

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WASTELAND IN AMERICAN CULTURE

By Joshua Peterson

In this paper, I examine the sense of restlessness and the resultant apocalyptic fantasy in contemporary American culture by distilling two film genres—the Hollywood western and the post-apocalyptic—down to their basic structural elements. The post-apocalyptic genre’s aesthetic and thematic borrowing from the Hollywood western signifies a cynical critique of the frontier myth. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner presented *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, his “Frontier Thesis,” which mourns the closure of the frontier and celebrates the American institutions built upon it.<sup>1</sup> The frontier only exists insofar as it is available for human exploration and settlement. Though the frontier is long gone, the desire for open space and freedom from social restriction remains prominent in American culture. The post-apocalyptic genre continues Turner’s mourning and indulges the fantasy of free and open space. In essence, it gives the frontier back to viewers by undoing everything that the frontier made possible. The characters in the post-apocalyptic genre then explore the possibilities of rebuilding society and struggle (and often fail) to avoid the mistakes of America’s historical past. In this sense, the wasteland functions as a revision of the frontier myth. This paper explores the post-apocalyptic genre’s view of the frontier myth as a trajectory towards civilization’s collapse. It posits a more cynical view of humanity and, in doing so, aims to expose the feet of clay on which our social order stands. In the process, a new myth is generated: the mythic wasteland.

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<sup>1</sup> Turner, Frederick J. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1893. 2. Web. 5 Nov. 2013.

## I. “Hi there!”

Sheriff Rick Grimes wakes up in a hospital room after he is shot in the line of duty. The power is out and the plants are dead. It is clear that nobody has been here in a long time. He hobbles out onto the street and finds himself in a mass of urban detritus. Military tanks are abandoned. Buildings are ransacked, many of them in ruins. Dead bodies are strewn everywhere, many of them shambling and hungry for flesh. That is to say: in this world, the dead walk. He eventually makes his way to the police station and gathers supplies, outfitting himself with a police uniform, a cowboy hat, and a gun. He mounts a horse and rides into the wasteland.<sup>2</sup>

In this first episode of AMC’s *The Walking Dead*, Sheriff Grimes could just as easily be riding into the frontier wilderness on his way to Tombstone. The warm, muted tones of the wasteland—washed out yellows and grays—are not so different from faded earthy tones of the land out West. Wide establishing shots dwarf Grimes beneath skyscrapers of concrete and metal. He may as well be John Wayne riding among the monoliths of Monument Valley. The unrelenting mass of hungry undead are not dissimilar to the shrieking, arrow-slinging “savages.” This aesthetic is not limited to *The Walking Dead*; it is conventional in the entire post-apocalyptic genre. The surface similarities are uncanny, but they are signifiers for much deeper philosophical points.

This evocation of a familiar western scenario is not unprecedented. Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* follows a group of American soldiers in flight towards the Soviet Union. Their ability to communicate with their home base is completely cut off due to the meddling of a renegade war general. A war room full of frantic government officials tries to stop them, but to no avail. They are well on their way and any attempts to initiate communication are fruitless. Their mission is to unleash a nuclear holocaust upon the Soviets. The technology on the plane fails, but the men are determined to complete their task. One soldier, donning a cowboy hat, climbs onto one of the bombs with the words “Hi there!” painted on it. After only a few moments, the repairs are completed and the hatch opens with the soldier still on the bomb. The cowboy figure excitedly lifts his hat above his head with his free hand as he rides his nuclear horse into the Soviet Union. In a flash of light, and the mushroom cloud that follows, the enemy is vanquished.<sup>3</sup>

*Dr. Strangelove* presents this narrative in such a way that seems so obviously ridiculous. The character in the cowboy hat signifies an American historical trajectory. He recalls an entire tradition of stories—stories of a figure restoring order to the mythic West, making it possible to build America. The cowboy figure often maintains order on the frontier with brute force and deadly weapons. Here, however, viewers watch as the cowboy rides a bomb into the threat, highlighting the truly destructive force behind the myth and warning us that the *telos* of the mythic frontier is not complete when America has been built.<sup>4</sup>

*Dr. Strangelove* takes the future-oriented gaze of the frontier to its very end. After the apocalypse, when there is nothing left but wasteland, those who are left wandering often look to a world that no longer exists. The title for the aforementioned first episode of *The Walking Dead*, “Days Gone Bye,” is very fitting. It looks back to the past. Rick Grimes is a figure from days long gone. The title provokes a prolonged sense of abandonment. He was unconscious in a hospital bed during the disaster. He has no knowledge of what happened. When he wakes up to

2 *The Walking Dead*. “Days Gone Bye.” Andrew Lincoln. DVD. AMC. 31 Oct. 2010.

3 *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. Slim Pickens. DVD. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. 1964. Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 2001.

4 *Dr. Strangelove*.

find himself in a new world, it is because the days have gone by without him. He is a figure from the past who rides on horseback into the wasteland and into an uncertain future. Into the urban decay he goes, ready to pull the pieces back together.<sup>5</sup>

The post-apocalyptic film gives viewers back the possibility of the frontier, but at a price. The frontier that is returned to us is not the one that we had before. The wasteland recreates the frontier by undoing everything that it accomplished and, in doing so, deconstructs the frontier myth. In its wake, a new myth is produced: the mythic wasteland.

## II. Etymology and Definitions

In his short story “The Plot,” Jorge Luis Borges describes a scene that has happened time and again. He writes, “Fate is partial to repetitions, variations, symmetries” and traces the betrayal and assassination of Caesar nineteen centuries into the future to the story of a gaucho who is murdered by his fellow gauchos.<sup>6</sup> A single act accrues power by virtue of its repetition. Despite the “variations” among these stories, they share a common tragic core. Due to this repetition, the significance of the story is amplified.

As I examine the “repetitions, variations, [and] symmetries”<sup>7</sup> that emerge between western and post-apocalyptic films and texts, it is key to remember that this conversation between genres is made possible by the law of genre itself. Aside from the variations in their narratives (or “plots,” shall we say) the western and the post-apocalyptic films and texts share a common core, both within their genres and between one another. In his essay “Genre,” Andrew Tudor writes, “To call a film a western is thought of as saying something interesting or important about it. To fit it into a class of films suggests we presumably have some general knowledge about it.”<sup>8</sup> Given all of the variations in theme, character, and plot, among other things, what does it really mean to call a film a western or post-apocalyptic? Where some genre titles, such as horror, refer to the genre’s intent,<sup>9</sup> the genres I analyze here seem to refer mainly (but not exclusively) to space and temporality.<sup>10</sup>

The simplest answer to the question “What defines a western?” can be found in the genre title itself. The genre “western” suggests both a place and a time period. Jim Kitses writes, “First of all, the western is American History. Needless to say, this does not mean that the films are historically accurate or that they cannot be made by Italians. More simply, the statement means that American frontier life provides the milieu and the mores of the western, its wild bunch of cowboys, its straggling towns and mountain scenery.”<sup>11</sup> As he defines the western, Kitses situates the genre in a spatial and temporal dimension that is simultaneously specific and nonspecific. The time, generally speaking, is somewhere between 1865 and 1890. The place is the frontier. The

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5 *The Walking Dead*. “Days Gone Bye.”

6 Borges, Jorge L. “The Plot.” In *The Aleph and Other Stories*, Edited by Andrew Hurley, 157. Translated by Andrew Hurley. New York: The Penguin Group, 2004.

7 Ibid.

8 Tudor, Andrew. “Genre.” In *Film Genre Reader II*, edited by Barry K. Grant, 3. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995.

9 Tudor. “Genre.” 4.

10 Though the word “western” only explicitly refers to space and “post-apocalyptic” only explicitly refers to temporality, the two dimensions are intricately tied in both genres.

11 Kitses, Jim. “Authorship and Genre: Notes on the Western.” In *The Western Reader*. Edited by Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman, 57. New York: Limelight Editions, 1998.

frontier is an iconic setting, but it is characterized by a lack of specificity. It is a nebulous and mythic space, a space largely undefined by peoples and cityscapes. It is an open space, a space of freedom—freedom of movement, exploration, and expansion.<sup>12</sup> The word frontier, however, refers to a border or boundary, both of which seem to be the polar opposite of freedom. Frontier comes from the Middle English *frounter* and means “the edge of a settled area” or “front.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, the frontier is a boundary between the settled and unsettled; its placement in front implies that it is something towards which one moves.

The freedom that the frontier promises, then, implies the coexistence of something like constraint that one has to move away from in order to achieve. It is simply not enough to say that what defines the frontier, and the western genre by extension, is a free space in a historical context. Rather, the understanding of the frontier as “in front of” implies that this freedom is a structure of relation. Freedom does not exist on its own; it exists in relation to something else. Thus, the frontier does not offer us some general and abstract freedom, but freedom *from*. It establishes boundaries and limitations such that it can be defined as being outside of them.

The post-apocalyptic genre’s defining feature is that of an apocalypse. Like the western, it is defined against something that it is not—a well-established and arguably restrictive social order. The apocalypse is often conceived of as widespread destruction, but as Elizabeth Rosen reminds us, “The etymological root of the word apocalypse is the Greek *apokalypsis*, meaning ‘unveiling’ or ‘uncovering.’”<sup>14</sup> Over time, “apocalypse” has taken on a different meaning. Rosen goes on to differentiate this understanding of “apocalypse,” which is common in religious and eschatological narratives, from what she calls “neo-apocalyptic.”<sup>15</sup> She writes:

This form sees the apocalyptic genre’s message of hope largely subsumed by its emphasis on destruction, even though the main intent of the traditional story of apocalypse was to provide its audience with hope of a better world. To this extent, then, neo-apocalyptic literature is a literature of pessimism; it functions largely as a cautionary tale, positing potential means of extinction and predicting the gloomy probabilities of such ends. If these tales exhibit judgment, it is of the sort that assumes that no one deserves saving and that everyone should be punished.<sup>16</sup>

According to Rosen, “neo-apocalyptic” narratives see humanity as so far gone that all hope for “a New Heaven on Earth” is lost because “there is nothing worth saving.”<sup>17</sup>

Both of these understandings of “apocalypse” are important to understanding post-apocalypse as a concept and as a genre. At first glance, the idea of something being post-apocalyptic may seem counterintuitive. For many, the word “apocalypse” brings about the idea of complete destruction and the obliteration of the human race. The Day of Judgment<sup>18</sup> is a well-

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12 This is not limited to the western and the post-apocalyptic film. Other genres, such as the road movie, invoke a similar aesthetic and create their own sort of frontier. Thelma and Louise’s trip across the American southwest, for instance, looks and feels very similar to the fantasies of freedom surrounding the romanticized West.

