

***BEYOND THE WILD WEST LITERATURE: THE COWBOY – HERO OR ANTI-HERO?***

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*Abstract: With his deep historic roots tracking back to Spain somewhere around the year 1500, the cowboy has always fascinated and inspired many generations. Over the centuries, the practical cowboy adapted to the modern world, aspect stated by writers who created a number of novels and characters that have explored the cowboy's historical truth, its ideological significance and its traditionally exemplary role.*

*By drawing parallels between Western novels and Western characters, the hereby paper deals with contemporary authors who have exhibited a particularly attitude towards the cowboys, echoing the belief that a reassessment of historical narratives is an effective means of evaluating this character as hero or anti-hero.*

*Keywords: cowboy, Western literature,*

Before the 1960s, American culture and popular narratives – both textual and filmic – offered a reassuring icon of masculinity and individualistic certainty in the figure of the cowboy, or so it appeared. As the conventional cowboy figure rides the wilds of the Western frontier, his actions embody a set of individualist ideals. The cowboy presents an archetype with wider ramifications for American society, as sociologist Will Wright notes: “Most American popular stories...are in some sense versions of Westerns, because they are always versions of individuals.”<sup>1</sup> The ‘traditional’ cowboy figure fights for a post-feudal, post-hierarchical society dominated by the notions of the market and the individual. However, while the cowboy represents these relations in an entertaining and accessible manner, its relevance diminishes in a post-agrarian, industrial society.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Will Wright, *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy and Social Theory*, London: Sage, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> David Simons, *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel from Joseph Heller to Kurt Vonnegut*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 81.

James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) is the most famous of the 'Leatherstocking' series of novels, and has long been accepted as the begetter of many of the popular conventions of the Western genre. *The Last of the Mohicans* contains the anti-heroic character of Hawkeye," an ambiguous type,"<sup>3</sup> whose actions often seem to embody a particularly counter-cultural, individualist ideal. As Wright notes, "[Hawkeye is] defined by his strength, honour, and independence, his wilderness identity, not by his job."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Hawkeye's pastoral lifestyle was implicitly emulated by many of those in the 1960s counterculture, who "attempted to live off the land; scorning materialism, they sought a simple life more attuned to the natural world."<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the parallels between Hawkeye and the counterculture go beyond a shared individualism, and a desire for a more pastoral way of living. The character embodies many of the beliefs that the counter-culture adopted. For example, Hawkeye is presented in a populist manner, he possesses no sort of privileged lineage, has no aristocratic status, and consequently is accessible to everyone. Hawkeye is known by a variety of names, the multitude of which indicates a transcendence of one dimensionality. Hawkeye is also of white ethnicity, yet works and fights alongside the Mohicans, Chingachgook, and Uncas.

While Hawkeye appears to establish an almost countercultural, seditious template for the protagonist of the Western society to follow, the more complex elements of Cooper's novel (concerning plot and character) were simplified, and subsequently lost, in the innumerable, "unapologetically formulaic and subliterate,"<sup>6</sup> 'dime store' Western novels of the late 1800s.

The Dime store novel set about mythologizing frontier life, infusing it with a simple narrative of good versus evil that proved to be hugely popular. The immense success of these populist texts meant that they, rather than Cooper's novels, were responsible for establishing many of the basic characteristics of the stock 'cowboy', not least the structuring of the figure's rebellion as a kind of criminal yet laudatory act. Such texts depicted the rebellion of the cowboy as a positive act in a manner that displeased the establishment: "Novels about the escapades of Jesse and Frank James were eventually banned from distribution by the Postmaster General of

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<sup>3</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, rev. ed., New York: Criterion, 1960; London: Granada, 1970), p. 181.

