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1997.

Borden, Diane M., and Eric P. Essman. "Manifest Landscape/Latent Ideology: Afterimages of Empire in the Western and 'Post-Western' Film." *California History* 79, no. 1 (2000): 30-41.

Bordwell, Timothy. "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice." In *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Reading*, edited by Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj, 558-72. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011.

Boris, Eileen. "On Cowboys and Welfare Queens: Independence, Dependence, and Interdependence at Home and Abroad." *Journal of American Studies* 41, no. 3 (2007): 599–621.

Boucher, Brian. "Landmark Copyright Lawsuit Cariou v. Prince Is Settled." *www.artinamericamagazine.com*. Accessed March 18, 2014. http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/landmark-copyright-lawsuit-cariou-v-prince-is-settled/.

Bowen, Bob. "Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth Exhibits 'The Wild West' Photographs by David Levinthal," Amon Carter American Art Museum, Fort Worth, TX, January 1996, Typescript.

Bower, Sue. "'They'd Kill Us If We Knew': Transgression and the Western." *Journal of Film and Video* 62, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 47–57.

Boxer, Sarah. "Hardly Child's Play: Shoving Toys to Darkest Corners." *The New York Times*, January 24, 1997, B edition, sec. The Living Arts.

Broder, Patricia Janis. *The American West: The Modern Vision*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1984.

Brod, Harry. "Masculinity as Masquerade." In *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation*, edited by Andrew Perchuk and Helaine Posner, 13–20. Cambridge, Mass: MIT List Visual Arts Center : MIT Press, 1995.

Broglio, Ron. *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Brooks, Rosetta. "A Prince of Light or Darkness?" In *Richard Prince*, *Contemporary Artists*, 26–59. New York: Phaidon, 2003.

Bruce, Chris, and Henry Art Gallery. *Myth of the West*. New York; Seattle: Rizzoli ; Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, 1990.

Brush, Gloria DeFilipps. "Photographing Small-Scale Objects: History, Context and Format." *Leonardo* 20, no. 3 (January 1, 1987): 231–34.

Buren, Daniel. "Function of the Museum." In *Theories of Contemporary Art*, edited by Richard Hertz, 219–22. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993.

Cajori, Marion. *Art 21*. DVD. Vol. Consumption, 2002.

Campbell, James T. "'Print the Legend': John Wayne and Postwar American Culture." *Reviews in American History* 28, no. 3 (September 2000): 465–77.

Campbell, Suzan, Kathleen E**.** Ash-Milby, and Rockwell Museum of Western Art. *The American West: People, Places, and Ideas*. Corning, NY; Santa Fe, NM: Rockwell Museum of Western Art ; Distributed by Western Edge Press, 2001.

Candela, Iria. "Picasso in 2 Acts." In *Roy Lichtenstein*, edited by Graham Bader, 36–45. October Files 7. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.

Carmichael, Deborah A., ed. *The Landscape of Hollywood Westerns: Ecocriticism in an American Film Genre*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006.

Casebere, James. "James Casebere." *BOMB*, no. 24 (July 1, 1988): 42–43.

———. "James Casebere." *BOMB*, no. 58 (January 1, 1997): 80–81.

Cawelti, John G. *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999.

Chambers, Marlene. *Elevating Western American Art: Developing Institute in the Cultural Capital of the Rockies*. Edited by Thomas Brent Smith. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012.

Chamber, Nicolas. "Pictures Came and Broke Your Heart," in *Video Hits: Art & Music*. Queensland, Australia: Queensland Art Gallery, 2004.

Churchill, Ward. *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema, and the Colonization of American Indians*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998.

Clifford, Craig Edward. "Warped West." *Baltimore Sun*, December 22, 1985, sec. M.

Comer, Stuart, and Christopher Eamon. *Film and Video Art*. London: Tate Pub., 2009.

Conrad, Peter. "Avedon on the Naming of Modern American Myths." *Harpers and Queen*, November 1986.

Corbijn, Anton and Groninger Museum eds**.**, *Anton Corbijn: Werk*. München, Germany: Schirmer/Mosel, 2000.

