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ABSTRACT

THE POWER OF MYTH IN AMERICAN FILMS

The narrative of myth in film plays an important role in society as one of today’s most powerful forms of communication. Myth in film has the ability to tell stories about heroes particular to a culture and evolving from the oral tradition of the storyteller. This study analyzes myth as narrative through an examination of three genres of film: the western, gangster, and science fiction. Myth in film has helped to document and define the values and beliefs of a period, helping to redefine society. Studying the heroes found in these genres in the 1990s illuminates how myth in film teaches lessons of values and beliefs relevant to current times. Myth in film has taken this role and expanded it to speak to many cultures at once, teaching the lessons, values, and beliefs that unite this diverse populace.

Judy Diane Yhnell
August 2002
THE POWER OF MYTH IN AMERICAN FILMS

by

Judy Diane Yhnell

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Today film has become one of the main storytellers and recorders of cultural myths. The effect of both the big screen and arena type seating is that the movie theater is an excellent venue for members of society to gather and experience life lessons that magically unfold before their eyes. The physical structure of a movie theater allows the story to be communicated through sound and image to many people at one time.

The act of storytelling pertains to the narrative of myth and that which it teaches. Narration is what tells the story, and the narrative of myth found in film is the focus of analysis in this thesis. The elements of film and myth working together express meaning and communicate a particular cultural reality to large collective groups of people. The narrative of myth is found in several genres of film; however, for the purpose of this thesis, only three genres have been selected for analysis. They are examined in the chronological order of their development within American society.

Film, like the storyteller of oral tradition, has become a conveyor of social messages. People need to understand who they are and where they have come from, and
they need to have heroes that guide them through life. Stories and lessons are conveyed through the narrative of myth in film and then passed down from generation to generation of film viewers, in much the same way as the oral tradition of storytelling.

For the purpose of this thesis, myth is defined as a narrative that conveys certain ideologies found within a structure of prototypic patterns. The prototypic patterns, or standard motifs of myths, are archetypal figures such as heroes, villains, or fools that act out traditional stories that shape worldviews and explain societal customs, ideals, and behaviors.

The narrative of myth found in many American films is a means of communicating human psychological desires, fears, and truths. The importance and relevance that mythic components carry in film are worth analyzing. Sal Randazzo, author of *Mythmaking on Madison Avenue*, explained the importance of myth: "Mythology provides a window into the unconscious psyche--the non-rational, intuitive aspect of the human psyche. Myths grant us a glimpse of the human soul, our instinctual nature hidden beneath the veneer of civilization" (34). Renowned mythologist Joseph Campbell is quoted as saying, "Myths and dreams come from the same place[. . .]myths are the world's dreams[. . .]the song of the universe" (33).
Cultural myths are repeatedly used in films to convey and express collective thoughts and tensions in a manner that permits individuals to both identify and relate. They are forms of reinforcement and catharsis of the social consciousness. Victor Carrabino, author of The Power of Myth in Literature and Film, explained that "[i]t is plausible that because of the kinship of film and myth, film functions so as to relate closely to the paradoxes and tensions of national crisis and self-contradiction" (47).

Film’s ability to capture and document the tensions, values, and ideologies specific to a particular time in American history has made film a powerful tool for communication and documentation. Film not only explores cultural beliefs and ideologies, it does so as a form of entertainment. Film, as a form of entertainment, teaches values, ideas, thoughts, morals, and lessons through the narrative of myth.

A good example of this is found in the western film genre. The western captures the old west in a way that has both idealized it and given it symbolic meaning in American culture. The macho image of the rugged, independent cowboy, shooting his way through the west, conquering and claiming a frontier in the name of "manifest destiny," a founding principle for progress in the 1800s, is a predominant value of the western.
Eugene Rosow, author of *Born to Lose: The Gangster*, painted a picture describing how progress, the frontier, and geographical movement in America were important elements of the American Western and its cowboy hero.

The blazing sunsets of western stories continually point toward horizons of new beginnings in which the cowboy and his horse could ride, bearing the grail of American progress. Progress associated with the western frontier meant a geographic movement away from the decaying civilization of Europe and toward the fresh possibilities offered by the wilderness—an optimistic march away from the past toward the future of America, home of the brave, and free. (8)

Film is a vehicle for escape; it is a means to appease an unconscious need, and yet, when analyzed, it teaches us about who we are and our origins. According to Carrabino,

[A] more fruitful insight into the kinship between film and myth is suggested in an oblique argument, that the type of fiction found in myth and film is specifically unharnessed, a basic prototypic pattern capable of many variations and disguises.(37).

Another genre of film that utilizes myth's prototypic pattern is the gangster movie. In the typical gangster film, the archetypal gangster is deemed "public enemy," an antisocial hoodlum representative of the depression era.

Stephen Louis Karpf referred to this type of film as the "Little Caesar Syndrome," based on the movie *Little Caesar* that typified that genre. Karpf described the characteristics of the hero as "cockiness, swaggering, desire for power gained by illegal means, control of a mob or gang" (112). Both genres, the western and the gangster,
teach through film and the narrative of myth about a particular time in American history.

The prototypic patterns found in the narrative of myth are also very evident in the science fiction film genre. Movies such as Universal Soldier and Terminator illustrate the conflict between man and technology. Instead of man against nature or the government, the science fiction pattern is man against machine. The hero, as expected in our patriarchal society, is male. However, the female in both Universal Soldier and Terminator is a much stronger character with a larger role than she would typically have in the western or gangster genres; this is a sign of the changed times.

Myth as narrative conveys a theme, story, or character that embodies certain cultural qualities and truths. Myths help us to understand ourselves both individually and as a culture. For this reason, defining the difference between the narrative of myth and the narrative of realism is important to fully understanding myth as a narrative.

One of the sources used in the thesis is Gregory Lucent, author of the book titled The Narrative of Realism and Myth. He explained the difference between myth and realism as narrative:

Briefly then mythic components are those repeating elements of narrative which approach an existence apart from specificity of space and time, which at their core involve unified and idealized figures, and which
establish and depend upon a relationship of unquestioning belief.\(42\)

The components of realistic narrative, such as a documentary, do not ask for suspension of reason; rather, they require analysis, or even critical review, of the subject matter. This does not imply that more is taught in such films as documentaries, which rely on realistic components, but rather that the mythic narrative teaches through metaphor, archetypal figures, and prototypic patterns. The mythic narrative has been passed down from ancient generations of oral tradition and satisfies the need to understand the human condition.

Myth, unlike realism, idealizes archetypes, such as heroes, to tell a story that teaches certain human truths and consequences. For example, in the Biblical story, Adam and Eve are told to not eat the apple, but they ate it anyway. The consequences of not listening that befall them are what the narrative of myth in this story teaches. Myth, as narrative, functions to explain human consequences and, as a result, teach the morals of a society.

An excellent source for analysis of myth and storytelling is Joseph Campbell, a well-known American mythologist. He explained how myth stems from the human imagination in his book The Inner Reaches of Outer Space:

For myths and dreams, in this view, are motivated from a single psychological source--namely, the human imagination moved by the conflicting urgencies of the organs (including the brain) of the human body, of which the anatomy has remained pretty much the same
since c. 40,000 BC. Accordingly, as the imagery of the psychology of its dreamer, that of mythology is metaphorical of the psychology posture of the people to whom it pertains. (12)

Campbell based his interpretation of dreams and myths in theories of symbolism, universal patterns, and archetypes, termed as such by Carl G. Jung (1875-1961):

The same mythic motifs that Bastian had termed "elementary ideas" Jung called archetypes of the collective unconscious, transferring emphasis, thereby, from the mental sphere of rational ideation to the obscure subliminal abyss out of which dreams arise. (11)

Campbell's approach to understanding the prototypic pattern of myth as narrative is based on a finite set of archetypes stemming from a collective unconscious whence the dreams arise. Essentially, myth teaches us what we already know, yet cannot normally see or define, unless placed in the narrative of myth.