13 This is according to Dictionary.com, though others seem to disagree on this and spell it as “fronter” or “frontere.”

14 Rosen, Elizabeth K. *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination*. xiii. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008.

15 Rosen. *Apocalyptic Transformation*. xv.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 It is important to note that different denominations and different religions have variations on this eschatological narrative that may cause tensions with this statement. I am mainly referring to the aspect of Christian eschatology that

known example of this understanding in American culture; the world ceases to exist. How, then, can something be post-apocalyptic?<sup>19</sup> James Berger succinctly writes, “What does this mean, this oxymoron ‘after the end’? Before the beginning and after the end, there can only be nothing.”<sup>20</sup> Though it is often tempting to define the apocalypse as “the end of the world,” it may be more accurate to define it as “the end of *our* world as we understand it.” This conception of apocalypse demonstrates that both of the aforementioned definitions of the word are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they work together. It “[forecasts] the ultimate destiny of the world,”<sup>21</sup> implying that the apocalypse is not simply a destructive event, but that it also carries a prophetic message.

One of the key signifiers of the apocalyptic event in the post-apocalyptic film is the wasteland it leaves behind. Depictions of the post-apocalyptic wasteland differ from those of the frontier in that where the former looks to some distant or not-so-distant future, the latter looks back to a specific range of time in American history. Likewise, the frontier looks to a space that is situated in American geography, a place that viewers know will become a developed world. The wasteland, however, is simultaneously nowhere and everywhere. Current geographical anchors<sup>22</sup> no longer exist to define the space and the wasteland often consumes the entire world. The word “wasteland” itself describes a place that has literally been wasted; the land has been used up for an unworthy purpose. The frontier echoes this sentiment in that it, too, is land being wasted. It is empty and undeveloped. It is going to waste. These two spaces—the frontier and the wasteland—are central factors that determine the membership of texts and films in their respective genres.

Genre itself is a shaky category that eludes clear definition. Richard Slotkin addresses this concern in his book, *Gunfighter Nation*, when he explains, “The history of a movie genre is the story of the conception, elaboration, and acceptance of a special kind of space: an imagined landscape which evokes authentic places and times, but which becomes, in the end, completely identified with the fictions created about it.”<sup>23, 24</sup> Part of my project here is to examine the way in

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sees Judgment Day as the destruction of the entire world and the end of all humanity. While some people go on to Heaven, they do so as souls—not human bodies. In addition to this, even when a new world is established, it is after the apocalypse, it is *new*. It is not the old world that has been previously undone.

19 The introduction of Mary Shelley’s novel *The Last Man* (which I will return to in the next chapter) is an interesting example of the “oxymoron” described by Berger. In 1818, the narrator claims to have found the story of the titular last man written on leaves scattered about the Cumaean Sibyl’s cave. While most post-apocalyptic films take place in the future, Shelley’s novel makes this temporal gap part of her story. A paradox results: how can one read the story of something that hasn’t happened yet? It seems especially paradoxical because the narrative is recorded looking *back* on the end of the world. In Shelley’s novel, humanity dies out with the main character. It raises the question of who can look back on the apocalypse.

20 Berger, James. *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. xi. Print.

21 “Apocalypse.” 2. *Merriam-Webster*. 2014. Web. 10 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apocalyptic>>.

22 Atlanta, GA in AMC’s *The Walking Dead* is but one example of a geographical anchor in the wasteland. Though it gives viewers an understanding of where the characters are, it seems largely incidental. It could just as easily be New York, San Francisco, Seattle, etc. It is worth acknowledging that the characters seem propelled from, rather than anchored to, Atlanta; they escape into the woods and only go back for supplies. Atlanta is no longer the city they once knew; it is in ruins and swarming with “walkers” (zombies). Atlanta *is* the wasteland.

23 Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. 1-462. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992.

24 I should point out that Slotkin and I are working with genre a little differently. While we are both focusing on film genre, I extend my analysis to works of literature that influence, and are influenced by, film. His definition of genre is useful here in that it focuses on the primacy of the visual. The novels I am working with are also very visual works, but film makes certain things apparent about setting that literature does not (take the comparison between the skyscrapers in *The Walking Dead* and the monoliths on the frontier, for example). Still, the genres I work with seem to be fairly consistent across mediums. Though this is a fascinating discussion, it is beyond the scope of my main argument.

which westerns and post-apocalyptic genres are defined by their “spaces” and how the complex interplay between them informs our understandings of American culture, American history, and an American (or perhaps un-American) future.<sup>25</sup> Slotkin explains:

The genre setting contains not only a set of objects signifying a certain time, place, and milieu; it invokes a set of fundamental assumptions and expectations about the kinds of event that can occur in the setting, the kinds of motive that will operate, the sort of outcome one can predict. If setting does not absolutely determine story, it at least defines the range of possible plots and treatments.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, as Slotkin points out, settings define possibilities and limitations that exist within a narrative. The influence of setting is particularly marked in both the western and the post-apocalyptic genres. Any definition of the genres is indebted to their iconic settings. Both the western and the post-apocalyptic film are centered on limitations, boundaries, and possibilities. They are about crossing borders and creating new ones. The wasteland and the frontier are both lands of possibility (or perceived possibility) and the limitations exerted on the characters who pursue those possibilities.

The possibilities and limitations are largely influenced by settings within settings. Boom towns, outposts, American Indian villages, mining camps, fortresses, and abandoned buildings are just a few of many settings that exist within the larger settings of the frontier and the wasteland. Slotkin writes:

The geography of the Frontier represented in Western movies is that of a world divided by significant and signifying borders, usually marked by some strong visual sign [...] these border signs have come to symbolize a range of fundamental ideological differences. [...] [The borderline] is nearly always understood as a border between an “old world” which is seen as known, oppressive, and limiting, and a “new world” which is rich in potential or mystery, liberating and full of opportunity.<sup>27</sup>

The limitations and possibilities only exist insofar as there are characters to experience them. Often times, character and setting are intricately intertwined. The signifying aspects of the settings are filtered through the character and their interaction with the space. In this sense, the setting informs not only the possibilities for plot and interaction, but also what characters perceive, and by extension, what they are able to think, feel, and believe about the world, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter.

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25 I understand that the post-apocalyptic genre stretches beyond America, but for the purposes of this project, I am only interested in the aspects of the post-apocalyptic film that are in dialogue with the western.

26 Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 233.

27 Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 351.

### III. “When You Call Me That, SMILE!”

#### A. *The Westerner*

William Wyler’s 1940 film *The Westerner* features Gary Cooper, the iconic western film star, as Cole Hardin, the eponymous “Westerner.” The title of this film is one of the most important in all of cinema because it assigns a name to a prominent archetype in the Hollywood western<sup>28</sup>—the main character. This name is unique in that it situates the figure in a very specific context.<sup>29</sup> To fully appreciate this context, it is necessary to look back at the character’s literary prototype. In 1902, Owen Wister published his novel *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*. This novel is important to the western in many ways, as it established the foundation of many western themes and motifs that are taken for granted among audiences today.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps just as significant, but less obvious, are the similarities that the two titles bear to one another. *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* is a complex title that establishes a structure of signifiers for the genre. The word “Virginian” marks a specific location, the place that our nameless hero has come from. Thus, we are given a location in the American East as a point of origin. This word is mirrored by the word “Plains” at the end of the title. If this first noun signifies the hero and the place from which he came, then the last noun signifies where he is going. This concept of movement from one place to another is emphasized by the noun between the aforementioned two; he is “A Horseman.” Wister’s use of articles in the title is also very telling. There are many horsemen, but there is only one Virginian—*The Virginian*. Following this logic, “the Plains” also refers not to some ambiguous setting, but to a setting that deserves a proper noun. This space has many names: the American West, the mythic frontier, the Wild West, the wilderness. Wister chooses the word “plains” and invokes a very specific image, one that is central to the way the frontier is understood. “Plains” invites readers to imagine flat, grassy, unencumbered space across which one can move freely. The image of the horizon, where the sky meets the Earth and the land seems to go on forever, is implicit. Limits are invisible. This vision is reinforced many times in Wister’s text, such as when he writes “at their very doors began a world of crystal light, a land without end, a space across which Noah and Adam might come straight from Genesis. Into that space went wandering a road, over a hill and down out of sight, and up again smaller in the distance, and down once more, and up once more, straining the eyes, and so away.”<sup>31</sup> Wister creates an idealized image of the frontier and, in doing so, provides a context against which the Virginian can define himself.

The relationship between the Virginian and the frontier reveals much about how we should understand our archetypal hero. The subtitle, *A Horseman of the Plains*, can be read in a variety of ways depending on how the prepositional phrase is interpreted. He is not “of the Plains” in the sense that he comes from or originates from there—the eponym makes that perfectly clear. This is reinforced by many moments in the text, such as when the narrator and the Virginian discuss feelings of lonesomeness on the plains. Wister writes, “I could not live without [the lonesomeness] now,’ [the Virginian] said. ‘This has got into my system.’ He swept his hand out at the vast space of the world. ‘I went back home to see my folks onced. Mother was dyin’

28 For the purposes of this analysis, I am restricting my attention to the classic western.

29 This “specific context” is a bit ironic because the West itself is not very specific. John Ford’s westerns would have viewers believe that the entire frontier looks like Monument Valley.

30 Kemble Wister, Fanny. “Introduction.” *Owen Wister Out West: His Journals and Letters*. Edited by Fanny Kemble Wister, 2. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

31 Wister, Owen. *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*. 6-7. Lexington: Virginia Press, 2013.

slow, and she wanted me. I stayed a year. But them Virginia mountains could please me no more. Afteh she was gone, I told my brothers and sisters good-by. We like each other well enough, but I reckon I'll not go back."<sup>32</sup> This passage demonstrates that our western hero is deliberately unanchored and purposefully distanced from the more "civilized," family-oriented East.