Corrigan, Timothy, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj, eds. *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011.

Corcoran Gallery of Art, and Terrie Sultan. *Surrogate Selves: David Levinthal, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons.* Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1989.

217

Coyne, Michael. *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1998.

"Cremaster 2." Accessed October 16, 2012. http://www.cremaster.net/crem2.htm.

Crimp, Douglas. "Pictures." Art Journal. *X-TRA*, Fall 2005. http://xtraonline.org/ article/pictures/.

———. "Pictures." *October* 8 (April 1979): 75–88.

Crimp, Douglas, and Louise Lawler. *On the Museum's Ruins*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993.

Damsker, Matt. "Richard Avedon: Photographer Seeks Essence of Working-Class Westerners with 'In the American West.'" *Courant*, March, 14, 1999, sec. C.

Danto, Arthur C. "Matthew Barney's Cremaster Cycle." In *Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap Between Art and Life*, 234–41. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2005.

Day, Jonathan. *Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography*. Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2011.

Denison, D.C. "The Interview: Richard Avedon." *Boston Globe*. August 5, 1987.

Depeche Mode: The Videos 86-98. Dir. Sven Harding and Martyn Atkins. Warner Brothers, 1999.

Derrida, Jacques, Hubertus von Amelunxen, Michael Wetzel, Gerhard Richter, and Jeff Fort. *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010.

Dippe, Brian W. "The Moving Finger Writes: Western Art and the Dynamics of Change." In *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West*. 89-116. New Haven: Yale University Press : Yale University Art Gallery, 1992.

———. "Western Art Don't Get No Respect: A Fifty-Year Perspective." *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, January 1, 2001, 68–71.

Dolezal, Suzanne. "Maestro of the Lens Focusing on Some Just Plain-Folks." *The Atlanta Journal*, September 7, 1979, sec. B.

Douglas, Davis. "A 'View of the West.'" *Newsweek*, September 23, 1985.

"*Drawing Restraint* by Matthew Barney." Accessed October 22, 2012.
    http://drawingrestraint.net/.

Drohojowska-Philip, Hunter. "Lessons From One Man's Model Society." *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 2000, sec. Art and Architecture.

Dubiel, Richard M. "Richard Avedon's in the American West and Jean-Paul Sartre: An Existential Approach to Art and Value." *Art Education* 42, no. 4 (1989).

Dubin, Steven C. *Displays of Power: Controversy in the American Museum from the "Enola Gay" to "Sensation."* New York: New York University Press, 1999.

———. *Displays of Power: Memory and Amnesia in the American Museum*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.

Dunne, Michael. "Mikhail Bakhtin and the Sundance Kid: Generic Dialogue in the Western." *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* 23, no. 2 (January 2004): 33–47.

Dyer, Richard. "From Stars." In *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, edited by Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj. 401-15. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011.

"Edward S. Curtis's The North American Indian - Portfolio 1 Plate No. 32 Son of the Desert - Navaho." Accessed September 28, 2014. http://curtis.library .northwestern.edu/curtis/viewPage.cgi?showp=1&size=2&id=nai.01.port.000000 33.p&volume=1.

Eklund, Douglas, and Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.). *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984*. New York and New Haven Metropolitan Museum of Art ; Yale University Press, 2009.

Evans, Jessica, and Stuart Hall. *Visual Culture: The Reader*. London [etc.]: SAGE, 1999.

"Faces of the West." *Texas Monthly*, September 1985.

Falconer, Morgan. "The Pictures Generation 1974-1984." *Art Monthly*, no. 327 (June 2009): 25–26.

Foresta, Merry A. "The Photographic Movement." In *The Photography of Invention: American Pictures of the 1980s, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C*, edited by Joshua P. Smith, 1–6. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989.

Foster, Hal. "Uncanny Images." *Art in America*, November 1983.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

Frank, Robert. *The Americans*. Millerton, N.Y: Aperture, 1978.

Fraser, James Earle. *The End of the Trail*. Plaster, 1893. National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City. Accessed January 12, 2015. http:/www.nationalcowboymuseum.org/education/lesson-plans/Fraser/Fraser.aspx.