**Purpose and Importance of the Study**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine latent meanings found in cultural myths as relayed through American films. This analysis is concerned with how myth, conveyed through film, creates a powerful form of storytelling. The power of myth in film is in the message it carries. That message teaches us about human nature, both collectively and individually. Storytelling through film is an important vehicle for passing on information and values from one generation to the next.
Through film, myth can express specific values, thoughts, and ideas relevant to a particular culture and time. Film, as a modern-day storyteller, has taken on a very important role, and one that must be analyzed. This thesis focuses on how the narrative of myth in film has become an effective medium for telling stories and teaching lessons.

**Thesis Questions**

This thesis sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the relationship between myth and film?
2. Why has the union of myth and film become an important means of communication?

The objective was to gain insight into the depth of myth in film, as both a function of mass communication and a form of entertainment. This was accomplished through the analysis of three film genres—the western, gangster, and sci-fi—and their heroes.

**Methodology**

Three genres of film were selected to aid in understanding some of the cultural values and ideologies that comprise the fabric of American society as told through the narrative of myth in film. One movie within each of the three genres was analyzed to give an in-depth look at the narrative of myth and its relationship with film.
Cultural and historical analysis was used to study the narrative and the socioeconomic and political climate from which the movies were created. The study of myth as narrative is key to understanding the important role film has taken as modern-day storyteller. Here the influence and knowledge of mythologist Joseph Campbell is important, especially his explanation of myth.

Other sources for information include Gregory Lucent, for his analysis of the narrative of realism as opposed to the narrative of myth; and authors Sal Randazzo, George Laurence Gomme, and Victor Carrabino, for their insight into the meaning of myth as a form of narrative.

Other key sources of information were selected for their study of the genres analyzed in this thesis. For example, authors Eugene Rosow, Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones, and John McCarty are important for their interpretations of the gangster genre. Rita Parks and Philip French are cited for their insight into the western genre. Janice Hocker-Rushing and Thomas Frenzt are important for their study of the cyborg hero in the sci-fi genre.

Today, instead of gathering around elders and listening to stories, people gather in movie theaters to watch and listen as cultural myths unfold before their senses. Unlike literature, film has the ability to capture the visual and aural senses, making the story come alive
seemingly as reality. Whether the hero is conquering frontiers or fighting alien nations, governments, or technology, the struggle is always between good and evil, helping define cultural values and morals.

Summary of the Study

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the study of film as a cultural conveyor of stories through the narrative of myth. This chapter explores the relationship between myth and film and the importance of film as storyteller. It describes how film as a medium is very suitable for the role of modern-day storyteller. Film cuts across demographics to reach a multitude of people and present a single, unifying story that carries a message about who we are as a people.

Chapter 2 explores the relationship between myth and film. This section defines the role that dreams, archetypes, and the unconscious play in this relationship. Archetypal images and symbols are the language of dreams and the unconscious, the creative forces that propel myths in film out into human reality. They are the threads that are woven into a fabric of coherent meaning, a story in which reality is suspended by film.

Chapter 3 analyzes the three genres and identifies the social implications of all three and the need for mythologizing American culture. In this chapter, American
ideology and history are analyzed through the narrative of myth in film. Social climate, history, and geography are important elements of culture. For example, the rural and urban gangsters of film were defined greatly by the times, social climate, and geography of the nation.

Chapter 4 analyzes the narrative of myth applied in film. This section focuses on the hero in three 1990s films, each from one of the selected genres: the western, gangster and sci-fi. These films illustrate how myth changed and adapted to the time in which the different genres were created. They help explain the values, beliefs, and ideologies of the 1990s.

Chapter 5 addresses the research questions and suggests the significance of the study. This focuses on the narrative of myth in film and on film as a modern-day storyteller. As a storyteller to society, the narrative of myth in film has become an important means of communicating cultural values, beliefs, and ideals.
Chapter 2

THE NARRATIVE OF MYTH IN FILM

Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind. It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth. (Campbell 3)

Mythology does not simply encompass Greek or Roman myth; rather, it is a universal pattern and guide that is used to help people of different cultures understand who they are and where they come from. Myths are composed of universal patterns, which are interpreted to make sense to a particular culture and society. For the purpose of this thesis, myth is defined as a universal pattern or structure of narrative that uses symbols and archetypes specific to a culture and time.

Sal Randazzo, in his book Mythmaking on Madison Avenue, described the important role archetypes play in myth:

The concept of archetypes can be traced back to the ancient Greeks, to the dialogues of Plato and his Doctrine of Forms. The Greeks perceived the world in terms of universal forms—essences or archetypes—that underlay the world of day-to-day reality, and gave their “Kosmos” order and meaning. (41)
The cultures that comprise a society create their own heroes and symbols specific to their particular culture and time that tell their own story. Randazzo called this the "mythopoetic" experience:

The mythopoetic human experiences the world instinctively and intuitively—in the depths of the soul. In this sense, the mythopoetic imagination is also the realm of the artist, who also experiences the world mythopoetically, then tries to communicate that soul experience in art. (33)

This mythopoetic experience, as defined by Randazzo, comes from the same place where both myths and dreams originate. In film, the artist could be the director or producer with a message to convey and, as the artist, has this mythopoetic experience in making the film. Each artist has his or her own unique perspective that affects the story being told. In film, this perspective can be seen in the director's style or choice of camera shots, angles, special effects, and any of the other elements of film that aid in telling the story.

From a psychological standpoint, the mythopoetic experience is similar to what Carl Jung termed the "collective unconscious." Jung developed the concept that the unconscious "contains archetypal (universal) images that can be traced back to the origin of the human species and that are the same in all people" (Randazzo 35). The collective unconscious is the universe within, a place
where images come forth that shape our understanding and perception of ourselves and our culture.

This idea is also found in the structure of the narrative of myth. Randazzo illustrated how the warrior archetype can take many different forms, from the common to the uncommon—from a tribal chief to a modern-day postman. The various forms that the archetype takes depend on the times and the culture, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The archetype always remains the same: it is the culture that changes the face of an archetype according to its needs. A warrior can be a knight, a police officer, a blue-collar worker—whatever is most relevant to society at that point of reference. The fact that film is able to capture and document various changes within a society has increased the importance of its role as storyteller. Film is a means for documenting who we are and where we come from. It provides an interpretation of our modern mythic forms.

Psychotherapist Geoffrey Hill quoted Parker Tyler in an attempt to explain this phenomenon: “Hollywood is but the industrialization of the mechanical worker’s daylight dream . . . extended ritualistically into those hours reserved by custom for relaxation and amusement”(7). Hill also illustrated the “thread of mythic expression” as running something like this: Consciousness ---- Dream ---- Myth ---- Religion ---- Art ---- Drama ---- Literature ----
Cowboy

Blue-collar worker

WARRIOR
- Independence
- Strength
- Courage

Football Player

Knight

Businessman

Soldier

Gladiator

Policeman

Fig. 1. Warrior Archetype

Cinema (7). This thread illustrates that, essentially, a metaphor is born of the consciousness and moves through a chain of expressions, ending with the cinema as a final and most conclusive, lifelike means to reality.