<sup>4</sup> Will Wright, *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy and Social Theory*, London: Sage, 2001, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> David Farber, "The Intoxicated State/Illegal Nation Drugs in the Sixties Counterculture," in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s & '70s*, ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, London: Routledge, 2002, 17-40, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Anon., *The Writers of the Purple Sage, John Wayne, The Movies and the Old West: The Western Hero in the Dime Novel* (2003) [online]. Available: <http://www.jcs-group.com/oldwest/writers/hero.html>.

the United States, because they turned outlaws – still living at that time and still dangerous – into heroes.”<sup>7</sup> However, while writers of Dime Store fiction did indeed attribute a rebellious characteristic to the protagonists of their stories they also established a pattern that works to undermine the validity of this rebellion. For Dime Store novels often contain a generic plot structure in which an insubordinate character (usually a cowboy) eventually comes to realize the futility of his wayward lifestyle, and subsequently chooses to return to the establishment he so once vehemently opposed: “And yet the paradox is that at the end of many of these stories, the characters wind up settling down on farms and getting married. The stories make heroes of outlaws, but then imply that part of the destiny of a hero is to become civilized.”<sup>8</sup>

This ‘traditional’ aspect of the cowboy is, in many ways, ideologically opposed to the ‘truly’ rebellious aims of the 1960s counterculture, which, as David Farber suggests, sought “a new cultural orientation...a cultural rebellion.”<sup>9</sup> In contrast to the intended aims of the more socially and politically motivated insurgence of the counterculture, the rebellion of the traditional cowboy is shown to be ineffectual. Indeed, it is possible to read the figure as setting an example to others of the pointlessness of revolt, and, therefore, as posing no real threat to the status quo. As Wright notes, “[the cowboy never seeks dominant control] He always rides away or settles down after the community has been saved, surrendering his social authority.”<sup>10</sup>

Marcuse’s ideas concerning ‘counterrevolution’<sup>11</sup> seem to have relevance here. In such a reading, the cowboy’s failure to challenge the system is interpretable as a success on the part of the State, which tries to transform rebellion into “an image of disruption as a source of order.”<sup>12</sup> In *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse suggests that in late capitalist society dissident literary figures, such as the anti-hero, only serve to reinforce the status quo, rather than disrupt it: “The negation which is inherent in the aesthetic oeuvre will thus itself be negated by advanced industrial society.”<sup>13</sup> While it is important to remember that this belief represents only one side of Marcuse’s, often contradictory, statements concerning the critical role of art, it does seem applicable to the traditional cowboy whose superficial rebellion serves to uphold, rather than disrupt, the status quo. In a Marcusean reading, the figure comes to function as a

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<sup>7</sup> David Simons, *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel from Joseph Heller to Kurt Vonnegut*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 79.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> David Simons, *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel from Joseph Heller to Kurt Vonnegut*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 80.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972.

<sup>12</sup> Will Wright, *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy and Social Theory*, London: Sage, 2001, p. 119.

<sup>13</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972.

kind of deceptive exemplar, whose rebellion is considered to be “introjections of social needs required by the established order,”<sup>14</sup> rather than a truly liberating force.

It is important to note that the presence of a Marcusean element in the 1960s version of the cowboy stands in opposition to much of the cultural rebellion going on in the 1960s counterculture. Indeed, Marcuse’s measured approach to rebellion in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* angered many within the counterculture, who saw it as conservative. Ben Agger notes in “Marcuse in Postmodernity,” “by 1972, the year of publication of *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Marcuse had already put distance between himself and the student movement, which he deemed overly irrationalist and insufficiently theoretical.”<sup>15</sup>

If it is possible to see the cowboy’s rebellion as ineffectual, it seems incongruous that the figure is still held aloft as an ideal embodiment of the national character into the twentieth century. A situation that Henry Kissinger’s comments in a 1972 interview, held by *New Republic* magazine, demonstrate: “The main point stems from the fact that I’ve always acted alone. Americans admire that enormously. Americans admire the cowboy leading the caravan alone astride his horse, the cowboy entering a village or a city alone on his horse.”<sup>25</sup>

It would appear that the cowboy’s individualist rebellion has become such an ingrained model for defiance in the United States, that one must consciously step back, and reexamine its structure, in order to uncover an agreeable explanation for its persistence. One of the reasons behind the endurance of the figure is, undoubtedly, the links it has retained with American national identity, as Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies suggest in *Why Do People Hate America?*: “In the post-war world, a new Cold War became America’s global metaphor, its externalisation of its own Western mythology as the means for understanding the whole world.”<sup>16</sup> America seems to employ the cowboy as an emblem of its national character, as an aesthetic model that symbolizes elements of the country’s history and ideology that are recognizable, and agreeable to a majority of the population.