Fritsch, Julie, ed. *Museum Gallery Interpretation and Material Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2011.

Fryer, Heather, and McMullen Museum of Art. *Cowboys, Indians, and the Big Picture*. Chestnut Hill, MA; Chicago: McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College ; Distributed by the University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Gagnon, John H., and William Simon, eds. *The Sexual Scene*. New York: Adline Publishing Company, 1970.

Gehring, Wes. "Mass Media." *USA Today*, November 2010.

Gidley, M. *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated*. Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

———. "Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952) and The North American Indian." *Edward S. Curtis's The North American Indian: Edward S. Curtis in Context*. Last modified January 2001. http://curtis.library.northwestern.edu/curtis/aboutwork.html.

———. *Photography and the USA*. Exposures. London: Reaktion, 2010.

Gilmore, Mikal. "Shot in the Heart." *Rolling Stone*, June 16, 1994.

Glueck, Grace. "Clashing Views Reshape Art History." *New York Times*, December 20, 1987.

Goetzmann, William H, and William N Goetzmann. *West of the Imagination*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009.

Goldberg, Vicki. "Richard Avedon's Own True West." *New York Magazine*, September 16, 1985.

Green, Charlotte. "Avedon: Photos of the American West." *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, September 1, 1985, sec. D.

Grimaldo Grigsby, Darcy. "Negative-Positive Truths." *Representations* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2011), 16-28.

Grundberg, Andy. "Images with Eerie Echoes." *The New York Times*, October 21, 1984, sec. H.

———. "PHOTOGRAPHY VIEW; The Mix of Art and Commerce." *The New York Times*, September 28, 1986, Arts and Leisure Desk

———. "PHOTOGRAPHY VIEW; Where Blurred Focus Makes Sharp Statements." *The New York Times*, December 20, 1987, Arts and Leisure Desk.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation." In *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Robert Stam and Toby Miller, 704–14. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000.

Hamilton, William L. "An Artist's Novel Take on History: He Lets the Walls Talk." *The New York Times Sunday*, May 28, 2001, sec. E, The Arts and Cultural Desk.

Harris, Charles W., and Buck Rainey, eds. *The Cowboy: Six-Shooters, Songs, and Sex*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976.

Hassrick, Peter H. "Creating the West in Art." *Magazine Antiques*, July 2009.

Hassrick, Peter H., and Patty Limerick. *Redrawing Boundaries Perspectives on Western American Art*. Denver; Seattle; London: Institute of Western American Art, Denver Art Museum; University of Washington Press, 2007.

Hassrick, Peter H, and Mississippi Museum of Art. *The American West: Out of Myth, Into Reality*. Washington, D.C.: Trust for Museum Exhibitions in association with the Mississippi Museum of Art, 2000.

Havis, Allan. "Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill! (1969)." In *Cult Films: Taboo and Transgression*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007.

Haygood, Tamara Miner. "TEXAS FEVER," Last modified June 15, 2010.
    http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/awt01.

Hellum, Lene Cecilie. "The Face of the Cowboy: Perspectives on Myths and Identities
    among Texan Cowboys." Ph.D. Diss., University of Oslo, Norway, 2007.

Heti, Sheila. "Laurie Simmons." *Interview*, March 2014.

Hickey, Dave, Laurie Simmons, and Sarah Charlesworth. "Laurie Simmons
    Interviewed by Sarah Charlesworth." In *Between Artists: Twelve Contemporary
    American Artists Interview Twelve Contemporary Artists*, edited by Lucinda
    Barnes, Miyoshi Barosh, William S. Bartman, and Rodney Sappington, 199–220.
    Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1996.

Hoffman, Donald. "The West as Cruel Fiction." *The Kansas City Star*, June 29, 1986,
    sec. C.

"Honoring the Working Modern West." *Williston Basin Oil Report*, September 1,
    1982.

Hopkins, Seth M. "Andy Warhol's Cowboys and Indians Suite." Thesis, University of
    Oklahoma, 2005.