When discussing mythology, terms such as "folktale" and "legend" come to mind. It is important to understand the differences between these two terms and the myth in the realm of storytelling. These three forms of narrative function at different stages of social development. To clarify, George L. Gomme explained the differences between the three:

The myth belongs to the most primitive stages of human thought, and is the recognizable explanation of some natural phenomenon, some forgotten or unknown object of human origin, or some event of lasting influence; the folktale is a survival preserved amidst culture—surroundings of a more advanced stage, and deals with events and ideas of primitive times in terms of the experience or of episodes in the lives of unnamed human beings; the legend belongs to an historical personage, locality, or event. (129)

One quality that these forms of mythic narrative have in common is that, however fanciful, they all speak of human truths. They do not simply tell stories; rather they tell truths about humanity and, when conveyed through film, continue their teaching role in human lives. Film as a modern-day storyteller has helped to keep these stories alive by retelling them as a storyteller would from oral tradition.
Myth as a narrative structure from the past is concerned with teaching cultural values and lessons. This form of narrative is religious and philosophical in nature and origin in that it functions to teach human truths. Legends, on the other hand, are stories based on a real person or event from the past. Legends are usually about a person who did something extraordinary, such as Jeanne d'Arc, who became a martyr and saint; they are about heroes that teach lessons about humanity. Unlike legends, folktales are pure fiction. They are concerned with people, not a hero on his journey as a myth is. Folktales may have animals that speak, such as in the story of The Three Little Pigs.

The structure or pattern of the narrative of myth differs from that of the folktale and the legend. Philip Durham and Everett Jones's explanation of how the western is more than just a film illustrates how myth is structured in the western genre: "It is precisely the rigid form of the Western which gives the contents mythological weight and significance" (328). The structure of the story—its plot and theme—distinguish it from folktales and legends. Myth as narrative carries a weighted message that relies on a rigid and repetitive structure. Film as a medium is very conducive to providing this structure in its use of visuals, sound, and special effects.
The fact that film genres, such as the western, are viewed in mythic proportions illustrates the importance and power film has as a means of communication. The social irony of myth in film is in the partnership of technology and humanity. Sal Randazzo argued that as a result of technology, the world as we know it is devoid of human myths, and humanity is lost to science. "Today’s world has been demythologized and disenchanted by science and technology," Randazzo lamented. "We are no longer open to the magical song of the universe. We no longer feel connected to nature, to the mountains, streams and trees" (32). Film not only helps to connect us to our roots, it also helps define society and give it a means to continue to learn from its history. The irony of film is that it comes from the same technology that seems to demythologize society. Yet, it is this very technology that brings society its modern-day myths in the form of storytelling.

Susan Mackey-Kallis, author of "Dreaming The Myth Outward": Oliver Stone’s America, described how film has become the modern American storyteller:

In analyzing the power of films, scholars have claimed, among other things, that films project collective images, fantasies, and values of the culture in which [they are] created. Able to inform, persuade, and reinforce existing attitudes and beliefs, films are a potent vehicle for symbolizing sociopolitical change and for expressing cultural archetypes. And along with television, popular film has become the modern American storyteller. (22-23)
The ability to capture and capitalize on cultural beliefs and ideas most prominent and at the forefront of social consciousness in a timely manner gives film power in conveying myth. The film medium offers certain qualities to the production of stories that other media, such as television, do not. For example, film's arena type seating, advancements in special effects, and unique sound and visual qualities make its impact more effective than the impact of other media.

Film, as a result, is capable of reaching more strangers at one time, giving people only a seat away a shared experience. This medium, quite often, has an enormous budget to splurge on special effects, cinematography, and top-notch acting. Thus it can be a very realistic and powerful form of storytelling. The sheer magnitude of what can be produced today cinematically makes film a very powerful means of communication—one that needs to be taken seriously.

Film, like myth, also documents cultural values and prejudices. Peter C. Rollins spoke about the important role film plays in our society in his book titled Hollywood as Historian. He suggested that film's purpose is more than simply documenting American culture; film also identifies and conveys the emotions, ideals, and attitudes of a particular period in American culture (249). The merging of myth and film has made movie genres, such as gangster,
western, and sci-fi films, into pieces of American culture. They are reels of stories from American history, cultural myths that help define a society and document stages of cultural development.

For example, the gangster film genre captures a particular culture of the 1930s and 1940s within American society. "The recurring characters, stories, themes, motifs, and iconography of gangster movies represent a superstructure of values and ideas that create a self-image of America's advanced capitalist society" (Rosow xi). The gangster film follows the structure of myth--using recurring characters, values, and ideas--telling a story particular to a place and time. Films conveying stories of mythic proportions ultimately teach about the human condition and consequences of human action.

Eugene Rosow, author of Born To Lose, pointed out that myth, and in particular the narrative of the gangster, changes and adapts according to the need and time in American culture. For example, during the Great Depression the movie gangster was viewed "as a fearless and ambitiously ruthless gunman rising to the heights of financial success and respectability" (xiv). However, a few years later the image changed: "The gangster became a scapegoat who was gunned down during the New Deal, after which he was quickly re-incarnated as a G-man who was called upon for the World War II effort to fight the Nazis"
(xiv). The role of the gangster to this day continues to change, reflecting the social climate. The gangster's role is not as prevalent in American society as it once was, and the gangster is now viewed either as an icon of the past or as a satirical figure, as can be seen in the movie Dick Tracy starring Warren Beatty and Madonna.

Myth in film, as a means of social storytelling, is society's attempt at making sense of its past and helping to define its present. People have an innate desire to understand their origins. Film, as a means of expressing the narrative of myth, satisfies that hunger and entertains at the same time. This storyteller medium communicates to a very broad audience, appeasing the social collective mind's need to know.

Myth as narrative to a collective cultural mind is naturally expressed through film. Myth in film expresses collectively the thoughts, values, and feelings of a culture. Victor Carrabino explained:

"Myth thinking" and "film thinking" are related to the creativity that occurs in associative collectives. Definitionally, filmmaking tends to be archetypical, collective, and national. Yet, it is the film's capacity to overcome or disregard time that relates it most closely to myth.(10)

The fact that the stories and characters in film change over time as they adapt to contemporary issues, values, and beliefs makes film more than a form of entertainment and a mode of communication. The union of
myth and film has become a significant means for understanding where society is developmentally. This messenger teaches a society of people about who they are and what they value. Three genres that trace this social evolution in film are the western, gangster, and sci-fi. Chapter 3 discusses the importance of these three genres and the purposes they serve in American society.
Chapter 3

FOLLOWING THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIETY THROUGH FILM GENRE

This chapter is devoted to the analysis of three film genres that have aided in the understanding of American culture throughout the history of film. Only one genre is really taken from history—the western. The gangster genre and the movie industry had a sycophantic type relationship, and the sci-fi capitalized on society's fears of where the technology would lead. All three are representative of the social struggles and issues of progress at particular points in American history.

The focal point of every story within these genres is the hero. The hero brings to the forefront of social awareness issues, beliefs, and ideologies pertinent to the time in which the story is told.

When analyzing the genre, it is important to consider the context from which the hero arises. Factors that need to be considered are the environment, socioeconomic state, and psychological climate of the nation during the time period the genre portrays. These are elements that stem from the attitudes, beliefs, and ideologies of many cultures within one nation.
The environmental aspect, the physical landscape, plays a major role in all three genres. The landscapes change from one genre to the next: from the western's wild frontier to the urban setting of the industrial age to the technological milieu of the sci-fi. Each film genre is representative of a socioeconomic and psychological stage of development within American culture.