The Virginian's relationship to the West is that of an outsider. It is not his native land, but one to which he has laid claim. This relationship is further reinforced by the prepositional phrase in the title, particularly in consideration to the word "of." Many definitions of "of" elucidate the Virginian's relationship to the frontier, the most apparent being "occurring in."<sup>33</sup> It is true that the western hero exists as such because he traverses the frontier, but his relationship to the space is more complicated than that. The word is also defined as "a function word to indicate the cause, motive, or reason."<sup>34</sup> As evidenced by the quote above, being on the frontier is a large part of what motivates the Virginian. He has left his birthplace for the Wyoming plains simply because it is where he wants to be. Other definitions of the word add complexity to the Virginian's relationship to the plains. One definition which reads, "a function word to indicate the component material, parts, or elements of the contents"<sup>35</sup> suggests that the plains are intricately intertwined with the Virginian. When the narrator first encounters the Virginian, he describes him as:

a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures. His broad, soft hat was pushed back; a loose-knotted, dull-scarlet handkerchief sagged from his throat; and one casual thumb was hooked in the cartridge-belt that slanted across his hips. He had plainly come many miles from somewhere across the vast horizon, as the dust upon him showed. His boots were white with it. His overalls were gray with it. The weather-beaten bloom of his face shone through it duskily, as the ripe peaches look upon their trees in a dry season. But no dinginess of travel or shabbiness of attire could tarnish the splendor that radiated from his youth and strength.<sup>36</sup>

The frontier in this passage seems to be a part of the Virginian. Had he simply been a man traveling across the plains, it would have been enough for Wister to describe his worn and dirty clothes. Wister takes the description a step further and projects the qualities of the frontier onto his face, which makes him recognizable as an individual. The dust is clearly not a part of the Virginian because his "youth and strength"<sup>37</sup> show through in spite of it. The face that shines through all this dust, however, is still a "weather-beaten bloom"<sup>38</sup> and this image certainly evokes a sense of unity with the frontier wilderness. The tree image is interesting to use for such a transient character, as it suggests something firmly rooted in the earth. This description conveys that a nomad such as the Virginian belongs most of all on the plains.

Thus far, the prepositional phrase in the title has revealed that the Virginian's relationship to the plains is one of mere occupation, simple motivation, and a unique sense of internalized surroundings. Two other definitions work in tandem to add nuance to this relationship. When read as "a function word to indicate the whole that includes the part denoted by the preceding word,"<sup>39</sup> it is implied that the Virginian is merely one piece of a much larger system; he is a

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32 Wister, *The Virginian*, 39.

33 "of." *Merriam-Webster*. 2014. N. pag. Web. 9 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/of>>.

34 *Ibid*.

35 *Ibid*.

36 Wister, *The Virginian*, 2.

37 *Ibid*.

38 *Ibid*.

39 "of." *Merriam-Webster*.

part of the frontier. At first glance, this definition seems to contradict the previous one that marks the frontier as part of him. But what might be read as a tension between definitions could actually suggest a symbiotic relationship. The Virginian needs the frontier to live an authentic life and the frontier needs the traveling Virginian to give it meaning. Readers and viewers generally experience the frontier only as the hero of the western does. As such, all of its meanings are filtered through his interaction with the space.

Other definitions of the word largely reveal what this interaction is. When read as denoting possession or belonging, the plains are something upon which the Virginian acts.<sup>40</sup> He is *Horseman of the Plains* just as one could be the President of the United States. When read as “indicat[ing] a characteristic or distinctive quality or possession,”<sup>41</sup> his relationship to the plains as expressed through this prepositional phrase comes full circle. Implicit in the actor-location relationship is an assertion of dominance and a potential for ownership. This possessive potential is his most fundamental characteristic. What it means to be the Virginian is to have this relationship to the mythic frontier space. In doing so, he helps to make it mythic.

When William Wyler released *The Westerner* in 1940, he named an archetype (and his film) in such a way that encapsulated Wister’s title and explored his mythic construction.<sup>42</sup> Wyler takes all the complexity of Wister’s title and abstracts it away into two words. It is puzzling that the Virginian’s moniker defines him by the place that he willfully left—a place to which he has no desire to go back—and not by the space with which he actually identifies. This is a strategic move on Wister’s part and an important one for this western prototype. Throughout the novel, the Virginian is recognized by where he came from and readers’ perceptions of him as a traveler are reinforced. He is an outsider, someone who has come from far away and might leave for somewhere even further on a whim.

Wyler’s film debuted thirty-eight years after the publication of Wister’s novel when this idea of the western hero was well-established in popular culture. Wister’s daughter, Fanny Kemble Wister, writes:

[Wister] created the prime romantic novel of the Wild West. For the first time, a cowboy was a gentleman and a hero, but nobody realized then that the book was the master design on which thousands of Westerns would be modeled. Its hero was the first cowboy to capture the public’s imagination, and hundreds of young girls fell in love with him. Before this, cowboys had been depicted as murderous thugs. The Virginian was utterly different from heroes of his day; besides being handsome, he was humorous and human.<sup>43</sup>

Wyler takes this information for granted and instead names his hero for the space in which he “belongs.” No longer nameless, Cole Hardin is the Westerner.

“The Westerner” becomes a proper noun as it names the protagonist. This moniker situates him in the frontier: the American West. In doing so, Wyler reinforces the view that the West is just as much an integral part of who the Westerner is as he is to the West. The “—er” suffix also makes “the Westerner” into an action noun—he creates the West. The westerner is not just

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40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 “The Westerner” also refers to the genre itself. When the film was released, people often called these movies “westerners.” It is also worth noting that Wyler cast Gary Cooper in this role because he starred in the very successful 1929 film adaptation of *The Virginian*.

43 Kemble Wister, “Introduction,” 2.

a name that situates him in a location, for it marks a specific kind of lifestyle. Because his title acts as an abstraction of Wister's more complicated one, Wyler is able to simplify its symbolic structure and encode more information. It no longer matters where the Westerner comes from. The title implies that he does not look back; he looks forward.

In his influential essay on the genre "Movie Chronicle: *The Westerner*," Robert Warshow offers a detailed description of the Westerner and solidifies the term as a signifier for the generic Western hero. His description of who the Westerner is also provides insight into the way that the layering of these signifiers reinforces a mythic code. Implicit in Warshow's essay is a revelation of what the Westerner's relationship to the frontier actually is, or what it means to read "Westerner" as an action verb and a noun simultaneously. He writes:

The Westerner is *par excellence* a man of leisure. [...] Employment of some kind—usually unproductive—is always open to the Westerner, but when he accepts it, it is not because he needs to make a living, much less from any idea of 'getting ahead.' Where could he want to 'get ahead' to? By the time we see him, he is already 'there': he can ride a horse faultlessly, keep his countenance in the face of death, and draw his gun a little faster and shoot it a little straighter than anyone he is likely to meet. These are sharply defined acquirements, giving to the figure of the Westerner an apparent moral clarity which corresponds to the clarity of his physical image against the bare landscape; initially, at any rate, the Western movie presents itself as being without mystery, its whole universe comprehended in what we see on screen.<sup>44</sup>

Warshow's description of the Westerner exemplifies the idealized vision of cowboys out west that Wister popularized with his novel. The mythic figure relates to the frontier space with an air of arbitrariness. He can work if he wants, but he does not have to. He is free to travel where he wants; the entire frontier is his destination. The key word in the passage is "leisure," which forms the basis of the idealized vision. The frontier makes freedom of action and movement possible for him. The driving force behind many of his decisions is simply that he does what he wants and goes where he wants. His desire to be there is, in part, what makes his interaction with the frontier space seem so arbitrary. Whims shape his interaction with the space and this interaction shapes the way in which the audience can access the frontier through him.

This idealistic element is not limited to the figure of the Westerner and the frontier space. It exists only insofar as there is a subject, such as the audience or a narrator, to experience him in his element. There is a romantic element to the classic western even when the hero himself does not have a romanticized point of view. This, too, finds its prototype in Wister's novel. He writes, "For something about [the cowboys], and the idea of them, smote my American heart, and I have never forgotten it, nor ever shall, as long as I live. In their flesh, our natural passions ran tumultuous; but often in their spirit sat a true nobility, and often beneath its unexpected shining their figures took on heroic stature."<sup>45</sup> This passage comes from the narrator of the text, a nameless man from the East. Wister makes these men on the frontier, especially the Virginian, objects of the romanticized gaze. The description equates this romantic vision, and the cowboy, with national identity. To have this kind of emotional experience, and to have this proximity to the cowboy, is to have something awoken inside of you that Wister marks as being distinctly American.

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44 Warshow, Robert. "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner." In *The Western Reader*, edited by Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman, 35-47. New York: Limelight Editions, 1998.

45 Wister, *The Virginian*, 18.

That these titles encode this kind of information reflects a certain consciousness of itself as a specimen of the genre. It is not accidental and also finds roots in *The Virginian*. There are numerous moments in Wister's text where the narrator references the form itself—the form of the novel and the words on the page. In one such instance, the narrator describes a cowboy, Steve, as addressing the Virginian with “one unprintable name after another.”<sup>46</sup> Of course, this passage serves to mark the narrator as a civilized man from the East and reinforces the fact that people in the West are not like him. In addition to this, it also shows readers that their access to the frontier and the Virginian is being filtered and constructed. In another instance, Wister writes, “The friend's decision had been quite suddenly made, and must form the subject of the next chapter,”<sup>47</sup> more obviously making reference to the novel as a construction of a familiar kind.