Hubner, John. "Avedon Goes West 'for Someone Who Was Me,'" *Eagle-Beacon*
    (Wichita, KS), June 3, 1986, sec. C.

Indick, William. *The Psychology of the Western: How the American Psyche
    Plays Out on Screen*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008.

Iverson, Peter. *Riders of the West: Portraits from Indian Rodeo*. Seattle, WA:
    University of Washington Press, 1999.

James Casebere. Tampa: University of South Florida Art Museum, February 21,
    1989. Exhibition Catalog.

"James Casebere." *Assemblage*, no. 24 (August 1, 1994): 77–76.

Jenkins, Henry. "Monstrous Beauty and Mutant Aesthetics: Rethinking Matthew
    Barney's Relation to the Horror Genre." In *The Wow Climax: Tracing the
    Emotional Impact of Popular Culture*, 41–64. New York: New York University
    Press, 2007.

Johnny Cash. *Ride This Train*. Audio CD. SBME SPECIAL MKTS., 1960.

———. *Sings Ballads of True West*. Audio CD. Sony, 1965.

Jones, Jonathan. "Lonesome Cowboys: Matthew Barney," Spring 2000. http://www.postmedia.net/.

Juarez, Roberto, and James Casebere. "James Casebere." *BOMB*, no. 77 (October 1, 2001): 28–35.

Kackman, Michael. "Nothing on but Hoppy Badges: 'Hopalong Cassidy,' William Boyd Enterprises, and Emergent Media Globalization." *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 4 (July 1, 2008): 76–101.

Kasson, Joy S. *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2001.

Keller, Alexandra. *Re-imagining the Frontier: American Westerns Since the Reagan Administration*. Ph.D. Diss., New York University, 1998.

Keller, Alexandra, and Frazer Ward. "Matthew Barney and the Paradox of the Neo-Avant-Garde Blockbuster." *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 2 (2006): 3–16.

Kerstetter, Todd M. "Rock Music and the New West, 1980-2010." *The Western Historical Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 53–71.

Kirby, Lynne. *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997.

Kolonia, Peter. "Another Face of Portraiture: Anton Corbijn." *Popular Photography*, May 1997.

Kort, Pamela, Max Hollein, and Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. *I like America: Fictions of the Wild West*. München, Germany and New York: Prestel, 2006.

Kramer, Jane. *The Last Cowboy*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.

Lahr, John. "The Unknown Face of America's West." *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, October 13, 1985.

L'Amour, Louis. *The Man Called Noon*. New York: Bantam, 1970.

Lane, Glenn. "Avedon's Subjects Thrilled, Chilled." *Dallas Morning News*, January 5, 1986, sec. Metro West People.

Langmore, Bank. *The Cowboy*. New York: Morrow, 1975.

Laurie Simmons. Accessed March 1, 2015. http://www.lauriesimmons.net.

Laurie Simmons and Carroll Dunham Joint Lecture. Mp4. Anderson Ranch, Colorado, 2011. Accessed March 1, 2015. http://www.youtube.com /watch?v=yAedxx5cEbc&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

Laurie Simmons: Photographs 1978/79. Skarstedt Fine Art, 2002.

Lawler, Louise, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, and James Welling. "October Portfolio One." *October* 66 (October 1, 1993): 55–67.

Levinthal, David. *The Wild West*. Photographers at Work. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.

Lewis, James. "James Casebere." *ArtForum*, May 1993.

Linker, Kate. "On Richard Prince's Photographs." *Arts Magazine* 57, no. 3 (November 1982): 120–22.

Livingston, Jane. "Richard Avedon (1923-2004) Wanting to Understand Everything, to Express Everything." *American Art* 19, no. 19 (Spring 2005): 108–10.

Lubow, Arthur. "Crimson Reds." *The Three Penny Review*, no. 10 (July 1, 1982): 19–20.

Lufkin, Liz. "Avedon Vs. Edward Curtis: Two Views of the West." *San Francisco Examiner/Chronicle*. March 23, 1986, sec. Review.

Luke, Timothy W. *Shows of Force : Power, Politics, and Ideology in Art Exhibitions*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992.