The western outlaw was representative of the wild frontier and rugged individualism. This was America's psychological struggle in its preteen years as a developing society. The gangster, a product of urbanization and the industrial age, represented the struggle of many different emerging immigrant cultures competing for limited economic resources (McCarty xi-xii). This was America's social struggle to become a mature, successful adult. The sci-fi genre, on the other hand, is representative of the present and future. Here America is middle-aged, looking into its future golden days--its retirement, so to speak--with all the fears and concerns that accompany forward looking. The sci-fi genre is concerned with where a future that is dominated by technology. This genre captures the age of technology and the struggle between man and machine as illustrated by the dark hero, or shadow, Cyborg--half man, half machine.

The historical emergence of these genres largely chronicle the transformation of a culture and its

The Western outlaw, like his opposite number the Western hero, was a product of America’s epic nineteenth-century saga—the rugged, often violent settling of the frontier. Likewise, the gangster and his nemesis, the T-man or G-man, emerged with urban America in the twentieth century—a part of our transformation from a wild frontier society to an industrialized one in which the new ethnic groups pouring into America’s great, growing cities had to struggle sometimes violently, to claim their share of the pie. (xi)

This meshing of various ethnic groups in the United States in the early twentieth century created competition for work, which in turn created racial tensions. Soon gangs emerged, acting out their tensions in violence. The cowboys from the days of the wild frontier became the gangsters of industrialization, who epitomized the economic struggles of poor immigrants trying to make good. McCarty examined this transformation of landscape and showed that it symbolized America’s growth as a nation:

Their lawless exploits symbolized what might be called America’s adolescence—that period during which America grew from volatile teen hood to early adulthood. As the country’s maturing process continued into the next century, these loner outlaws, reflecting America’s changing culture and physical landscape, transformed into something new and equally mythic: organized gangs whose individual members became popularly known as gangsters. (xi-xii)
The Western and Its Rugged, Independent Cowboy Hero

The Western, though certainly not set in the time of America’s origin, is closest to the mindset of the new immigrants crossing uncharted territory. Western movies epitomize the age of the wild frontier and independence. Adventure and independence were exactly what the European immigrant was seeking. The immigrant wanted freedom and a chance to be more than the limits of his past allowed him to be.

Rita Parks explained that the Western, although American in origin, is based on older, universal myths:

One view acknowledges that the Western depicts certain symbolic elements of American life—the self-made man, the Edenic dream, the clever Yankee, the ultimate success of the work ethic, the triumph of physical prowess and personal energy, independence and freedom of movement. Another view accepts these myths but further insists that they are merely American versions of older tales common to all nations and culture—the death and resurrection of the hero-god, the journey, the quest, the demon trickster, the duel to the death between good and evil. (29)

The western as a myth conveyed by film is a narrative about America creating its history, defining its cultural values, ideals, and beliefs. This was a new nation that created a past, present, and future.

The American hero, the cowboy, spoke to many cultures divided under one nation. The cowboy epitomized freedom and independence, ideals highly cherished, sought after, and to this day strongly valued in American culture. This hero is
a permanent fixture in the psyche of the American consciousness.

The Western and its hero represent the time period between 1865 and 1890. This was a time in American history of vast expansion into the great unknown and uncharted territory—the western frontier. While America was claiming and conquering a wilderness and "uncivilized" native peoples, the cowboy, or frontiersman, rode ahead carrying the grail of progress—"Manifest Destiny." Author John Williams analyzed the origin of the western hero archetype:

I believe that the most usable and authentic myth available to us may be discovered in the adventure of the American West. Viewed in a certain way, the American frontiersman—whether he was a hunter, guide, scout, explorer or adventurer—becomes an archetypal figure, and begins to extend beyond his location in history. He is a nineteenth-century man moving into the twentieth century; he is a European man moving into a new continent; he is man moving into the unknown, into potentiality, and by that move profoundly changing his own nature. (Parks 36)

This nineteenth-century European man moved the grail of progress, not in the name of his European heritage, but rather in the name of America—land of the free, ripe with opportunity and self-gratification. This was the rugged individual out for adventure and whatever else he could claim.

This film genre was most popular in the time period between the 1930s and 1950s. Some of the actors who were known for playing the role of the popular gunfighter were John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, Kirk Douglas, Gary Cooper,
Henry Fonda, and Burt Lancaster. Two of Hollywood's most productive directors in this film genre were John Ford and Sam Peckinpah. John Ford produced over one hundred and twenty-five films in his film career and is best known for his contributions in and development of the western genre (Parks 108). "As My Darling Clementine epitomizes the early Ford hero, Henry Fonda epitomizes the type of actor Ford used to portray that hero--tall, lean, with an air of innocence, and projecting a curious mixture of shyness and determination." (109)

Paramount to the western, aside from the hero, is its landscape. The western film features vast, panoramic views of uncharted land stretching for miles, where cowboys blaze through on their horses, firing their guns into the air at nothing and at everything. This is a common opening scene in the western.

John Ford was know for a particular landscape:

The most notable and best known is John Ford's Monument Valley, straddling Arizona and Utah in the Navajo Reservation with its cathedral-like buttes and mesas rising out of the flat red desert, where eight of Ford's thirteen sound Westerns have been made. (French 104)

The environment, or setting, is not just the backdrop for the hero's exploits. The landscape of the West represents adventure, freedom of space, and the great unknown.

Philip French, author of Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre, examined the double meaning of the genre:
The Western is a great grab bag, a hungry cuckoo of a genre, and a voracious bastard of a form, open equally to visionaries and opportunist, ready to seize anything that's in the air from juvenile delinquency to ecology. Yet despite this, or in some ways because of it, one of the things the Western is always about is America rewriting and reinterpreting her own past, however honestly or dishonestly it may be done. (24)

The influence and perception of the director, the times in which the film was created, and the audiences' needs all have direct effect on the ultimate outcome of the story. The face of the evil villain changes from that of an individual out for his own gain to an authority figure abusing power, as viewed in the film The Unforgiven (1992), starring Clint Eastwood. The western hero in this film is a reformed gunman on a personal quest to right a wrong in a community. This speaks about the abuse of authority figures, a condition possibly found more prevalent or at the forefront of the social consciousness in the 1990s.

Somewhere between 1950 and 1980, the protagonist and antagonists change, although the hero form did not. In the 1950s the antagonist was simply a man with an evil nature who exerts illegal power over innocent victims. In the 1980s, the antagonism is more likely to be the misuse of authority and, too, the protagonist does not always act because it is the right thing to do. (Ferrell 6)

Yet, typically, the western hero has been defined and accepted into American culture mainly as director John Ford depicted in his films of this genre, as a good guy upholding the law. This cowboy was an American icon—an example of moral good. The most widely portrayed cowboy embodied virtuous traits and was dressed all in white to
signify this. He was a loner for the most part, except for his most trusted and faithful companion, his horse. He respected women and children and upheld the law by fighting the villain, who was dressed all in black to represent the opposite—the bad guy. The roles were well defined.

The Gangster as Anti-Hero

The 1920s marked a change in the American icon, from the western do-good hero to the anti-hero—the gangster. While the cowboy was out winning the West, another American icon was being born in the East—the gangster. The urban landscape, though very different from that of the rural western, definitely was in need of its own cowboy. “Because of Prohibition, the Great Depression, and World War II, gangsters assumed the mantle of yesterday’s gunslinger and outlaws, and the gangster saga replaced the Western as the quintessential American myth” (McCarty xiii). This urban hero was very different from the cowboy hero, who was a clean living, white Anglo-Saxon protecting innocent women and children.