According to Warshow, “Where the Westerner lives it is always about 1870—not the real 1870, either, or the real West—and he is killed or goes away when his position becomes problematical. The fact that he continues to hold our attention is evidence enough that, in his proper frame, he presents an image of personal nobility that is still real for us.”<sup>48</sup> Western films inherit the consciousness of form from their literary prototype. Warshow draws attention to the fact that the western is a narrative about American history. This narrative is constructed and filtered, much like the narration in *The Virginian*. A key piece of this passage is the phrase “proper frame.” The western genre itself is a framing device through which viewers are invited to imagine American history. The mythic quality of the western becomes apparent as the frontier—the stage on which the mythic historical narrative takes place—is focalized through the conventions of a film and literary genre. What looks like history is actually the property of culture and our collective imagination.<sup>49</sup>

Another famous scholar on the western genre, Jim Kitses, disagrees with Warshow. In his essay “Authorship and Genre: Notes on the Western,” he writes, “But this [romanticized] view, popularized by Robert Warshow, is one-sided. Equally the terrain can be barren and savage, surroundings so demanding that men are rendered morally ambiguous or wholly brutalized.”<sup>50</sup> Even as he questions the perceived lack of nuance in Warshow's argument, Kitses does not completely disagree with him. He warns against forming two oversimplified attitudes of what the western can be, arguing that “a complex structure that draws on both images is the typical one.”<sup>51</sup> Kitses goes on to write, “Thus central to the form we have a philosophical dialectic, an ambiguous cluster of meanings and attitudes that provide the traditional thematic structure of the genre.”<sup>52</sup> Despite this disagreement,<sup>53</sup> Kitses and Warshow agree that the layering of signifiers and the form of the genre (the Westerner's “proper frame”<sup>54</sup>) create a myth that is relevant to American culture and history.

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46 Wister, *The Virginian*, 20.

47 Wister, *The Virginian*, 46.

48 Warshow, “Movie Chronicle: The Westerner,” 38-9.

49 It is interesting to note that *The Walking Dead* episode title “Days Gone Bye” is a little ironic. Most post-apocalyptic films take place in the future, but this title references the apocalypse happening in the past. This recalls the western genre's simultaneous forward gaze (into the horizon) and backward gaze (into history).

50 Kitses, Jim. “Authorship and Genre: Notes on the Western.” In *The Western Reader*. Edited by Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman, 59. New York: Limelight Editions, 1998.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Warshow's essay describes the most popular view of the Westerner, but he does not necessarily hold that every single western film must conform to this formula. He may very well grant Kitses his point that the view does not hold true across the entire genre.

54 Warshow, “Movie Chronicle: The Westerner.”

In the second chapter of Wister's novel, the Virginian utters one of the most recognizable phrases in the entire genre. The phrase is so important, in fact, that it is also the title of the chapter. Trampas, the antagonist of the story, calls the Virginian an offensive word—yet another one that the narrator deems unprintable. The Virginian responds, gun in hand, “When you call me that, SMILE!”<sup>55</sup> Readers are reminded that if they do not share the narrator's romanticized view of the hero—if they do not accept him in his “proper frame”<sup>56</sup>—then they are in the wrong. Disrespecting the Virginian is part of the reason why the West is disordered and wild. Thus, the complex layering of meaning in these titles comes full circle. They provide a basic level of guidance so that readers can more clearly see things according to the “proper frame.” This is not to say that every title in the western genre must encode this information. In fact, most of them do not because people like Wister, Wyler, Warshow, and Kitses have done the intellectual and artistic work to solidify the genre conventions in the cultural imagination.

### B. *The Wanderer*

If the western is about looking back, then the post-apocalyptic genre is about looking forward. Apocalyptic narratives are much older than the Western, predating the Book of Revelation. As we currently know it, the post-apocalyptic genre finds its origins in science fiction. Mary Shelley, often considered the mother of the science fiction genre with her *Frankenstein* novel, is the genre's version of Wister.<sup>57</sup> In 1826, Shelley published her novel *The Last Man*, the first post-apocalyptic work as we understand it today. Her book established a literary prototype for the genre and, like *The Virginian*, her title also encodes several pieces of important information.<sup>58</sup>

The novel features a now oft-recycled element in post-apocalyptic fiction. A plague wipes out most of humanity and a small group of survivors struggle to stay alive and maintain their crumbling social order.<sup>59</sup> Unlike *The Virginian* and *The Westerner*, Shelley's title makes no reference to place, time, or direction. Her title focuses entirely on one element: the sole survivor of the apocalypse, the last man. Those three haunting words (also the last three words of her novel) paint a powerful picture of what life is like after the apocalypse. The title recalls Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*,<sup>60</sup> a famous painting that exemplifies the Romantic tradition in which Shelley writes. It features a man in an overcoat standing on the edge of a jagged precipice. He looks out across the landscape obscured by fog and towards the horizon. Trees and the peaks of large rock formations, much like the one on which he is standing, jut up above the wisps. Faded mountains and a distant monolith recede into the horizon.<sup>61</sup>

In her introduction to Shelley's novel, Anne McWhir argues that it differs from other earlier representations of the figure of the last man. She writes that the novel is dominated by an “elegiac solitude.”<sup>62</sup> This description certainly resonates with the painting. The man's posture projects confidence. One hand rests on his cane, the other in his pocket, not unlike the Virginian's “casual

55 Wister, *The Virginian*, 15.

56 Warshow, “Movie Chronicle: The Westerner.”

57 Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012.

58 Shelley, Mary. *The Last Man*. London: Henry Colburn, 1826.

59 Ibid.

60 It is worth noting that at least one edition of Shelley's novel features this painting on the cover.

61 Friedrich, Caspar David. *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. 1818, oil on canvas. 3' 1" x 2' 5" (95 cm x 75 cm). Kunsthalle Hamburg, Germany.

62 McWhir, Anne R. Introduction. *The Last Man*. Ed. Mary Shelley. Broadview Literary Texts ed. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996. xiii. Print.

thumb” hooked in his belt.<sup>63</sup> His stance seems to project a sense of ownership or command over the space. He is a dignified, solitary figure. One might notice that this description also permeates Wister’s *Virginian* and, by extension, the figure of the Westerner. It is not fair, however, to say that Shelley’s last man, Lionel Verney, is simply an avatar of the Westerner. Her novel offers a prototype for a new archetypal hero, which I will call “the Wanderer.”<sup>64</sup> A closer examination of both the painting and Shelley’s novel reveals an important characteristic of the Wanderer that sets him apart from the Westerner. This characteristic is his relation to the space he inhabits.

The Westerner is situated in a very specific time and space. The same is not true of the Wanderer. McWhir writes, “Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* eludes definition.”<sup>65</sup> She goes on to say, “*The Last Man* presents a series of spatial and sometimes temporal overviews—Cumberland moors, battlefields, seas, mountains laid out as scenery and, at the end, the eternal city of Rome”<sup>66</sup> and that the novel is “loosely structured and expansive.”<sup>67</sup> Wister’s description of space in *The Virginian* may also seem to fit this description, but there is one key difference. As humanity continues to disintegrate due to the plague, geographic and political boundaries begin to fall apart and become meaningless. The western is different in that, while many of these boundaries have yet to be formed, the unstructured space is always anchored by the horizon to the west; there is a geographic framework to be filled in. There is a direction to go.

The same is not true after the apocalypse and this is exemplified in Friedrich’s painting. The Wanderer stands on uneven footing as he overlooks a landscape concealed by a thick blanket of fog. He cannot see into the horizon, nor can he see any path through the wilderness. In fact, he cannot continue forward. The only place left to go is down, over the edge of the precipice. Thus, his only option is to go back the way he came. This sentiment is common in post-apocalyptic fiction. There is a marked inability to truly move forward, a futility of direction. Even as the Wanderer projects confidence, his travels become less assured. The Westerner’s dignified trek into the wilderness gives way to a shakier, more vulnerable path.

Considering this, it is apt to name the post-apocalyptic hero “the Wanderer.” Wandering still implies movement, but there is no implication of any direction or end goal. When cities crumble and the social order is shattered, there is nowhere left to go. Directions become painfully arbitrary. While there is a level of arbitrariness to the Westerner’s travels, it seems less relevant simply because the frontier space is his home. The Wanderer is often unwillingly thrown into the wasteland. Post-apocalyptic wastes exist where human homes used to be. Although he is often a strong and capable character, the Wanderer’s travels across the wasteland are plagued by famine, sickness, slavery, harsh weather, and unfathomable violence. These are all things that, while undoubtedly present on the historic frontier, are largely absent from representations of the Westerner’s own experience with it. The Wanderer lives each day struggling to see the next. He does not stroll leisurely about the wasteland as the Westerner does on the frontier. Rather, he travels in some direction—any direction—that might lead him to some semblance of any living situation that is conducive to survival.

Two (of many) characters who exemplify the Wanderer archetype, albeit at different extremes, are Riley Denbo in George A. Romero’s *Land of the Dead* and the unnamed man in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. In Romero’s 2005 film, Denbo’s job is to work with his team to

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63 Wister, *The Virginian*, 2.

64 This is not without precedent. *Fallout 3*, an installment in a series of popular post-apocalyptic video games, refers to its hero as “the Lone Wanderer.”

65 McWhir, Introduction, xvi.

66 McWhir, Introduction, xviii.

67 McWhir, Introduction, xix.

scavenge supplies for Fiddler's Green and the surrounding slums, a walled dystopian city. Fiddler's Green is a lush high-rise building. The height at which one lives in these buildings is indicative of social status. People at higher levels are attributed a greater rank and (presumably) more safety. Other characters, including some on Denbo's team, gaze at the towers with longing, hoping to one day earn themselves a spot there. Denbo, however, has no interest in living within the walls of the city. His only desire is to leave, to go north. In this sense, Romero's wanderer seems more like the Westerner and less like the Wanderer. Like the Westerner, Denbo navigates society, does his part and, as many westerners do, leaves when all is "taken care of."<sup>68</sup> But even though the Westerner does not necessarily belong in society, cities and towns are better off after his presence. In Denbo's case, the city is beyond repair. His only desire is to abandon it completely.<sup>69</sup> While his desire to roam north mirrors the Westerner's desire to roam west, there is a key difference. Denbo's trek north is completely arbitrary. He gives no reason for wanting to go north. The Westerner's travels on the frontier are also arbitrary, but his actions are a part of a larger impetus that shapes American identity. Denbo's northward longing does no such thing, for he is not "westerning;" he is wandering.