Luscombe, Belinda. "Dutch Master: The Director of Philip Seymour Hoffman's Last Film Soldiers on." *Time*, July 28, 2014.

Lydiate, Henry. "Fair Use?" *Art Monthly*, October 13, 2013.

Mailer, Norman. *The Executioner's Song*. 1st Vintage International ed. New York: Vintage International, 1998.

Mansfield, John. "Nevada and The Killers," *The Millennial Star Blog*, December 8, 2008. Accessed March 15, 2015. http://www.millennialstar.org/home-has-meant-nevada-to-some/

Maquet, Jacques. "Objects as Instruments and Signs." In *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture*, edited by Steven D. Lubar and W. D. Kingery, 30-40, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.

Markus, Kurt. *After Barbed Wire: Cowboys of Our Time*. Santa Fe, NM: Twelve Trees Press, 1986.

———. *Buckaroo: Images from the Sagebrush Basin*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co, 1987.

———.*Cowpuncher: Cowboyin' in the Southwest*. Kalispell, MT: Wild Horse Island Press, 2000.

Marsden, Michael T. "The Popular Western Novel as a Cultural Artifact." *Arizona and the West* 20, no. 3 (October 1, 1978): 203–14.

Marton, Andrew. "Avedon's Lone Stars." *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, September 18, 2005, sec. G.

Marvel, Bill. "Large than Life: Avedon Photographs the Face of the West." *Dallas Times Herald*, September 15, 1985, sec. C.

———. "Richard Avedon: He's Moving on from the World of Haute Couture to the World of The West!" *Dallas Times Herald*. April 29, 1979.

"Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle Symbolism." *Guggenheim New York*. Accessed October 5, 2014. http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/education/school-educator-programs/teacher-resources/arts-curriculum-online?view=item&catid=715&id=66.

"Matthew Barney - Art21 - PBS." Accessed October 22, 2012. http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/matthew-barney.

McCarthy, David. "Andy Warhol's Silver Elvises: Meaning Through Context at the Ferus Gallery in 1963." *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 2 (June 2006): 354–72.

McClain, William. "Western, Go Home! Sergio Leone and the 'Death of the Western' in American Film Criticism." *Journal of Film and Video* 62, no. 1–2 (April 2010): 52–66.

McGrath, Ann. "Being Annie Oakley: Modern Girls, New World Woman." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 28, no. 1/2 (January 1, 2007): 203–31.

McKee, Francis. "Matthew Barney Tap-Dancing Through the Pier." *Sight and Sound* 12, no. 1 (December 2003): 23.

McLeese, Don. "In Pursuit of the Truth with Avedon." *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 25, 1986.

McQuay, David. "Richard Avedon's Faces of the West." *The Sunday Denver Post*, October 6, 1985, sec. Contemporary.

McReynolds, Douglas J. "Alive and Well: Western Myth in Western movies." *Literature Film Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (January 1998): 46

Michener, Charles. "The Avedon Look." *Newsweek*, October 16, 1978.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

Mitchell, W. J. T. *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Montgomery, James. "Killers Don't Understand Their Anton Corbijn-Directed," MTV Online, June 22, 2005. Accessed January 3, 2015. www.mtv.com/news/articles/1504534/20050622/ killers_ the. jhtml

Moore, Jacqueline M. *Cow Boys and Cattle Men: Class and Masculinities on the Texas Frontier, 1865-1900*. New York: New York University Press, 2010.

Murray, Joan. "Harsh Truths and Unexamined Lives." *Artweek*, April 5, 1986.

Nelson, Andrew Patrick. *Contemporary Westerns: Film and Television Since 1990*. Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013.

Nemerov, Alexander. "Projecting the Future: Film and Race in the Art of Charles Russell." *American Art*, no. 1 (January 1, 1994): 71–89.

Newhouse, Victoria. *Art and the Power of Placement*. New York, NY: Monacelli Press, 2005.

Nuckols, Carol. "Avedon Project Will Unite Family of West's Unsung Heroes." *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. January 31, 1980, sec. B.