In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), the French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, suggests that “the imaginary power and wealth of the double – the one in which the strangeness and at the same time the intimacy of the subject to itself are played out...– rest on its immateriality,

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Agger, “Marcuse in Postmodernity,” in Marcuse, ed. John Bokina and Timothy J. Lukes, Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 1994, 20-40, pp. 29-30.

<sup>16</sup> Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *Why Do People Hate America?*, Cambridge: Icon Books, 2002, p. 183.

on the fact that it is and remains a phantasm.”<sup>17</sup> During the 1960s a range of writers, including Thomas Berger, E.L. Doctorow, James Leo Herlihy, David Markson, and Ishmael Reed, attempt to examine the immateriality of the cowboy figure, reassessing both the validity of the cowboy as a national exemplar and its uses, and possible reinterpretations, in the postwar period.

Max Evans’ somewhat overlooked comedic novel *The Rounders* (1960) exemplifies this contemporary reappraisal of the cowboy. In the case of Evans’ text, this process of reassessment results in the cowboy’s relegation into the realm of the ‘ordinary’ or ‘mundane’. For, while President Kennedy’s cowboy image was founded upon “the Emersonian concept of the hero as ‘representative man,’ ”<sup>18</sup> a reduction of the figure’s formerly superior nature is an intrinsic part of the anti-heroic cowboy of the 1960s novel.

*The Rounders* tells the story of two horse breakers, an anonymous narrator and a character named Wrangler. The novel follows these two down and out characters as they try to earn enough money to survive while working for the corrupt, cattle rancher Jim Ed Love. Evans’ novel is one of the first of a spate of 1960s texts, which represent the cowboy as an everyman. Both the narrator and Wrangler are noticeably devoid of the figure’s more conventional, heroic trappings, as one character says, “I never knew of a couple of dumber cowboys than us.”<sup>19</sup> The ennui experienced by the two cowboy characters, as they struggle to subsist on a meager income, can be read as a reflection of the boredom experienced by many 1960s blue-collar workers, who, as Vance Packard notes, “are bored with their work and feel no pride or initiative or creativity.”<sup>20</sup>

The two protagonists of the novel also stand in opposition to an encroaching and oppressive capitalism: “The country is goin’ to hell in a hurry. If these ranchers keep buying these pickup trucks, there ain’t goin’ to be no use for horse breakers like us.”<sup>21</sup> In spite of their awareness of the immense changes that capitalism is bringing to the horse-breaking profession, the cowboys are unable to do anything about their situation and, as such, become increasingly

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<sup>17</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, rev. ed., 1981; repr., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996, p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation. The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, New York: Atheneum, 1992, p. 502.

<sup>19</sup> Max Evans, *The Rounders*, rev. ed., New York: Macmillan, 1960; New York: Bantam Books, 1965, p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> Vance Packard, *The Status Seekers*, rev. ed., New York: David McKay, 1959; London: Longmans, 1960; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961, p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> Max Evans, *The Rounders*, rev. ed., New York: Macmillan, 1960; New York: Bantam Books, 1965, p. 29.

absurd figures: “I felt kind of embarrassed walking into camp with one boot off. The boys all laughed and wanted to know if I’d felt sorry about my horse carrying such a big load. They acted like I had just got down and walked on purpose. It would have been easy to have killed the whole bunch, including Old Fooler, right on the spot. I was just too tired to do it.”<sup>22</sup>