The nameless protagonist of Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel more obviously exemplifies the Wanderer archetype. He and his son, who is also nameless, struggle to stay alive as they cling to their fragile lives from one moment to the next. McCarthy's short, often incomplete sentences and sparse dialogue reinforce a feeling of urgent restraint. Each moment is precious. Every possible resource must be conserved as they starve and wither in the wastes. Many sentences are a feeble step to the next, doing just enough to push the narrative forward. Other sentences run on. The speaker is on the brink of death and must say all he can, lest this breath be his last. Danger lurks in every place they stay; they continue on, only driven by the hope that the next place will be safer than the previous, though no place is ever truly safe.<sup>70</sup> McCarthy writes:

With the first gray light he rose and left the boy sleeping and walked out to the road and squatted and studied the country to the south. Barren, silent, godless. He thought the month was October, but he wasn't sure. He hadn't kept a calendar for years. They were moving south. There'd be no surviving another winter here.<sup>71</sup>

The man and the boy trek south, but it is largely meaningless. It merely provides them with somewhere to go that is not the direction from which they came. They are, in many ways, the Wanderer who chooses to plummet over the edge of the precipice and into the sea of fog. They are pushing south in hopes of reaching the coast, assuming that it could be warmer there. As far as they know, the temperature of the entire world is plunging. They have no real reason to think that the coast will be warmer. In fact, the man seems to suspect this. Still, they continue on. When they finally do reach the coast, they find only overcast skies, cold gray water, and a trash-strewn beach. The man's fears are confirmed. Their coastward trek gains them nothing.

The 2009 film adaptation of the same name brings McCarthy's prose to life visually. The unsteady camera frames our hero in a land of washed out grays and looks unflinchingly at raw violence, the marring and wasting of bodies (both alive and dead) and guts, gore, and debris strewn across the wastes. The man and the boy are clothed in rotting cloth and worn pieces of

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68 In Denbo's case, this means saving the citizens from the city after it has been swarmed by zombies. Order is restored, or "taken care of," when the corrupt city is left in ruins.

69 Baker, Simon. *Land of the Dead*. DVD. Directed by George A. Romero. 2005. Universal, 2008.

70 McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Vintage International, 2006. Print.

71 McCarthy, *The Road*, 4.

plastic held together with twine. His beard, a tangled mess. Their eyes and skin are sunken in and gray like the wasteland.<sup>72</sup> Not only do they exemplify wandering, but they offer a realistic portrayal of wandering. Like the Virginian, they have the qualities of their landscape projected onto their bodies. The extremity of this projection is rather atypical, but very telling. In most cases, the Wanderer is dust-strewn in tattered, piecemeal clothes, washed out and threadbare like the rest of the environment. *The Road* makes explicit what most post-apocalyptic works merely hint towards. It shows us that life in an untamed space is harsh, lonely, and deadly.

This depiction is probably much closer to the reality of frontier life than what is depicted in the western film. When the Westerner takes off on his horse into the plains, it is not even considered that he could get sick, starve, or freeze. He rarely seems to have more than one pair of clothes, and even when dirty they remain perfectly intact. The weather is almost always conducive to travel and, even when it isn't, rarely seems to cause any serious problems for him. He seems immune to disease and often appears to have an infinite supply of food and coffee. His wits and trigger finger never fail him. Whereas the Wanderer is often distressed by questions of morality, the Westerner simply does things that are right and, in some sense, they are right because he does them.<sup>73</sup> Viewers are meant to take for granted that, by some logic or other, the Westerner does what is best. He does his part to propel a mythic vision of American history forward. In doing so, the figure of the Westerner is an integral component of the American cultural imagination: he is a vector for the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny; it is America's God-given right to expand from coast to coast and it is his job to help tame the space.

It is very telling, then, that in McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel, the man and the boy do indeed reach the coast. They have reached the coast, but it was a struggle, and they cannot tame the wilderness, they merely navigate it. This Manifest Destiny, of sorts, proves to be a meaningless endeavor. It is just another space of transient relief, one from which they must quickly leave in order to stay safe. This danger is evidenced while the man scavenges for supplies and the boy (who is now violently ill) sleeps on the beach. The boy wakes and the man returns. They find that their cart with all of their food and supplies has been stolen from them.<sup>74</sup> The futility of their wandering towards the coast seems to deconstruct an imperialistic narrative, a driving force for expansion. To further reinforce this, the wasteland is described as "godless." An important piece of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny is that it is vindicated by God. *The Road* takes away not only the ability, but also the impetus for expansion. It makes explicit what most post-apocalyptic films only suggest: that the end result of the Westerner's trajectory is fruitless.

#### IV. Belonging and Longing

John Ford's 1956 film *The Searchers* is arguably the pinnacle of the western genre. The film opens with Martha Edwards exiting her home, standing on her porch, and looking across the windswept desert into the horizon. The scene is shot through the doorway from behind her; viewers are seeing the scene unfold through her eyes, from the inside looking out. A figure in the distance

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<sup>72</sup> Mortensen, Viggo, and Kodi Smit-McPhee. *The Road*. DVD. Directed by John Hillcoat. 2009. Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures, 2009.

<sup>73</sup> I do not mean to belittle the western here, as it is a very rich genre. The best western films are fraught with moral ambiguity (take *The Searchers*, for example), but the genre tends to have endings that give these issues some level of closure.

<sup>74</sup> McCarthy, *The Road*, 253.

approaches on horseback, flanked on each side (and dwarfed) by faraway monoliths. This man, wearing a Confederate army coat and a cowboy hat, is Ethan Edwards. His introduction in the film mirrors the ending scene where, after he and Martin have rescued his niece, Debbie, from her American Indian captors, he carries her to the threshold of the Jorgenson house, never entering the house itself, and leaves on foot into the desert horizon as the door shuts behind him.<sup>75</sup> Ethan Edwards embodies the figure of the Westerner.

This scene has been played out time and time again in the western. By the time he directed *The Searchers*, John Ford was closely identified with the film genre, as was the actor he cast as Edwards, the iconic John Wayne. As such, this scene that they have created together exemplifies the relationship between the Westerner and the setting that he inhabits. Although the Westerner internalizes his interaction with the frontier space, it is important to remember that this relationship between character and setting speaks to a larger theme between different spaces. What makes both the establishing and the final scene significant is that the point of view is aligned not through Wayne's Westerner, but through Martha Edwards. This striking perspective—looking *out* to the west and the Westerner from an enclosed domestic space—reveals much about the way in which the Westerner's movement through the frontier speaks to the structure of the frontier myth itself. In his discussion of John Ford's foundational western film, *Stagecoach*, Slotkin writes:

Thus *Stagecoach* completes its ironic commentary on the “progressive” Myth of the Frontier. The “progress” achieved through the journey-ordeal belongs only to the isolated individual—it has no social realization, finds no historical home. Democracy, equality, responsibility, and solidarity are achieved—are *visible*—only in transit, only in pursuit of the goal. When the goal is reached they dissolve, and society lapses into habitual injustice, inequality, alienation, and hierarchy. Our only hope is to project a further frontier, a mythic space outside American space and American history, for the original possibilities of our frontier have been used up.<sup>76</sup>

Slotkin touches on a few very important points: that the frontier myth is “progress” and that the interaction with the frontier space is almost always transitory; the Westerner never stays in one place. Also, the “progressive” quality of the frontier myth is made possible by the Westerner being in transit.

In the opening scene to *The Searchers*, however, viewers experience the West and the Westerner from a different perspective, albeit for only a brief moment.<sup>77</sup> Martha exemplifies the woman in calico archetype.<sup>78</sup> She is domestic, kind, and nurturing. In many ways, she is the opposite of the Westerner; where he is always in transit, she is firmly rooted in one place. As Ethan approaches her (and the rest of his brother's family) on the porch, they share a tender glance and a brief touch suggesting a future that never came to be. Where the woman in calico's function is often to tame the Westerner, to make him fit for domestic life, Martha is already married to Ethan's brother. Any domestic (or openly romantic) possibility between the two

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<sup>75</sup> Wayne, John, Dorothy Jordan, and Natalie Wood. *The Searchers*. DVD. Directed by John Ford. Warner Brothers, 1956. 01:57:02 – 1:58:34

<sup>76</sup> Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. 311. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992.

<sup>77</sup> *The Searchers*. 00:01:29 – 00:03:12.

<sup>78</sup> Thank you to Dr. Breitwieser for introducing me to this term. The woman in calico is a domestic woman who serves as a love interest for the Westerner. Often times, she convinces the Westerner to settle down and marry. Molly Stark Wood in *The Virginian* is a prime example.

has been thwarted. Ford further reinforces this point when Martha and most of the family are slaughtered by the “savages”<sup>79</sup> who kidnap Debbie.

Martha’s domestic perspective allows viewers to see the Westerner in a new light. Ethan has been roaming the frontier after the Civil War and the family is happy to see him. As she stands on the porch, she strains her eyes while looking into the horizon. When the camera shifts to Ethan approaching on horseback in the distance, he is very far away. Why, then, did she come out to the porch to greet him? It seems implausible that she could have seen him from so far away inside her home. She did not see him by accident, either. She does not pause between exiting the doorway and gazing—searching with her eyes—into the desert. There is some kind of intention driving her action. This subtle moment gives the impression that she is expecting Ethan to come home. Perhaps she has done this many times before, always waiting for the moment of his return. On some level, Ethan belongs at home with his family. Even as he roams the frontier, he still has a place to which he can return, a civilized place that expects his presence, a place where (whether he wants it or not) he belongs. This sense of belonging also makes his free roaming across the frontier possible. He defines himself against the prospect of belonging to a family and living a settled life.

The Edwards’ home, however, is not in a town, nor is there any civilization in sight. It exists on its own out in the middle of the plains. It seems that an isolated home on the frontier is exactly what the Westerner would want. Ethan may well have lived here at one time, but the word “home” is generally troubling to the Westerner. He is pulled by the contrary impulses of belonging and longing. He feels that he should not be defined by the circumstance of his birth. The Virginian, whom I have discussed in the previous chapter, is but one example; he explicitly states that he has left Virginia and has no desire to go back. The structure of belonging and longing provides the Westerner with another way to define himself, and an additional means by which viewers can understand his relationship to the mythic frontier space. What Martha’s gaze tells viewers is that Ethan’s presence in their household is merely a hope. The Westerner feels that he belongs on the frontier.