This urban hero replaced the horse with a car and the six-shooter with a Tommy gun. He dressed to impress; gone were the leather chaps and cowboy hat, replaced by an expensive suit. This dark hero was not working for the law, but rather against it, or paying it off. This hero sported names such as “Machine Gun Kelly,” “Pretty Boy Floyd,”
"Baby Face Nelson," and "Ma Barker." "But the Immortals in this corner of gangland--immortal in that they've come to symbolize the era of the outlaw/gangster more than anyone else--are Bonnie and Clyde and John Dillinger" (McCarty 114).

Bonnie and Clyde, two historical figures from the Great Depression era, were representative of the rural gangster. Their true story reflected a particular time within American history and was told as a cultural myth in film. One of the first movies made about Bonnie and Clyde and their exploits was the 1937 version, titled You Only Live Once, made just three years after their death. The time period of their exploits was the Great Depression, when economic upheaval gave birth to lawless individuals who took the law into their own hands. This was a period in American history when people in general felt helpless. Their farms had been foreclosed by the banks; people were left jobless and homeless. Heroes such as Bonnie and Clyde emerged at the forefront of cinematic entertainment documenting this time period in American society. Since 1937, several more movies have been made telling this story. One of the more popular versions is the 1960s Bonnie and Clyde, produced by Warren Beatty.

The reason this pair of outlaws was, and still is, so popular is that they were against "public enemy number one," which at the time was the banking establishment. They
gave vicariously a voice to those without a voice, something the 1960s capitalized on. This gave those who felt helpless a sense of retribution in the wake of the depression.

As heartland Americans lost their jobs or saw their farms foreclosed on by that once admired symbol of the establishment, the banking system, rural gangs—descended in spirit from America’s frontier outlaws such as the James Gang, and led by desperados like Pretty Boy Floyd, Baby Face Nelson, and Machine Gun Kelly—rose up to assault that system, often with public endorsement. (McCarty xiii)

Bonnie and Clyde, however, had many predecessors. Before them came a string of urban gangsters from the 1920s, heroes that, unlike the rural gangsters Bonnie and Clyde, really glamorized the urban gangster’s lifestyle. One notorious and highly publicized gangster was Al Capone. “He was so popular in fact, that during his reign in gangster power, movies began mythologizing his exploits while he was still alive” (McCarty 61).

Most gangsters that were popularly viewed in film, such as Al Capone, lived or were supposed to have lived in the time period of the 1920s and 1930s. Some actors widely known for playing the infamous gangsters were James Cagney, Humphrey Bogart, and Edward G. Robinson. Their films were produced mainly by Warner Brothers studios.

Capitalism was the basis and justification for this gangster genre. The industrial world, prior to the depression, thrived on success and wealth in any way
possible. America’s work ethic and founding principles were rooted in the idea that as long as a person worked hard, anyone could be successful and rich in this land of “milk and honey.”

One of the interesting differences between the Western genre and the gangster genre is that the gangster and the movie industry exploited each other. “The gangster genre began appropriately in the Lower East Side of New York (Musketeer of Pig Ally), where it was filmed on location and previewed for a local audience”(Rosow 42). The movie gangsters were pictured primarily as second-generation Italian immigrants with a strong sense of family. The mother and Roman Catholic religion both played central roles in the gangster saga.

This urban gangster hero’s popularity was strongly affected by the economy and the times. The gangster’s fate followed the rise and fall of the economy and urban landscape. During the height of his career, in the roaring twenties, he was viewed as a high-rolling bootlegger. The movie industry cashed in on this image, documenting the gangster’s success, glamorous lifestyle, and blatant endorsement of capitalism.

During the Great Depression, the urban gangster went on to represent the fearless and ruthless gunman, who would not stop at anything to obtain success and respect. Later, as corporate America began to take over and society became
less personal, the gangster hero was again called on: "Movie gangsters again surged to the forefront of movie popularity in the troubled era of the Vietnam war and the Watergate scandals" (Rosow xiv). Whenever there was trouble, the gangster was sure to have been involved.

The gangster, like the cowboy, was created out of a cultural need. He was a visual icon of hope and a guide to a better life. He embodied the values and ideology of the times; he was a physical connection to the abstract. The gangster is an example of how heroes help society to understand itself, to shape and define its code of existence according to the times and the socioeconomic and political climate.

The Technological Sci-Fi and Its Hero, the Cyborg

The new American hero that has come to the forefront of cinematic entertainment is the sci-fi shadow hero, half machine and half human—the cyborg. This hero, unlike its predecessors, is not quite human, possibly posing an unknown threat to society and mankind. Authors Janice Rushing and Thomas Frentz of Projecting the Shadow: The Cyborg Hero in American Film, described the "hunter myth" that explains the development of the American psyche up to this latest cultural hero:

Prepared and guided by the shaman and the older men, the adolescent Indian boy ventures forth from his mother and his tribal circle to hunt a wild animal. Propitiating the animal's spirit with prayer, he kills
it with a weapon invested with sacred power and often given him by women. He returns his prey to the tribe, which gratefully uses it for sustenance and survival. The hunter is initiated as a hero into the society of adult men; he is now capable of leading his tribe.

Attracted by the Indian’s natural freedom, the white frontiersman imitates his hunting ritual. Early on, the influence of his religion binds the frontier hunter morally to his society and prevents him from killing more than he needs. But eventually both his culture and his God become impediments to what he now sees as “freedom”--the conquering of the American frontier. Since Indians as well as wild beasts occupy the land he wants, he slaughters both indiscriminately, gaining a decisive advantage over his human prey because of his large numbers, his more sophisticated weaponry, and his lack of spiritual restraint. Although his frontierism converts “savagery” to “civilization,” the white hunter himself cannot reside in society without losing his individualistic heroic status, and thus he does not return from the hunt to exercise cultural leadership.

Tasting great success in conquering the wilderness, the frontier hero desires to maintain and extend his control over the earth. Because he is so good at making machines, he now uses brains more than brawn, and he prefers to minimize his contact with nature, which can be uncomfortable and menacing. Thus he creates ever more complex tools to do his killing and other work for him. Having banished God as irrelevant to the task at hand, the hero decides he is God, and, like that now obsolete power, creates beings “in his own image”; this time, however, they are more perfect versions of him--rational, strategic, and efficient. He may fashion his tools either by remaking a human being into a perfected machine or by making an artificial “human” from scratch. Unfortunately, however, these new creations have designs of their own that the hero fails to foresee. At first, they demand to be cared for, to be given a legitimate and valued place in society. Afraid and repulsed at what he has done, the creator refuses his offspring’s requests. Like their human creator, these technological beings develop a desire for complete freedom, and so they declare themselves to be God and set out to hunt and ultimately eliminate their maker. (54)

This scenario is played out beautifully in the *Terminator* movies, in the sequel of which the role of the
cyborg changes from evil to good. The cyborg is quite often representative of the shadow character, such as Darth Vader in Star Wars, or possibly the first version of a cyborg—Frankenstein. These shadow characters are used as examples of what can happen if society is not careful and the hero loses control to his darker side, his shadow.

When the cyborg plays the shadow character, a human hero, such as Luke Skywalker, must step up to destroy the creature that has seized power over mankind.

The sci-fi myth and its hero are no longer limited to the American experience; technology has enabled them to transcended regional and cultural boundaries, becoming more of a universal myth. This is the stage of development Marshall McLuhan defined as the "retribalization" of society. McLuhan suggested that, whereas print had dissociated and individualized people, technology is now bringing people back together to share in their social existence (37).