Nugent, Walter. "Where Is the American West? Report on a Survey." *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, 1992, 2–23.

O'Neal, Lauren. "Denatured Beauty: Matthew Barney's Cremaster Cycle." *Art News* 4 (July 2003): 16–17, 62–63.

Pearson, Demetrius W., and C. Allen Haney. "The Rodeo Cowboy as an American Icon: The Perceived Social and Cultural Significance." *Journal of American Culture* 22, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 17–21.

Pénichon, Sylvie. "The Making of In The American West." *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 47 (2008): 175–82.

Peterson, Larry L., and L. A. Huffman. *L. A. Huffman: Photographer of the American West*. Revised edition. Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 2013.

Phillips, Lisa. *Richard Prince*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992.

Picard, Charmagne. "The Eternal Return: Matthew Barney: Zone of Potential." *Art Nexus* 2, no. 49 (August 2003): 98–103.

Popplestone, John A. "The Horseless Cowboys." In *The Sexual Scene*, 75–80. New York: Adline Publishing Company, 1970.

Porter, Hugh. "Moving Pictures." *Time International*, October 15, 2007.

Posey, Richard. "Editorials, Avedon's Vision." *The Dallas Morning News*, September 26, 1985, sec. A.

Price, B. Byron. "'Cutting for Sign': Museums and Western Revisionism." *The Western Historical Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1993): 229–34.

———. *Imagining the Open Range: Erwin E. Smith, Cowboy Photographer*. Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1998.

Princenthal, Nancy. "James Casebere at Vrej Baghoomain." *Art in America*, June 1990.

Prown, Jules David, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Yale University. Art Gallery, and Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art. *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West*. New Haven: Yale University Press : Yale University Art Gallery, 1992.

Pyne, Lynn. "Avedon out West." *The Phoenix Gazette Marque*, August 9, 1986.

Raideke, Paul. "Interview with Richard Avedon." *PhotoMetro*, July 1986.

Rian, Jeff. "James Casebere." *Flash Art*, December 1998.

Rian, Jeff and Prince, Richard. "In the Picture: Jeff Rian in Conversation with Richard Prince." In *Richard Prince*, 6–25. Contemporary Artists. London ; New York: Phaidon, 2003.

"Richard Prince: Cowboys." *gagosian.com*. Accessed February 21, 2013. http://www.gagosian.com/exhibitions/richard-prince--february-21-2013.

"Richard Prince: Untitled (almost Original)." *Moma.org*. Accessed April 17, 2014. https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/richard-prince-untitled-almost-original-2006.

"Richard Prince - Untitled (originals)." Accessed October 16, 2012. http://www.richardprince.com/originals/.

Prince, Richard, and James Frey. *Richard Prince: Cowboys*. Edited by Ken Maxwell and Alison McDonald. Beverly Hills: Gagosian Gallery, 2013.

Robinson, Walter. "See Here: Judging an Artwork by Its Cover at Richard Prince's New Gallery." *Artspace*. Accessed April 17, 2014. http://www.artspace.com /magazine/interviews_features/judging_an_artwork_by_its_cover_at_richard_prince_new_gallery.

Rohrback, John. "Preface." In *In the American West*, 2005 ed., [1–3]. New York: Abrams, 2005.

Rondeau, James, Art Institute of Chicago, and Tate Modern (Gallery). *Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective*. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2012.

Rosenberg, Karen. "Artist: Richard Prince." *NYMag.com*. Accessed October 31, 2014. http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/art/11815/.

Røssaak, Eivind, ed. *Between Stillness and Motion: Film, Photography, Algorithms*. Film Culture in Transition. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011.

Rowley, Storer. "Richard Avedon's Look at the West Raises Horizons and Lifts Eyebrows." *Chicago Tribune*, October 13, 1985, sec. 13.

Rubin, Robert. *Richard Prince: American Prayer*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2010.

Sandweiss, Martha A. *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

———. "The Public Life of Western Art." In *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West*, 117–34. New Haven: Yale University Press : Yale University Art Gallery, 1992.

Schatz, Thomas. "Film Genre and the Genre Film." In *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Reading*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011.