So while it is clear that a settled lifestyle is aversive to the Westerner, an important question remains unanswered. Once on the frontier, what motivates him to continue “westerning” or going further west? What fuels his errant lifestyle? The answer lies in his competing impulses of belonging and longing, which can be thought of as a self-reinforcing cycle. The illusion of independence can only be maintained for so long, for he is of no use to the mythic frontier unless he has contact with society. Train robbers, bounties, missing girls, things that fuel the adventures of the Westerner would be largely unknown to him if he was completely disconnected from cities, towns, and settlements. He needs the pockets of social order on the frontier to give meaning to his trek across the land. As soon as he stops in one of these places, his longing for the frontier is rekindled and he drifts back into the wilderness.

While Ethan Edwards is undoubtedly motivated by these impulses, his role in *The Searchers* is somewhat unique in that his travels across the frontier are fueled by two things: his hatred of the native population and a desire to avenge the crimes they committed against his family. When he arrives back at his family’s home, he finds it in ruins. Ethan experiences a sort of micro-apocalypse, and in this regard resembles the Wanderer. His resemblance to the Wanderer is reinforced because he is a Civil War veteran who fought on the side of the Confederacy. The decimation of the South in the war was imagined by some as an apocalyptic event, and can be

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79 In the logic of the film, that is.

read as another driving force behind Ethan's travels.<sup>80</sup> Still, he is not a Wanderer in the wasteland because he roams a different space. The frontier space is generative; it is fueled by belonging (or rather, by the creation of spaces to which one can belong). Ethan's search for Debbie reflects this function of the frontier; he desires to maintain and restore order by returning her from her captors to a settled home. The wasteland, by contrast, is an inversion of this spatial function. By the very nature of what it is, the wasteland takes belonging away. It is created by the destruction of the social order. If the frontier sets the foundation for the nation, then the destruction of the nation sets the foundation for the wasteland. During the apocalypse homes are destroyed and people are killed en masse. Those who survive find themselves in a world that is very unlike the one that they knew. They are unanchored. The homes and social circles that survivors of the apocalypse once belonged to no longer exist.

By removing belonging, the post-apocalyptic film scrambles the impulses of belonging and longing. Though motivation driven by belonging and longing is seemingly present within the post-apocalyptic film, as with Riley Denbo's arbitrary desire to go north in *Land of the Dead*, there is another motivating impulse within the genre.<sup>81</sup> Rick Grimes is but one example of the Wanderer who finds survivors along the way, forms alliances, and desperately looks for a safe place to call home. In this case, the motivating factor is longing *for* belonging. It is worth noting that even though Riley is motivated by belonging and longing, he does not go north alone at the end of the film. Some of the other characters that he has befriended join him to find a new home and he does not seem to mind. In fact, Riley does not express a desire to roam the wastes as the Westerner roams the frontier. Rather, he wants to go north so that he can find a place to build a new life for himself away from the unjust confines of the city over which Fiddler's Green towers.

This revised method of motivation is exemplified in a conversation between Riley and Cholo in *Land of the Dead*. Both tired of risking their lives on supply runs, Riley and Cholo have an argument after the most recent run goes horribly awry; a young man is killed because of Cholo's sloppy and opportunistic approach to his job. The young man was eaten alive by zombies while following Cholo's order to raid a liquor store so that they could celebrate later. In Cholo's opinion, Riley insists on hanging on to an antiquated sense of morality. When Riley scolds him for his behavior, Cholo responds, "You know who you remind me of? My old man. He never had anything because he never went for anything. You know what? I'm going to have my own place, my own goddamn place." To this, Riley says, "You're dreaming, Cholo. They won't let you in there, they won't let me in there. We're the wrong kind." In this scene, Riley and Cholo both have the same desire—they both long for a place to belong. Where Cholo holds out hope for earning a coveted spot in Fiddler's Green, Riley has turned his gaze northward.<sup>82</sup>

Charlton Heston's character in *Planet of the Apes*,<sup>83</sup> George Taylor, reconciles the frontier and the wasteland. He and his crew find themselves on a mysterious planet after their spaceship

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80 The event was not completely apocalyptic (in the way that I am using the term) because it did not affect all of humanity or even all of Southern society. The conception of the Civil War as apocalyptic for the South is perhaps a little problematic in that the social order still existed after the war, albeit differently from the one they had before. "Apocalypse" itself is a very interesting term, perhaps more shaky and relative than we might think.

81 There seem to be two basic kinds of motivation that drive the Wanderer. In post-apocalyptic works where the apocalypse has recently happened, such as *The Walking Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, or *Day of the Dead*, the Wanderer seems to be driven by longing for belonging. In those where the apocalypse has long past, such as *A Boy and His Dog* or *Land of the Dead*, the Wanderer more closely resembles the westerner. Even in these cases, the hero as a solitary figure is deemphasized—Riley still has his crew and Vic still has his dog.

82 Baker, Simon and John Leguizamo. *Land of the Dead*. 00:18:18 – 00:19:17

83 Heston, Charlton, Kim Hunter, Linda Harrison, Roddy McDowall, and Maurice Evans. *Planet of the Apes*. DVD. Directed by Franklin J. Schaffner. 1968. Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment. 2003.

crash lands on its surface. He is imprisoned by the apes who rule the area along with Nova, a woman he has befriended. Taylor and Nova share a cage and begin to develop a bond when the apes have them separated and put her in a different cage across from him. Standing in his own cage alone, he tells her, “Now I don’t even have you. Imagine me needing someone. Back on Earth I never did. [...] Lots of lovemaking but no love. That’s the kind of world we made. So I left because there was no one to hold me there. [...] Do you love me, I wonder? Can you love, I wonder?”<sup>84</sup> Throughout the film, Taylor lives and breathes the Westerner archetype; he is independent, confident, and always prepared for conflict. In this scene, he reassesses the impulses that drove his actions back on Earth. In this new world, his previous way of living does not work. Taylor left Earth because the impulse of longing became so strong that he looked to outer space, “the final frontier,”<sup>85</sup> to satiate his wanderlust. This impulse has brought him to a place where he longs for something else: belonging. He no longer wants to be alone; he wants to be with Nova. He belongs with her, and as such, the folly of his impulses has become painfully apparent. His impulse of longing has forced him to realize that the ability to be independent like a Westerner on the frontier is a myth. A life without other people is a lonely and impractical one.

For Taylor, the previous opportunities for belonging are gone. These opportunities are not limited to homes, towns, and cities, but extend to a larger national—and even global level. This sense of national identity is alluded to by the flags on their spaceship and raft, and the small flag that one of Taylor’s crewmates puts into the ground of this strange new place when they first arrive. The film exposes the fantasy of the United States as the “frontier” of nationality. America as we know it today is the end result of the frontier. When the post-apocalyptic film takes away belonging, it destroys the nation. In *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy writes:

In those first years the roads were peopled with refugees shrouded up in their clothing [...] their eyes bright in their skulls. Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a fever land. The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone.<sup>86</sup>

In her discussion of this passage, Mary Manjikian describes the implications of the apocalypse on national identity:

Here it appears that Cormac McCarthy has used the apocalyptic events to ‘burn away’ many of our preconceptions about what America is and who we are as Americans. Here, Americans are ‘revealed’ (in an apocalyptic sense) as ‘creedless shells of men.’ In this scene, McCarthy forces the reader to consider the possibility that Americans are not special creatures with a unique destiny or future. [...] Americans are not, it seems, immune to famine, pestilence, or fear. [...] When apocalyptic events smash the structure and leave Americans exposed, these Americans ultimately have neither a national nor a religious creed to fall back upon.<sup>87</sup>

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84 Heston, Charlton, Kim Hunter. *Planet of the Apes*. 00:57:48 – 1:00:30.

85 This description of outer space was popularized by *Star Trek*.

86 McCarthy, *The Road*, 28.

87 Manjikian, Mary. *Apocalypse and Post-Politics: The Romance of the End*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012. 138. Print.

The absence of belonging in the wasteland is the source for the Wanderer's ambiguity of direction. It is why he is "wandering" and not "westerning." Even when the Westerner roams the mythic frontier on his own, away from spaces that he can belong to, he still operates under the umbrella of American national identity; he traverses the *American West*. In some sense, the Westerner still belongs to something. Richard Slotkin writes, "And the history that proceeds from the activity of [the western heroes] is one in which certain actors are accorded a moral privilege: to act on their own initiative, perhaps for the sake of the democratic *en masse* but without being bound by the constraints of the moral or civic order which the social collective must observe."<sup>88</sup> The Westerner's impulses of belonging and longing bring him to act in such a way that serves a greater good. With belonging taken away, the Wanderer acts—and longs—but his life on the wasteland is uncertain, undirected, and unsettling.

## V. Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of . . . ?

### A. *The Apocalyptic Fantasy*

It may be useful to ponder why there is such a fascination with post-apocalyptic narratives in American culture. In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the popularity of apocalyptic films, video games, and texts centered on the lives of humans after civilization has fallen, often in the wake of a zombie outbreak or some other disaster. This trend has likely been climbing within the past few decades, which is not surprising. Events like the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, Hurricane Katrina, and the wars overseas have all been covered extensively by the media. Political strife, cataclysmic events, and new technologies that expand what we can know beyond the brink of what we can understand create a cultural environment that feels overwhelming and maybe even hopeless. It seems possible that, at any given moment, everything could collapse. The possibility of an apocalyptic event feels very real for many people, having been cemented in the American consciousness by events such as the Cold War and the atomic bomb. A nation whose feet of clay are ready to crumble at any moment sounds awful, but life after the apocalypse in these works often feels like a sigh of relief. The wasteland is a blank slate where one can exist unconfined.