Some good cyborgs have been portrayed in films such as the Universal Soldier, Time Cop, and Terminator II: Judgment Day. These are very good examples of the cyborg embodying good virtues and values of society, protecting its women and children and fighting the "bad guy." In the case of the Universal Soldier (Jean-Claude Van Damme starring as the cyborg), it is the human creator, the authority abusing power, that the cyborg fights to right
the wrong. This is also the case in *Terminator II*, in which Arnold Schwarzenegger, who plays the good cyborg, fights for mankind against his machine creators that had originally been created by mankind. Both of these films, created in the 1990s, speak of current fears that society has of technology. They depict society's fear that at the current rate of technological advancement, especially in areas such as cloning and bio-robotics, technology may one day take over and kill its creator.

**Summary**

Films such as these, representing the three genres, the western, gangster, and sci-fi teach us about the beliefs, struggles, hardships, and social climate specific to particular periods of time within American history. The characters take on a unified and idealized relationship found within society's shadow side similar to that of the real gangster who lived during the Great Depression. Further analysis of the narrative of myth in film, with particular attention to the hero of the 1990s, is presented in chapter 4.
Chapter 4

AN ANALYSIS OF THE HERO IN THE 1990S

In this chapter the narrative of myth is examined in three movies relevant to contemporary American society. Each movie, representative of one of the selected genres, was produced in the 1990s. These movies were specifically chosen on the bases of their selection and use of archetypes and the meaning interpreted in the story. They are illustrative of current fears and desires that have helped to define and shape perceptions of modern American culture. Special attention is paid to the type of hero and his or her role in each of the three stories. The movies are the sci-fi Terminator II: Judgment Day, the western Unforgiven, and Oliver Stone’s Natural Born Killers of the gangster genre.

A prevalent archetype that is found in all of these movies is the shadow, which represents our darkest desires and undesirable qualities. The journeys are about finding, exploring, conquering and embracing this shadow self. The shadow is a reflection of the hero, something that he or she may try to reject or come to embrace. The qualities of the shadow can be good for the hero, aiding him, somehow, in his quest. The first movie genre analyzed is the sci-fi and its shadow hero, the cyborg.
The Sci-Fi and Its Hero, The Cyborg

Terminator II: Judgment Day explores the shadow side of society, its fears about the future of a technologically driven society and the loss of its humanity to its own creation, the machine. Terminator II: Judgment Day was written and directed by James Cameron. The Terminator movies are exceptional examples of the narrative of myth at work in film, particularly Terminator II, which uses several archetypes and clearly depicts the journey heroes must take into the shadow. Through the narrative of myth in this film, the movie is able to transcend the obvious and communicate real fears, beliefs, and values relevant to current times.

Fear about the future of technology is a recurring theme found in the sci-fi genre. The battle between man and machine portrays a fear of losing humanity to the machine. This is represented by a figure that is half human and half machine, the cyborg. Cyborgs are often portrayed as evil, in that the human half gives in to the dark side, that of the machine. Examples of this evil marriage are portrayed in characters such as Darth Vader of Star Wars, and the terminators of Terminator I and II.

The first Terminator movie had two heroes, one from the future--the father of the unborn future leader of the human race--and the future mother, Sarah Conner, who is brought back in the sequel as a very buff and lean fighting
machine. The sequel has two new heroes. One of these new heroes is Sarah's son John, and the other is the terminator himself, who this time has been sent back in time to protect John. The terminator has switched sides in Terminator II, from that of the shadow, or evil, cyborg to the side of good. In this sequel, he is protecting mankind rather than trying to destroy and take over.

There is also a new villain, the shape-shifting cyborg T-1000. The shape-shifter's role in myth is one of deception, to lead the hero astray. The T-1000 does this by taking on various forms, such as that of a police officer and that of John's foster mother, in order to capture and destroy John. The heroes, however, are much too clever and this time, with the aid of technology, they are able to combat technology--the evil cyborg--with technology--the good terminator.

The terminator is programmed to protect humanity by guarding its future leader--John Conner. John teaches this terminating cyborg what it means to be human, and that, as a machine, he is not to go around killing people. The terminator begins to take on the roles of John's father and John's friend, and as a result of its ability to learn and adapt to humans, becomes a little more humanlike. Sarah Conner, on the other hand, becomes more and more machine-like. She shows no motherly instincts or feelings towards John; instead she has a complete drive to beat the machine
and save humanity. Sarah is shown in excellent physical shape, dressed in fatigues and full combat gear. Her mission is to protect her son, the future leader, and destroy the man responsible for creating the computer chip that will cause a future war between man and the machine.

The main underlying premise of the movie is revealed in a scene in which John is watching two boys playing with guns and pointing them at each other. John comments about this to the terminator, whose response is: “It’s in your nature to destroy yourselves.” Man’s ability to destroy man with his own devices is what started the future war between man and the machine.

There is a caveat to this, however: Man also has the ability to create his own destiny and change his future, thereby undoing that which he caused in the first place. This is illustrated in the narrative of both movies. The first Terminator sends John’s father back in time to ensure the conception of the future leader. In the second movie, a good terminating cyborg is sent back to help protect the future leader and help destroy the computer chip that caused the future demise of humanity.

This theme is reiterated in a scene in which Sarah carves “No Fate” into a wooden table, and John, upon finding this, explains to the terminator how his father from the future, in the first movie, had explained this to Sarah. There is “No fate, only what we make for ourselves,”
he insists. The narrative of the myth in this film tells us that humans have the ability to destroy, and they do destroy to create their future. This is done through technology and the heroes' drive to save mankind. The battle is more about man against man than man against machine. This is the message carried throughout the movie, ending with the final sacrifice of the machine.

The final scene shows the destruction of T-1000, as he plummets to non-existence in a vat of melted metal, along with a computer chip from the previous terminator that had been saved. In this ending scene, a final sacrifice is made by the good terminator. The terminator proclaims that the battle will not be over until one other chip is destroyed. He points to his head, which on one side looks human and the other, having been torn, is machine. The cyborg, as a programmed machine, does not have the ability to self-destruct, so Sarah and John must lower him into the vat. John becomes tearful at this point, for he feels he is losing a father and true friend, something he had not had before and has found in this machine. The narrative tells us that technology is not necessarily a bad invention, that it in fact can be used for good.

The fact that the terminator wants to sacrifice himself for the good of mankind and his final words before he is lowered to his death—"I now know why you cry"—shows that the machine can understand human emotion and even
become somewhat human. Sarah's ending statement also supports this: "If a machine--a terminator--can learn the value of human life, than maybe we can too." This ending statement is a lesson to be learned.

The cyborg in this movie is an ideal choice of hero in a technologically advanced society that is trying to make sense of itself. This hero, as shown in both films, can be either good or bad, like the cowboy or gangster, depending on the time in which the story is told. In this particular time period of American society, the machine both works for humans and works against them. The message that is conveyed in these two narratives is that ultimately man determines his outcome and he must value human life. The story and its heroes illustrate current conflicts between man and his machine, or, more to the point, of man and himself. The cyborg, coupled with the two human heroes, is an ideal hero for conveying this message. They all embody the values, fears, and beliefs of society in the 1990s.

The Western Cowboy Hero

The hero of the western genre is much different from the cyborg in the sci-fi genre, though both grapple in their own ways with their shadows. The Unforgiven, a modern-day western, was produced and directed by the hero himself, Clint Eastwood. Clint Eastwood is no stranger to the western film genre, having played many roles as the
lone gunman, some as a good man and some a bad one. The objective of Unforgiven was to portray the western of the past in the light of the present, painting a more realistic and unromantic 1990s version.