As an intrinsic part of the national epic, it is perhaps inevitable that the cowboy figure should come under an immense degree of critical reappraisal during the 1960s, a process that William W. Savage suggests is “indicative of his stature as myth.”<sup>23</sup> Writers of the era create a number of novels and characters that explore the cowboy’s historical truth, its ideological significance and its traditionally exemplary role. Contemporary authors exhibit a particularly Marcusean attitude toward the cowboy, echoing the belief that a reassessment of historical narratives is an effective means of evaluating the present: “By virtue of this transformation of the specific historical universe in the work of art – a transformation which arises in the presentation of the specific content itself – art opens the established reality to another dimension: that of possible liberation. To be sure, this is illusion, Schein, but an illusion in which another reality shows forth. And it does so only if art wills itself as allusion: as an unreal world other than the established one. And precisely in this transfiguration, art preserves and transcends its class character; and transcends it, not toward a realm of mere fiction and fantasy, but toward a universe of concrete possibilities.”<sup>24</sup>

The idea that a process of transcendence is achievable through a reconsideration of the historical undoubtedly informs much of the contemporary modification of the cowboy figure in 1960s fiction. Several literary critics note the presence of the Marcusean concept that “Freedom implies reconciliation-redemption of the past.”<sup>25</sup> In *The Return of the Vanishing American* (1968), Leslie Fiedler suggests that many 1960s novels reconceptualize the cowboy, moving the figure from its traditional position as a historical, heroic exemplar to one that is more carnivalesque in nature. This transformation is carried out in an attempt to better comprehend the ideological complexities of the present: “Those more sophisticated recent pop novels which play off, for the laughs, the seamier side of Western history against its sentimental

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> William W. Savage, *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History and Culture*, Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1986, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972, pp. 87-88.

<sup>25</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation: A Philosophical Inquiry Into Freud*, rev. ed., 1955; repr., London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987, p. 106.

expurgations are not quite satisfactory either. Yet to understand the West as somehow a joke comes a little closer to getting it straight.”<sup>26</sup>

This shift in the way that writers employ the cowboy seems, retrospectively, more profound. For, in altering the ideological purposes of the figure, contemporary writers arguably produce a new, subgenre of the Western. This fresh iteration of the genre is classifiable as the self-referential, anti-Western. In opposition to its ‘original’ form, the anti-Western attacks the individualistic mono-theism of the cowboy, thriving instead on notions of plurality and community that more closely reflect the counterculture’s own ideological beliefs. The anti-Western also uses humor, with many 1960s writers sharing a desire to make a joke out of the conventions of the Western. This satirical element is particularly evident in Berger’s *Little Big Man*, Herlihy’s *Midnight Cowboy*, Markson’s *The Ballad of Dingus Magee* (1965), Reed’s *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), and Charles Portis’ *True Grit*. These novels take a revisionist approach to the Western, shifting traditional genre perspectives and tone in order to deflate the heroic mythology surrounding the cowboy. They attempt to expose the artificiality of the traditional Western by proposing that the cowboy would have been more likely to experience a mundane and unheroic way of life than is typically depicted, reminding of Theodore Roszak’s hypothesis that “myths so openly recognised as myths are precisely those that have lost much of their power.”<sup>27</sup>

Thomas Berger’s *Little Big Man* is perhaps the epitome of writers’ attempts to undermine the heroic and didactic qualities of the quasi-mythic Western. Indeed, the novel is a version of the picaresque form in which the central character of Jack Crabb retells the story of his life on the West. Right from its opening, the novel suggests that the frontier was little more than an aesthetic construction: “some kind of exhibit put on for...education and entertainment.”<sup>28</sup> Crab recounts his interaction in key events (Custer’s Last Stand), and with key characters (Calamity Jane, Wyatt Earp), drawn from the pantheon of Western mythology. This revisionist approach constantly reminds the reader of the sizeable gaps that exist between the myth of the West and its supposed, historical truth: “I immediately reduced that by half in my mind, for I had been on the frontier from the age of ten on and knew a thing as to how fights

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<sup>26</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American*, rev. ed., London: Jonathan Cape, 1968; London: Paladin, 1972, pp. 38-39.