Obviously, I am not the first person to make these observations, as this trend has existed in American culture (and worldwide, to some extent) for decades.<sup>89</sup> As he introduces his discussion of post-apocalyptic representations, Berger writes, "My focus, rather, will be on what I consider a pervasive post-apocalyptic sensibility in recent American culture. [...] I loved seeing civilization as we know it burst open in flaming centrifugal ecstasy [in films]. And I loved seeing those stories of aftermaths, the post-apocalypses in the *Blade Runner* mode, in which every gesture seemed pure, somber, and meaningful when performed in a garish wasteland."<sup>90</sup> Berger is not the only one. Social scientist John Wiley Nelson goes so far as to say, "[Apocalyptic ideas are] as American as the hot dog."<sup>91</sup> Manjiakin, too, writes: "Americans developed a fascination with apocalyptic

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<sup>88</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 34.

<sup>89</sup> It is worth noting that the post-apocalyptic trend is part of a larger cultural system and the lines between it and other genres blur. Kaiju films (for example, *Godzilla*), disaster movies, and science fiction all raise similar sorts of questions.

<sup>90</sup> Berger, *After the End*, xiii.

<sup>91</sup> Qtd. in Wojcik, Daniel. *The End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America*. 6. New York: New York University Press, 1997.

scenarios. Hollywood profited from the release of films like ‘I am Legend,’ ‘The Book of Eli,’ and ‘The Road’.<sup>92</sup> She further explains:

It may be argued that writers have grappled with the notion of totally destroying the state (at least fictionally) not only because it seems likely in some sense, [...] but also because it seems desirable. [...] The disaster or the apocalypse provides a space where the ground is cleared and life (and its institutions) can begin anew. Institutions which seem entrenched, warped, mired in neglect, decay, and corruption can be blown apart, thus providing a new emancipatory space. [...] Now, after the apocalypse, we are free to engage in personal self-discovery, to grow closer to the land, to one another, and to overcome traditional “bourgeois” affectations such as class and racial differences. In essence, what has been destroyed is the logic and practice of territoriality.<sup>93</sup>

Manjikian’s analysis of this pervasive cultural trend recalls another one from decades before that remains popular to this day. The world after the apocalypse is much like the frontier-world that the Westerner longs for.

There is something about the post-apocalyptic scenario that fascinates people, especially Americans. There is a general sentiment of frustration, confusion, and limitation for which the genre provides an outlet. Why must this outlet be so gruesome? And, more importantly, what does it mean for people to enjoy these post-apocalyptic narratives? These questions are addressed in the episode “Say the Word” in season 3 of *The Walking Dead*. Andrea, a friend of Rick Grimes, has survived the wasteland—barely—and taken refuge in the small fortified town of Woodbury. The town seems perfect, like a suburban paradise. Zombies and ruin are nowhere to be seen. The buildings are neatly painted, the greenery is well-maintained, the streets are clean, and the people are happy, all under the leadership of the Governor. Andrea joins the Governor and the rest of Woodbury to watch an event in the arena where she is shocked to see two brawling men surrounded by zombies on chain leashes. Disgusted, she confronts the Governor and tells him that the event was “barbaric.”<sup>94</sup> He reminds her that she was free to leave at any time and that she chose to stay and watch. He explains that it helps the residents of Woodbury “blow off steam.”<sup>95</sup>

The Governor acknowledges an important point, but Andrea appears hesitant.<sup>96</sup> While the Governor is able to pacify Andrea for the time being, viewers are not meant to accept his explanation at face value.<sup>97</sup> There is something wrong with Woodbury. Viewers later learn of the awful things that the Governor does: he exploits those who are close to him, commissions experiments on zombies within the city walls, and murders innocent people. The narrative aligns us with Andrea’s point of view and as conditions in Woodbury worsen, we realize that her initial reaction in the arena was right. We are meant to see that there is something fundamentally wrong about this spectacle. It is antithetical to an ordered social system. Woodbury was built so that people could live peaceful lives away from the barbarism of the wasteland. Such a spectacle is the

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92 Manjikian, *Apocalypse and Post-Politics*, 1.

93 Manjikian, *Apocalypse and Post-Politics*, 134-5.

94 “Say the Word.” *The Walking Dead*. Laurie Holden and David Morrissey. DVD. AMC. 11 Nov. 2012. 00:36:10 – 00:40:20.

95 *Ibid.*

96 The Governor’s response is aimed, not just at Andrea, but at the viewers as well. For a moment, viewers are forced to question why they choose to watch such a morbid show from the comfort of their living rooms.

97 Fans of the post-apocalyptic genre should know better. Any society that is rebuilt on the wasteland is almost always dystopian—*especially* if it resembles suburbia. Viewers are also invited to ponder whether they would be disgusted like Andrea, or if they would be among the citizens cheering in the stands.

product of a social order<sup>98</sup> that is fundamentally corrupt; it is “barbaric.” In the perfect suburban bubble that is Woodbury, what “steam” could people possibly have to “blow off?” Though the Governor does not make this explicit, he hints that there is something about living in a “utopia” that is fundamentally limiting and exhausting.

## B. Unveiling

What most critics I have mentioned in the previous section seem to agree on is that the public’s fascination with the post-apocalyptic genre is driven by a general feeling of restlessness that surrounds life in today’s social world. This feeling of restlessness is often spoken about in broad terms, but it is reflected within the content of the post-apocalyptic work itself in a few very specific ways. Thus far, I have explored how viewers’ experiences of setting in the western and post-apocalyptic genres are filtered through archetypes, aesthetic markers, and etymology. These factors place limitations on the way that viewers interact with setting and, in turn, these experiential mediators help to determine what the setting is. As I previously mentioned, Slotkin argues that setting itself sets limits on what is possible within a story.<sup>99</sup> Setting is a space of limitation that is filtered through other limiting factors to render a meaningful viewing or reading experience.

The wasteland and frontier settings are both integral to their respective genres. Where a horror movie, for example, can be set anywhere (a deserted castle, a summer camp, a haunted house, or a rural town, to name a few possibilities) the settings of the genres I examine in this paper are part of the genres’ definitions. Both settings provide a foundation on which a social order can be established. The aesthetic similarities between the frontier and the wasteland signify a deeper thematic relationship. The genres are situated at two opposite poles: one is situated at the beginning of American social expansion, the other at the end (or rather, after the end). The frontier myth is a significant part of the way that American culture imagines the foundation for its social order and its national identity. Given that restlessness, as some other critics have pointed out, is so pervasive in popular attitudes towards one’s place in relation to social institutions, it is not surprising that the similarities between the genres exist. It is as if the post-apocalyptic genre asks questions of our imagined origins and the implications that follow. Viewers are invited to ponder where, if anywhere, things went wrong and whether the patterns that brought us here can be escaped. From this arises the larger question of whether society is salvageable or if we must rebuild anew.

The post-apocalyptic genre asks us not to think forward about these problems, but to think retrospectively—to the past. With the definition of apocalypse as “unveiling,” the post-apocalyptic world can be thought of as unveiling a truth about the social order that it tears apart. In *Planet of the Apes*, Dr. Zira and Dr. Cornelius, two ape scientists, free Taylor and Nova from captivity.<sup>100</sup> They sneak out of the city and through the desert on horseback. Eventually, they cross a boundary marked by odd X-shaped scarecrows into the Forbidden Zone that lies

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98 For the purposes of this analysis, I use the term “social order” to refer to an established society complete with laws, rules, and institutions. Tombstone and Woodbury, for example, fit within my definition of “social order.” While Rick Grimes’ makeshift encampment in season 3 of *The Walking Dead* certainly has rules and some sort of structure, it does not have the institutional complexity and rigidity of the other cities and towns that more closely resemble the ones we have today. As such, settlements such as Rick’s do not fit within my definition. Though I recognize that these boundaries can be blurry, such nuances are beyond the scope of my analysis.

99 Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 233.

100 Heston et al. *Planet of the Apes*.

beyond. They reach the mouth of a cave that conceals the remnants of a human settlement long destroyed—evidence that humans were once civilized. Dr. Zaius, the film’s antagonist and the “Defender of the Faith, Guardian of the Terrible Secret,” is outside of the cave with his soldiers in anticipation of their arrival. With Zaius, the group enters to find the remains of what has been covered: broken structures, artifacts, and toys all scattered in dust. Among the rubble is a tattered human doll that speaks a single word: “Mama.” In this cave exists the evidence that crumbles the lie so ardently believed by the apes: that humans are not capable of language, intelligence, and culture.<sup>101</sup>

They exit the cave with Zaius as their hostage. Taylor says to his captive, “Man was here first. You owe him your science, your culture, whatever civilization you’ve got.” Zaius’ soldiers stand at the ready, and against the backdrop of the cave that covers the remnants of human society as Zaius asks him “Then answer me this. If man was superior, why didn’t he survive?” Taylor ponders that disease or a natural disaster was responsible, given the barren landscape. Zaius commands Cornelius to read a passage from the holy scroll: “Beware the beast man, for he is the Devil’s pawn. Alone among God’s primates, he kills for sport, or lust, or greed. Yea, he will murder his brother to possess his brother’s land. Let him not breed in great numbers for he will make a desert of his home and yours. Shun him. Drive him back into his jungle lair for he is the harbinger of death.” Before Taylor prepares to leave with Nova on horseback Zaius tells him, “I found nothing in that cave to alter that conception of man and I live by its injunction.” He continues, “The Forbidden Zone was once a paradise. Your breed made a desert of it ages ago.”<sup>102</sup>

Taylor rides with Nova along the waves and the film appears to be over. This moment seems to be an appropriate one for them to saunter away into the horizon, like John Wayne’s character at the end of *The Searchers*. But the scene lingers and they continue on. Shortly after Taylor and Nova make their escape Zaius tells the other apes that Taylor would find “his destiny.” At this point, it becomes apparent that it is not his destiny to freely roam a wild space. They stand still and an establishing shot from behind some structure has viewers gaze down on them, small and insignificant. Taylor crumbles into the ground and yells, “We finally really did it! You maniacs! You blew it up! Oh damn you! God damn you all to hell!” The camera pans out and the structure is revealed to be the Statue of Liberty.<sup>103</sup>

This moment is a moment of unveiling. The ruined Statue of Liberty, half-buried in sand, is a symbol of the impermanence of human society brought about by its own devices, the remnants of which are being consumed by the wilderness. The apocalypse has unveiled humanity’s true nature, as described by Zaius, and the film leaves viewers with an unflinching and pessimistic look at the wasteland that is revealed. The statue is tarnished, its vibrant green almost black. The points on her crown, once dignified, are withering. No longer does she look out into an endless sea with the majestic New York City skyline behind her. Her confident brow and her unrelenting seaward gaze have been sullied by centuries of neglect. The statue’s gentle backward tilt and marred face reveal a sad gaze now turned skyward, as if she is mourning the presence of some higher power that has long forgotten her. The word “liberty” becomes a sick parody of itself. It is liberty that drives the Westerner across the frontier, indulging his every whim. Taylor is the Wanderer, and he, too, is now completely free to act as he pleases. But buried deep beneath the sand is the plaque on the base of the statue with Emma Lazarus’ poem, “New Colossus”:

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101 Heston et al. *Planet of the Apes*. 01:35:18 – 01:37:17.