Clint Eastwood plays William Munny, a reformed gunman turned pig farmer who is down on his luck. His wife died after saving him from his evil ways by her virtuousness, leaving him with two children to raise. Left with a failing pig farm, his children dressed in rags, his home a poorly constructed shack, this hero is called upon for a journey. This journey is one that ultimately leads to the resurrection of his shadow. At first, he does not accept the mission, afraid that he will give in to his former ways. However, tempted by the possibility of turning around his misfortunes and providing for his family, he finally accepts. This journey begins with good intentions: Munny wants to improve his children’s living conditions. It ends in revenge.

This hero’s journey is not the typical self-sacrifice for the good of humanity; rather, it is a sacrifice of the reformed self. This sacrifice comes out of a necessity for self-preservation. The hero’s journey is about releasing the shadow that he had been suppressing—and resurrecting his former self.

Munny is tempted throughout the story to go astray by the kid he becomes a mentor to, the community of Big
Whiskey, and even his old partner and friend. What is strange is that this hero must confront his shadow, his former dark self, in order to once again enter the land of the living. This is illustrated several times when he tries to combat the bad with good and is only kicked down into the dirt of failure.

The values of the reformed pig farmer can no longer carry the hero through life; he must fight evil with evil—good is no longer the prescription for life. Munny learns that he can no longer suppress his shadow, that he must take on those traits, to a certain extent, to survive and take care of his children. He must resurrect his shadow for the greater good of his family. This is an example of the shadow qualities actually benefiting the hero.

The main villain Munny must battle and destroy is the sheriff of Big Whiskey, Little Bill. Little Bill is a sadistic ex-gunfighter still out for himself and not the good of the community. He wears the mask of authority, taking on the role of a shape-shifter. Little Bill's role is to deceive the community with his badge in order to exert his corrupt influence and allow injustice to prevail.

The women seeking retribution are prostitutes, one of the two kinds of women depicted in the western genre (the other is usually a schoolteacher or virtuous wife). When the sheriff dismisses the men responsible for cutting up the face of one of the prostitutes, the prostitutes decide
to take the law into their own hands, placing a thousand-
dollar bounty on the cowboys' heads. Clint Eastwood becomes
the unlikely hero, taking up the prostitutes' battle out of
a need for money. At first he tries to couch his decision
in terms of a greater sacrifice--avenging the innocent
prostitute--since he is no longer the cold-blooded killer
of his youth. Unlike the man of his past, he allows the
innocent men to live, this time knowing the value of human
life.

Munny is not able to escape his past and deny his
shadow self. The resurrection of his shadow ultimately sets
him free. He is released from his dead wife's memory and
the impoverished pig farm so that he can once again live.
This journey leads to the death of an unhappy life, bound
up in the memory of his departed wife, and the birth of a
new life in which he has more control over his family's
fate.

The hero in this western is dressed in black and rides
a white horse. The roles are not as well defined as they
were in the films of John Ford. This time, the hero is a
reformed gunman fighting against a corrupt authority, and
he must revert to his shadow self to prevail. This western
is a dark reality, not a romantic, fictional story that was
common in the earlier western genre.

The message of the narrative of myth is similar to
that of Terminator II: Judgment Day. The message and lesson
to be learned is that it is in man's nature to destroy himself, and in order to not self-destruct, man must learn to value human life and take control of his destiny. There is no fate except what man makes for himself. The hero takes control of his fate by releasing and accepting his shadow.

This is a journey, an exploration into the shadow side of humanity. One of the main messages communicated in the narrative is that violence begets violence; in order to fight violence the western hero must use violence as a necessary evil. This message is also present in the narrative of the film *Natural Born Killers*, which can be viewed as a postmodern adaptation of *Bonnie and Clyde*.

**The Gangster as Anti-Hero**

For the purpose of this thesis, *Natural Born Killers* represents the postmodern adaptation of the story of the rural gangsters Bonnie and Clyde. The narrative, characters, and theme of *Natural Born Killers* are unusually similar to those of *Bonnie and Clyde*. There have been many versions of *Bonnie and Clyde* over time; a 1960s version was directed by Arthur Penn and produced by Warren Beatty. The message conveyed a struggle of social psychological advancement that was taking place in the 1960s similar to that occurring during the Great Depression, when gangsters
were popularly personified in the movies as a certain type of dark hero.

The 1960s was a time in American history of rebellion against the establishment, against authority; Bonnie and Clyde embodied these rebellious traits. They were two young, beautiful people, supposedly in love, who just "did not give a damn." They did not believe in authority and took and did whatever they wanted. The 1960s was a time of free love, rebellion, and questioning of authority. Bonnie and Clyde were icons or heroes that embodied these traits. Thus it makes sense that these figures from the 1930s would be at the forefront of cinematic storytelling in the 1960s. In the 1990s, the times called upon them again; this time, however, they are Mickey and Mallory of Natural Born Killers.

Oliver Stone’s film Natural Born Killers (1994) can be viewed as a postmodern adaptation of the classic film Bonnie and Clyde. Although, nowhere does Oliver Stone state that this is an adaptation of Bonnie and Clyde, the plot and characters are peculiarly alike. This is where the narrative of myth and the archetypes come into play. The story and heroes are interchangeable. In Natural Born Killers, the names have changed from Bonnie and Clyde to Mickey and Mallory, who are two young, lusty lovers with a taste for violence and rebellion. These two set off on the road of adventure and a self-fulfilling killing spree,
similar to that of Bonnie and Clyde. However, instead of targeting the banking establishment, they focus on the media and society’s sick relationship with this enterprise.

On a psychological level of social development, the story is about society advancing into its alter ego stage while embracing its shadow side. The alter ego is society’s self-fulfilling persona, and the shadow its darker feelings, thoughts, and desires, that in this case also appear to help the heroes in their journey.

The journey of these two dark heroes is an exploration into their darker sides and a self-fulfilling fate as natural born killers. Unlike society, they are bold enough to embrace their destiny and be honest about who they are. Society is fed by the media that, like vultures, follow their every move, glamorizing their exploits, as they did in the real lives of Bonnie and Clyde.

Stone’s purpose, it appears, for recreating this version of Bonnie and Clyde is to convey a message about the sick relationship between the media and society. Natural Born Killers’ dark heroes’ alter egos of self-fulfillment are in direct contact with their shadow side, enabling them to kill ruthlessly and not feel remorse. This is their undeniable destiny and, in some perverse way, they try to save humanity from itself. The media feed off this, and the viewers are glued to their television sets, eating up the couple’s exploits and even admiring the couple.
The Bonnie and Clyde type heroes come into play when society is in a mode of destruction, taking down barriers and questioning authority. Throughout Natural Born Killers are images depicting this societal destruction. These images are on the walls of their hotel, on their own bodies, in the windows of the prison and in the prison itself when riots break out and officials are massacred—the inmates fleeing to freedom and their undeniable fate.

The images are of fire, wild stallions running free, sex, death, and blood. For example, right before a violent scene takes place, an animated image of blood and violence flashes across the screen. This violence is reinforced by the behavior of the media.

The movie contains definite themes of the media fueling the fire and violence begetting violence. The reporters follow Mickey and Mallory as they would follow rock stars; they are as enamored of them as is the public they report to. Mickey and Mallory are viewed as two ruthless, beautiful lovers, wild and free, like the images of the wild stallions. The media, police, and public chase them across the great American landscape of the west as they did Bonnie and Clyde.