———. *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981.

Schjeldahl, Peter. "Performance." *The New Yorker*, May 7, 2007. Accessed October, 7, 2014. http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/05/14/performance-2.

———. "The Joker." *New Yorker* 83, no. 31 (October 15, 2007): 90.

Schoelwer, Susan Prendergast. "The Absent Other: Women in the Land and Art of Mountain Men." In *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West*. 135-66. New Haven: Yale University Press: Yale University Art Gallery, 1992.

Schreiber, Martin H. *Last of a Breed: Portraits of Working Cowboys*. Toronto; New York: Bantam, 1988.

Seaton, Melynda J. "Pure Country: Pure Strait: Pure Myth - The Myth of Texas Cowboy," in *Contemporary Westerns: Film and Television since 1990*, ed. Andrew Patrick Nelson, 135-48. Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2013.

Shively, Jo Ellen. "Cowboys and Indians: Perceptions of Western Films Among American Indians and Anglos." In *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Robert Stam and Toby Miller, 345-60. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000.

Shusterman, Richard. "Photography as Performative Process." In *The Media of Photography*, edited by Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Lopes, 67–77. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

Silberman, Robert. "Contemporary Photography and the Myth of the West." *European Contributions to American Studies* 16 (1989): 297-325.

229

Silverman, Hugh J. "Andy Warhol: Chiasmatic Visibility." In *Impossible Presence: Surface and Screen in the Photogenic Era*, edited by Terry Smith, 193–208. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Simmons, Laurie. "Toys Are Us. (Artist Jarvis Rockwell's Studio)." *Artforum International* 36, no. 2 (19971001): 82.

Singer, Mark. "Toy Stories." *The New Yorker*, January 20, 1997.

Sladen, M. "Unspeakably Beautiful: The Fantasy World of Matthew Barney." *Art Monthly - London*, no. 217 (1998): 1–6.

Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. New York; Toronto; Atheneum; Maxwell Macmillan Canada; Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992.

Smith, Joshua P., ed. *The Photography of Invention: American Pictures of the 1980s, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989.

Smith, Terry, ed. *Impossible Presence: Surface and Screen in the Photogenic Era*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Smith, Toby. "Richard Avedon's West." *Albuquerque Journal Magazine*, November 12, 1985.

Span, Paul. "Richard Avedon's Stark Faces of the West: The Photographer and the American Myth in His Gallery." *The Washington Post,* (October 29, 1985): C1.

Spector, Nancy. *Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle*. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2002.

Spector, Nancy, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Walker Art Center, and Serpentine Gallery. *Richard Prince*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2007.

Squiers, Carol. "Is Richard Prince a Feminist?" *Art in America*, November 1993, 119.

Stallabrass, Julian. "What's in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography." *October* 122 (Fall 2007): 71–90.

Stam, Robert. *Film Theory: An Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000.

Stapen, Nancy. "Avedon's Western Faces Will Never Live in 'Dallas.'" *Boston Herald*. March 1, 1987, sec. Art.

Street, Richard Steven. *Everyone Had Cameras: Photography and Farmworkers in California, 1850-2000*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Sweeney, J. Gray. "Racism, Nationalism, and Nostalgia in Cowboy Art." *Oxford Art Journal* 15, no. 1 (1992): 67–80.

Taylor, Lonn. *The American Cowboy: An Exhibition at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., March 26, 1983-September 15, 1983*. Washington D.C.: American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 1983.

"Texas Prison Museum." Accessed November 29, 2012. http://www.txprisonmuseum.org/articles/rodeo_history.html.

Thall, Larry. "Avedon's 'In the American West' Fails to Make a Statement." *New City*, June 24, 1986.

"The Richard Avedon Foundation." Accessed May 19, 2014. http://www.richardavedon.com/index.php.

"The Roar of the Crowd." *Texas Monthly*, October 1985.

Thornton, Gene. "Photography View; Avedon Takes a Dark View of The West." *New York Times*, December 15, 1985.

Tomkins, Calvin. *Lives of the Artists*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2008.