<sup>27</sup> Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, rev. ed., 1968; repr., London: Faber, 1969, p. 215.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Berger, *Little Big Man*, rev. ed., 1964; repr., London: Harvill Press, 1999, p. 378.

are conducted. When you run into a story of more than three against one and one winning, then you have heard a lie.”<sup>29</sup>

In *Little Big Man*, the process of demythologizing goes so far as to subvert specific historical figures. In particular, the novel focuses upon dispossessing Wild Bill Hickok of his traditionally heroic qualities. Historians as late as Stout and Falk (1974) continue to perpetuate the heroic image surrounding Hickok, noting how he was described as “the handsomest man west of the Mississippi.”<sup>30</sup> In contrast to this heroic representation of Hickok, Berger’s narrator forms a decidedly different opinion of the onetime marshal and icon: “His hands was [sic] right small for a man his size, and his feet as well – as little as my own, almost. Then he turned and walked away down the street, straight as a die and certainly not swaying, yet with that hair hanging down his back and the long buckskin tunic descending almost to his knees like a dress, I was reminded of a real tall girl.”<sup>31</sup>

The true relevance of the cowboy figure’s masculine bravado is deconstructed in *Little Big Man*. Crab rejects an overt and ‘brutish’ display of masculinity as the only suitable attestation of the heroic. In particular, he dislikes the use of violence as a legitimate part of masculine expression: “All my life I have had a prejudice against over-grown louts”<sup>32</sup>. Crab’s aversion to violence, as a potentially valid means of achieving personal and social justice, further manifests itself in the novel’s forlorn depiction of Hickok’s day-to-day life: “the only thing he was suited to be was a peace officer, patrolling the streets of a cowtown in hopes someone would offer him resistance.”<sup>33</sup> The suggestion here is that the level of heroism surrounding Hickok has led him to a situation in which he must maintain an inescapable facade of bravado, a state which causes him to experience “[a] suspiciousness which warps the mind.”

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In the novel’s deconstruction of the mythology surrounding figures such as Wild Bill Hickok or George Armstrong Custer, the anti-heroic form is a suitable means through which a writer can question notions of the heroic. For the presence of the anti-hero implies an authorial rejection of selected standards, inherent within the heroic. While the hero figure serves to strengthen the ideological status quo, by encouraging our support for an ideal, the anti- hero

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 269.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph A. Stout Jr. and Odie B. Faulk, *A Short History of the American West*, London: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974, p. 247.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 299.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Berger, *Little Big Man.*, rev. ed. ,1964; repr., London: Harvill Press, 1999, p. 91.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 289.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 79.



induces the reader to question the ideology behind the heroic model by virtue of its radical stance toward the 'normal' order of things. By undermining the heroic superiority of the cowboy with the anti-heroic form, writers of the 1960s present the figure as being no different from the 'ordinary man on the street'.<sup>35</sup>

The deconstructionist process, applied to Wild Bill Hickok in *Little Big Man*, is just one example of a wider-scale destabilization of the cowboy's traditional form taking place during the 1960s. Novels, such as *Little Big Man* and David Markson's *The Ballad of Dingus Magee* in addition to films like George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid* and Mel Brook's *Blazing Saddles*, set about reducing the cowboy. Changing the figure from a paragon of heroism, to something often crude and unattractive in nature: "taking [it] into the terrain of the scatological."<sup>36</sup>

Markson's *The Ballad of Dingus Magee* is, perhaps, the most obvious example of an author presenting us with a 'lowbrow' version of the cowboy figure. The novel follows the unheroic cowboy, Dingus Magee, as he evades capture by the corrupt sheriff, C.L. Hoke Birdsill, in the aptly named town of Yerkey's Hole. Magee is aided and abetted in his adventures by Madam Belle Nops, the sexually promiscuous Native American Anna-hot-water and the spinsterish schoolteacher, Horseface Agnes. In an online interview, Markson notes how he could not help "turning the entire myth [of the West] upside down – everybody a coward or an incompetent, all the women unappetizing, that sort of thing."<sup>37</sup> Like Berger with *Little Big Man*, Markson infuses *The Ballad of Dingus Magee* with a revisionist rhetoric that serves to undermine the conventionally grandiloquent rhetoric surrounding the West, imbuing *The Ballad of Dingus Magee* with a staunch pragmatism, reserving the romanticized aspects of the cowboy figure for the newspaper cuttings of an idealistic young woman who meets and attempts to woo Dingus.<sup>38</sup>

In *The Ballad of Dingus Magee*, Markson takes the burlesque objective of many 1960s anti-Westerns to their very limits. He replaces the grandiloquence of the heroic with the anti-heroic in order to present us with characters who indulge in a variety of transgressive activities

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<sup>35</sup> David Simons, *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel from Joseph Heller to Kurt Vonnegut*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 86.