This is a common American theme, running free and wild, the images and landscape supporting the message. The landscape has played an important role throughout history in the western, gangster, and sci-fi genre. Bonnie and
Clyde were rural gangsters, so the landscape was vast and rural, indicating a certain sense of freedom on the open road. Like their predecessors, Mickey and Mallory spend a lot of time in their car, a red mustang, on the road, running from the law.

Mickey and Mallory embody some of the traits and values of typical heroes. They believed their destiny, their fate, was to be killers. They believed that their journey into the self-fulfillment of their dark side would help society see its true self. The saw the law as corrupt and the media feeding furiously on their exploits; they do indeed appear to be sane in an insane world.

**Summary**

The heroes of these three films embody the values and beliefs of the 1990s. Their journeys are similar to those of earlier heroes of their genres, yet different in that they are on journeys that reflect ideas, values, and thoughts relevant to the 1990s.

For example, the journey of the heroes in *Terminator II: Judgment Day* is about fears pertaining to the future of technology and losing humanity to its own creation. The journey of *Unforgiven* is about not being able to escape the past, and learning to accept it in order to move forward. The hero is more ambiguous than earlier cowboys, no longer defined by the typical characteristics of the original
western; nothing is merely black and white. Munny ultimately reverts to his former bad self and escapes his fate as an unsuccessful pig farmer. The heroes of Natural Born Killers journey into their alter-ego of self-fulfillment and fully embrace their shadow side.

The themes found in these movies and the messages they convey are about the destiny of mankind and the choice to either be a victim of destiny or to take control of one's fate. Violence seems to be a necessary evil in combating evil and gaining control. The issues are about the future of technology, the value of human life, the exploits of the media, and the questioning of authority and human nature. The movies explore society's shadow side, whether that shadow side is psychological or technological development, and how humanity will deal with its future.
Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

In the beginning there was rhyme, used as a means for remembering a story told in the oral tradition. After rhyme, society's stories were recorded through the written word. Today, the union of myth and film has created a powerful form of communication that fulfills a very basic and primitive human need. This study has shown the importance of myth in film's role as a modern-day storyteller.

The ability to capture an audience's attention and convey meaning through film allows us to continue telling our cultural stories, helping us better understand who we are and where we come from. Myth as a narrative teaches particular human truths. Combined with film, this narrative is powerful, having the ability to convey the ideals and values of a particular time and culture. Modern society continues to learn from its past, present, and future through the narrative of myth in film. This allows America to develop and define itself as a nation.

This research addressed the relationship of myth to film and explored how this union has become a powerful means of communication. Film as a means of communication to many at once is powerfully matched with the narrative of
myth. Both are forms of communication, film as the means and myth as the carrier of human truths. The union is powerful not only in the message it carries, but in its ability to convey its message to a multitude of diverse cultures at once.

Chapter 2 addressed the question: What is the relationship between myth and film and how has this union become an important means of communication? Myth was defined as a universal pattern or structure of narrative that encompasses more than Greek or Roman myths. Myth as a particular type of narrative uses archetypes that take on the appearance of the times and culture, such as the cowboy hero viewed in the western.

In myth, there is always a hero on a journey and a lesson to be learned. This narrative teaches and conveys human truths, values, beliefs, and the fears of a society. Film as a means of technological communication transmits this narrative to many at one time, aiding the narrative of myth in conveying these certain truths and lessons to a large society of many different people. This is a powerful form of communication that not only teaches; it also brings many different cultures and subcultures together to share in the life experiences and lessons of the story being told. Unlike the storyteller of the oral tradition, film can reach all of the diverse groups that now comprise a single nation.
Film's ability to document a society's stories helps us to remember them and the lessons they teach. The visual images, special effects, and sound enhance the story. They enable the story to magically unfold before our eyes, pulling us into the story and suspending our belief; we vicariously experience the journey of the hero. The result of the powerful union of myth and film is a modern-day storyteller.

Chapter 3 illustrated how this union helped to define the changing fears, ideals, and values of American society. It traced the development of society from the frontier days to the present technological society America has become through three genres of film.

The western genre actually takes from history to create its stories of the lone rider--a cowboy dressed in white, wearing a six-shooter, and riding his faithful companion, his horse. This cowboy represented the values and ideals of 1865-1890, when he lived, and of the 1930s-1950s, when the genre was popular. He was a rugged individual in search of the "Edenic dream"--adventure and freedom--exploring a vast expanse of uncharted territory.

This rugged individual and American icon lost popularity in time, trading in his horse, six-shooter, and chaps for a suit, automobile and tommy gun. The new American hero was the gangster. The gangster was popular in the 1930s, a time of struggle amongst many competing
immigrants in a new land with limited resources. The gangster became a champion for the newly arrived immigrant and further capitalized on the American ideal of the "Edenic dream."

The movie industry idealized the gangster, and the two soon formed a sycophant type relationship. The movie industry glamorized the gangster and his escapades, and the gangster later helped at times to finance gangster movies, forging a business relationship between the two. The movie industry and the gangster eventually moved from New York to Hollywood.

Another aspect of the gangster genre was the landscape that, like the western landscape, became very symbolic. The gangster was born during the industrial age that led to a predominantly urban landscape, which became the backdrop for his escapades. The movie industry illustrated the success of the gangster's career by the height of the building the gangster occupied. The bigger the success of the gangster's career, the higher the building that he occupied.

Another interesting development that film documented with this archetype was the change of the gangster's role in American society as society's values changed. The ability of film to communicate to many diverse people at once and myth's ability to record this change in the archetype's role from that of ruthless urban gangster to
patriotic war-time "G-man" helps us to continually examine ourselves as a nation.

The sci-fi genre took us into a technological landscape and into the future. The sci-fi delves into modern-day fears of where the advancement of technology will lead us. The sci-fi genre illustrates these fears as a struggle between man and machine. The cyborg, representative of these fears, half man and half machine, often becomes the unlikely hero when the human side overcomes the side that is machine. In the sci-fi, society has developed into its more mature adult years: having conquered its uncharted territory and resolved its problems with immigrant cultures, it is ready to consider its future as a nation of diverse people. This future involves technology and perhaps its final frontier—space. No longer bound to the physical landscape, space is the next step in the advancement of society.

The central values found in all three genres are capitalism, progress, adventure, independence, and freedom. Film transmits and documents these values as myth records the changes found in the archetypes of society's stories. Chapter 4 explores some of the heroes found in the three genres in the 1990s. Modern films help us to better understand ourselves through heroes more representative of present-day issues.
The heroes in each of the three films examined are found either struggling with or embracing their fate and their shadow side. The shadow struggle is with both the psychological and technological advancements of society. This struggle reveals how American society sees itself, its fears, values, and beliefs. The struggle teaches society about itself and its current fears about where it is going and what it must do to avoid making catastrophic errors.

Film's ability to reach many people at once and to document their stories helps the individuals within a society composed of many subcultures to remember the lessons taught to prior generations. This enables society to develop as a nation of many. The result is powerful, uniting many cultures to create one society of peoples. The role of the storyteller in the oral tradition was to teach the people of a culture about who they were, where they came from, and where they were going. Today, with the advent of technology, merging film and myth has expanded our ability to communicate these important things to a larger, more diverse populace.

The genres of western, gangster, and sci-fi and the films within these genres illustrate the social development of America. Through the narrative of myth, we are able to view our past and present heroes that embody our beliefs, values, and ideas and travel vicariously on a journey that helps us remember that we are only human. As humans we make
mistakes. We can become so caught up in ourselves, our technology, our advancement in career and society, that, ultimately, we forget who we are. In earlier times, it was the job of the storyteller to place things in perspective, to help us remember. Now, that is the role of myth in film.
REFERENCES