Tompkins, Jane P. *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Truettner, William H, Nancy K Anderson, *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*. Washington, D.C.: Published for the National Museum of American Art by the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991.

Tumlir, Jan. "Richard Prince: Gagosian Gallery." *ArtForum*, Summer 2013.

Turner, Fredrick Jackson. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." *Xroads.virginia.edu*. Last modified September 1997. http://xroads.virginia.edu /~HYPER/TURNER/.

Vassar College, and Mary-Kay Lombino. *The Polaroid Years: Instant Photography and Experimentation*. Munich, Germany: Del Monico Books, Prestel, 2013.

Vernallis, Carol. *Experiencing Music Video*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

Vincent, Steven. "In the Studio." *Art + Auction*, November 2003.

"Matthew Barney's Cremaster 2." Accessed October 23, 2012. http://www.walkerart.org/archive/D/B073714FCA4689C56179.htm.

Wakefield, Neville. "The Cremaster Glossary." In *Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle*. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2002.

Walker Art Center, and Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL. *Cross-References: Sculpture Into Photography: James Casebere, Bruce Charlesworth, Bernard Faucon, Ron O'Donnell, Sandy Skoglund, Boyd Webb*. Edited by James Casebere. Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1987.

Walker, Sidney, and Sydney Walker. "Artmaking in an Age of Visual Culture: Vision and Visuality." *Visual Arts Research* 30, no. 2 (January 1, 2004): 23–37.

Walle, Alf H. *The Cowboy Hero and Its Audience: Popular Culture as Market Derived Art*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2000.

Warren, Louis S. *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.

Weiley, Susan. "Avedon Goes West." *Art News*, March 1986.

West, Elliott. "Shots in the Dark: Television and the Western Myth." *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 38, no. 2 (April 1, 1988): 72–76.

"....Western Highway." *Aperture*, Winter 1985.

White, Richard, and Newberry Library. *The Frontier in American Culture: An Exhibition at the Newberry Library, August 26, 1994 - January 7, 1995*. Chicago and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

Wicker, Christine. "Travels With Avedon." *Dallas Life Magazine*, November 3, 1985.

Williams, Gilda. *The Gothic*: *Documents of Contemporary Art*. London; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007.

Wilson, Laura. *Avedon at Work: In the American West*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003.

_____. "Background." In *In the American West*, 2005 ed., [146–60]. New York: Abrams, 2005.

Wise, Kelly. "Avedon's 'West,' Exploitation or Art?." *Boston Globe*, February 24, 1987, sec. Arts and Films.

Wister, Owen. *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*. New York and London: MacMillan, 1902.

Wollen, Peter. "The Auteur Theory." In *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Reading*, edited by Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj. 361-374. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011.

Woodward, Richard B. "Color Blind: White Artist + Black Memorabilia = No Show." *Village Voice*, June 25, 1996.

———. "David Levinthal at Laurence Miller." *ARTnews*, March 1989.

_____. "Taking Toys Seriously: Mini-Movement of Sideshow?" *The New York Times Sunday*, February 29, 1989, sec. H.

Yablonsky, Linda, and Laurie Simmons. "Laurie Simmons." *BOMB*, no. 57 (October 1, 1996): 18–23.

Yokell, Adam. "Photographer Prevails in Prince Copyright Infringement Action: Court Takes Firm Stance on Appropriation Art and Fair Use; Defendants Appeal." *IFAR Journal* 12, no. 3 (2011): 8–12.

Zimmer, William. "Life With a Twist: Fiction-Based Photography, Realism in Paint," *The New York Times*, March 30, 1997.

Appendix A – Gene Autry's Cowboy Code

1. Cowboys must never shoot first, hit a smaller man, or take unfair advantage.

2. He must never go back on his word, or a trust confided in him.

3. He must always tell the truth.

4. He must be gentle with children, the elderly, and animals.

5. He must not advocate or possess racially or religiously intolerant ideas.

6. He must help people in distress.

7. He must be a good worker.

8. He must keep himself clean in thought, speech, action, and personal habits.

9. He must respect women, parents, and his nation's laws.

10. The Cowboy is a patriot.