<sup>36</sup> Don Graham, *Western Movies Since 1960* (1998) [online]. Available: <http://www2.tcu.edu/depts/prs/amwest/html/wl1256.html>

<sup>37</sup> John Garelick, *Themes and variations David Markson Writes on* (2004) [online]. Available: [http://www.portlandphoenix.com/books/other\\_stories/documents/04035282.asp](http://www.portlandphoenix.com/books/other_stories/documents/04035282.asp)

<sup>38</sup> David Simons, *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel from Joseph Heller to Kurt Vonnegut*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 86.

including thievery, lying, prostitution, cross-dressing, cuckoldry, and public urinating. Markson employs the scatological to expose the chivalric notion of ‘the code of the West’ as a falsehood, recommending instead, that frontier life should be regarded in a decidedly more carnivalesque manner. The author uses humor to ‘explode’ the conventions of the traditional Western in a Bataillean fashion, adhering to the suggestion that “laughter has the ability to suspend a very closed logic.”<sup>39</sup>

Markson’s novel also depicts authority as innately corrupt, holding it responsible for the debasement of the cowboy figure. While authority is depicted as corrupt, it is noticeable that Markson presents the cowboy Magee as possessing an integrity that is noticeably absent from the other characters in the novel. Though Dingus engages in range of transgressive activities, his actions are never malicious or harmful.

Alongside a desire to undermine the typically grandiloquent mythology of the cowboy, many 1960s writers attempt to reposition the figure in a decidedly more collectivist and compassionate manner. For, though many in the counterculture believed in a particular type of inclusive humanitarianism called Personalism, conventional incarnations of the cowboy figure tended to embody a quite different set of values. Indeed, rather than possessing a countercultural inclination toward ideals such as altruism, philanthropy, and compassion, Sardar and Davies note that “In the Western it is the hero...alone [who] evokes poignant reflection, while the vanquished are unmourned; they do not require the reflex of regret, for as agents of evil they are by definition of less human worth.” This reading of the Western as monolithic suggests the cowboy exemplifies a clandestine elitism toward the white, Anglo-protestant male. Such exclusivity did not sit well with the more liberal elements of the counterculture.<sup>40</sup>

Instead, many in the counterculture began to perceive the cowboy as analogous to “[the] lead-bottomed ballast of the status quo,” representing yet another conformist tool of the hegemony, which needed to be overturned in order to invoke an opportunity for the emergence of new, more humane ideological standpoints. If we move beyond the specificities of the Kennedy administration’s appropriation of Western iconography, then we can see that the ‘established reality’ of the cowboy has often been used as a powerful tool for garnering

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<sup>39</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall, ed. Stuart Kendall, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p. 144.

<sup>40</sup> David Simons, *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel from Joseph Heller to Kurt Vonnegut*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 87.

widespread political support. Ironically, given the superficially dissident nature of the cowboy, there has always been a long-standing association between politics and the figure in American life. Successive presidents have utilized a romanticized image of the cowboy, derived largely from its more conservative Dime Novel configuration, as a means to endear themselves to large sectors of the public. This political appropriation relies upon an image of the figure as an unshakeable bastion of moral values thought to be both intelligible and favorable to a mass audience. In *The Return of the Vanishing American*, Fiedler notes the suitability of the traditional cowboy's 'safe' rebellion for political requisition: "[cowboys] rebelled no more than they conformed, neither coming into their inheritances and settling down nor killing their fathers and challenging the power of the State."<sup>41</sup> Fiedler's reading suggests that the cowboy is easily co-opted by the establishment as a tool for what Marcuseans might term 'repressive desublimation'; acting as a kind of release valve or aesthetic gesture for radical feeling.

As part of their Marcusean rejection of the 'spontaneous' rebellion of the traditional cowboy, the 1960s anti-Western also examines the figure's legitimization of violence as a valid means of achieving one's goals. Writers of the 1960s frequently negate the moral worth of violence, questioning its effectiveness as a force for good: "Distinction must be made between violence and revolutionary force. In the counterrevolutionary situation of today, violence is the weapon of the Establishment; it operates everywhere, in the institutions and organisations, in work and fun, on the streets and highways, and in the air."<sup>42</sup> Traditionally, the cowboy liberates himself from either, the savagery of the wilderness, or the corrupt authoritarian politics and ideological conformity of civilization, through the redemptive use of violence. In contrast to this emphasis on violence, the 1960s anti-Western employs a specifically pacifist form of the anti-heroic. This serves to emphasize the negative elements of the violence of the traditional model.

In particular, by presenting the reader with a set of ideological problems that only a demythologized, anti-heroic version of the cow-boy figure can contend with, writers, such as Ishmael Reed and James Leo Herlihy, reaffirm the importance of the postwar individual. This reconstitution transcends the conventional mythological boundaries of the cowboy in order to move the figure toward a position of, ironically. More relevant 'concrete' possibilities, providing one possible answer to Fiedler's enquiry: "Can [we] re-establish the West

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>42</sup> Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, rev. ed., London: Methuen: 1962; London: Calder & Boyars: 1972; London: Picador, 1973; London: Marion Boyars, 1979, p. 242.

anywhere?" By repositioning the cowboy on the frontier of the mind, rather than any anachronistic geographical boundary, 1960s writers contribute to a necessary renewal of the figure, as Fussell notes, "The West exerted serious imaginative impact in the United States only so long as it remained a living idea, which was only so long as it survived in real potentiality."<sup>43</sup>

The contemporary anti-Western contributes to the continuing relevance of the cowboy in a period of, otherwise negatively viewed, political appropriation. By subverting the conventions of the traditional cowboy, 1960s writers prevent the figure from becoming entirely redundant to a great deal of the population; a situation that was in danger of realization in the postwar age.

The 1960s anti-Western's creation of a distinctly metaphysical version of the cowboy instills the figure with a new philosophical validity. Furthermore, by introducing a deeper, more organized element to the rebellion of the cowboy, the figure assumes a Marcusean credibility, reinstating its relevance to a new generation of countercultural readers. The infusion of a distinctly Marcusean, pro-communal ideology indicates a reexploration of the relationship between the subject and the world. The presentation of cowboy figures who prosper through the rejection of emotional individualism echo the Personalist suggestion that the individual must seek to combine his rebellion with like-minded peoples in order to maximize his potential to change the world around him. In attempting to incorporate an overtly ethical element into the cowboy, one could suggest that writers, such as Reed, Markson, and Herlihy, produce a modern iteration of the 'social bandit'. Indeed, in some respects, the socially informed motives of the 1960s cowboy seem to parallel those of the Reconstruction Outlaws of the dime novel in the period between 1865 and 1880, "whose outlawry was a response to injustices perpetrated by corrupt officials acting at the behest of powerful moneyed interests."<sup>44</sup>

Undoubtedly, both these sets of figures are anti-heroes who stand in opposition to a society that perceived to have lost its moral, social, and political integrity. They ride into the corrupt township of American 'civilization' in order to flush out the dishonest members of officialdom, and leave the landscape in a decidedly more humanitarian fashion and they can, somehow, be seen as an integral part of the rebellion of the 1960s counterculture.

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<sup>43</sup> Edwin Fussell, *Frontier: American Literature and the American West*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970, p. 24.

<sup>44</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972, p. 129.

By reinvoking the archetypal, heroic figures of American culture, then subverting, parodying and reconfiguring them as anti-heroic, writers of the 1960s expose the gulf between the heroic ideal and its reality. The novels discussed so far attempt to reveal a significant incongruity between a national heroic ideal and its reality in contemporary postwar America and they examine the individualist and chivalric image of the traditional cowboy figure, contrasting this with the mundane and dangerous ‘reality’ of life on the frontier during the nineteenth century.

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