102 Heston et al. *Planet of the Apes*. 01:41:30 – 01:49:20.

103 Heston et al. *Planet of the Apes*. 01:49:20.

Give me your tired, your poor,  
 Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,  
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!<sup>104</sup>

Her torch is dull and soulless, no longer a beacon of hope, the promises embedded in her flame long broken. There is no golden door for Taylor. He has arrived at the Statue of Liberty only to find that it does not signify relief. What remains of the human social order is a reminder that there is nothing left to escape to, only something to escape from.

The rosy picture of human society painted by the classic western stands in stark contrast to the bleak message at the end of *Planet of the Apes*. To be fair, the western genre is by no means simplistic. It is fraught with moral ambiguity, prejudice, and social strife. Despite its complexity, the western's attitude towards social order is fundamentally different from the attitude espoused by the post-apocalyptic genre. In Howard Hawks' 1948 film, *Red River*, John Wayne plays Tom Dunson, a tyrannical and murderous person who pursues his adopted son across the West after they have a falling out over their cattle drive.<sup>105</sup> Dunson is by no means a "good" man. He is abusive and territorial. His son is torn between being loyal to his father or protective of his workers. He ultimately sides with his workers and Dunson sets off to kill him. At the climax of the film, they prepare to have a gunfight and reconcile at the last minute. They acknowledge their love for one another and Dunson includes his son's initial on his ranch's cattle brand.

John Ford's *My Darling Clementine*—released two years earlier—also features a Westerner with dark elements.<sup>106</sup> Unlike Dunson, Wyatt Earp is not villainous. Earp comes into the town of Tombstone and becomes its marshal so that he can avenge his brother's death. Along the way he befriends Doc Holliday, a saloon owner and "murderous gambler" who contributes to the reckless behavior taking place in the town.<sup>107</sup> According to Slotkin, the relationship between these two men indicates that Earp is not in the business of cleaning up Tombstone.<sup>108</sup> Still, order is restored when the Clantons are defeated during the gunfight at the OK Corral. Slotkin argues, "Although Ford's movie ultimately reaffirms an essentially 'progressive' view of the town-tamer, the Earp/Holliday relationship suggests an element of darkness and violence that belongs to an earlier stage of civilization. Earp, however, is moving toward a more civilized way of life."<sup>109</sup> As with *Red River*, order is restored despite any moral ambiguities in the plot.

In Fred Zinneman's *High Noon*, Gary Cooper plays Will Kane, an aging town marshal who is preparing to retire so that he can settle down with his soon-to-be wife.<sup>110</sup> He is compelled to one last day of duty when he hears that a violent criminal is on the noon train en route to his town. He tries to rally support, but the town is a town of cowards. Nobody wants to help him

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104 Lazarus, Emma, "New Colossus," "What is the quote on the statue of liberty?" *How Tall is the Statue of Liberty?*. 10-14, n.d. Web. 11 May 2014. <<http://www.howtallisthestatueofliberty.org/what-is-the-quote-on-the-statue-of-liberty/>>.

105 Wayne, John, and Montgomery Clift. *Red River*. DVD. Directed by Howard Hawks. 1948.

106 Fonda, Henry. *My Darling Clementine*. DVD. Directed by John Ford. 1946. DVD-ROM.

107 Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 394.

108 Ibid.

109 Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 324.

110 Cooper, Gary. *High Noon*. DVD. Directed by Fred Zinneman. 1952.

fight. Having saved the town from a threat years ago, Kane is well-respected. Because of this, the townspeople's rejection of his request for help feels disorienting. Cooper's face is a recognizable one in the genre; he previously starred in Victor Fleming's *The Virginian* and William Wyler's *The Westerner*.<sup>111</sup> Will Kane could easily be an aged version of one of these characters. It is not hard to imagine the Virginian and Molly Stark Wood, for instance, settled in Medicine Bow only to find that some threat is creeping back into the town that he helped to clean up years earlier.

*High Noon* invites viewers to imagine the Westerner's life and the state of the social order after he has tamed the town and settled down. Close-up shots of Cooper's face show it to look different than expected, gray-haired and creased with deep lines. His wide eyes suggest uncertainty and vulnerability. The entire film is shot in stark black and white, as if he is a nuanced and troubled man living in a world that denies him his complexity and expects him to fulfill a rigidly-defined role. Slotkin agrees, writing, "The gunfight itself has a ritual quality. Kane's preparations and his solitary walk up the empty street tell us not only that he *must* fight Miller, but that he has to do it in a certain way, playing by certain rules."<sup>112</sup> The narrative progresses in real time, each passing moment brings Kane, and viewers, closer to the threatening arrival of the noon train. Wide establishing shots show viewers that he is painfully alone. Like the frontier, the town itself is a wide-open and threatening space. Kane's own liberty is subverted by the wills and ills of the townspeople who rely on him for protection.

He saves the town at the end of the film and order is restored once again. After the ordeal, he drops his badge in the dirt, hops in the carriage with his wife, hands her the reins, and leaves the town behind. Slotkin explains: "In the classic town-tamer Western, Kane's personal redemption would have been mirrored in the triumph of the community. But the social implications of Kane's victory are anti-canonical. Instead of vindicating Kane discredits the community, which proves itself unworthy of the sacrifices he has made for it. [...] The people have been saved, but they have less worth than the man who saved them."<sup>113</sup> Although the aforementioned westerns seem anything but rosy, I describe them as such because order is always restored at the end, no matter the troubles encountered along the way. The plot of *High Noon* reflects Manjikian's point that people expect their governments to keep them safe from disaster.<sup>114</sup> She argues that this expectation, in part, fuels the public's fascination with apocalyptic scenarios.<sup>115</sup> She writes that people want to know "how and why a 'modern' society is *not* immune to devastating acts of destruction, how it is that 'modern' people and their leaders behave in times of great danger, and whether there are lessons and opportunities one's society may draw from danger. We want to know how it is that we are safe, but not invulnerable."<sup>116</sup> *High Noon* makes it explicit that in the logic of the western, humanity—despite its flaws—is worth saving.

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111 These are just a few of many western films starring Cooper.

112 Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 395.

113 Ibid.

114 Manjikian, *Apocalypse and Post-Politics*, 4-5.

115 Manjikian, *Apocalypse and Post-Politics*, 5.

116 Ibid.

### C. *Visions of Dystopia: Social Order on the Wasteland*

#### i. Barbarism and the Arbitrariness of Boundaries

If humanity is saved regardless of its flaws, then the flaws do not *have* to be addressed.<sup>117</sup> In fact, they may be reinforced. It is worth noting that in *High Noon* the town itself is not presented as inherently evil. When Kane leaves, it does not seem that the town is unfixable or hopeless. Rather, it merely seems that the town is not the place for him. The post-apocalyptic genre differs from the western in that it refuses to tie up loose ends. More often than not, human flaws are what instigate mass destruction and social order is not restored afterwards. When a new social order is established on the wasteland, it is built upon the remains of societies that came before it, just as contemporary American society is built upon the frontier towns of western mythology. In the wasteland, it is as if the ground itself is infected by the specter of human social organization. Anything built upon that ground is tainted, doomed to fall like preexisting civilizations.

In the post-apocalyptic genre, social order inherits the flaws of the civilization that preceded it and almost every established society is inevitably dystopian. The genre sees social order itself as something that conceals. This attitude towards society becomes painfully obvious with the ending of *Planet of the Apes*. The apes' world is built upon the ruins of human civilization. It conceals the truth that humans were once civilized beings. Their denial of this fact is the lie that forms the basis of their world. The apes' culture centers on their superiority to humans, an idea which is even present in their religious texts. The irony is that they are not so different from the humans they subjugate. The apes' society has an air of exceptionalism about it; they are controlling and territorial. Their abuse and enslavement of humans recalls things that the western genre glosses over such as chattel slavery and the slaughter and displacement of native populations that made frontier settlement possible. They are a civilization built upon human folly and have inherited those follies.

It is worth acknowledging that the apes' society reflects elements of humanity, but it is not in itself a human society. Most post-apocalyptic films and texts are more concerned with the way that humans struggle to reestablish a social order of their own in the face of an apocalypse and the problems that arise from such an effort. *The Walking Dead's* Woodbury epitomizes the genre's dystopian vision of established social order. On the surface, it is everything one could possibly want it to be. It is safe, clean, and conducive to a "normal" life. But as I have previously mentioned, dark secrets are hidden within the town. *The Walking Dead* reminds us that if something seems too good to be true, then it probably is.

During the arena scene, the conversation between Andrea and the Governor hints to the idea that there is something exhausting about living in a "utopia." The Governor tells her that the arena fight helps the citizens of Woodbury to "blow off steam." What is it about this apparent utopian life that is so exhausting? What does this feeling of restlessness among Woodbury's citizens reveal about life in a society that has been built upon a wasteland?

When Andrea calls the spectacle "barbaric," she hints at the very core of the issue. Woodbury's "utopian" vision is a lie; it is built upon an untamed and violent space that people cannot actually escape from. The inclusion of zombies into their entertainment allows the citizens to see that they are not like the undead. Those shambling former humans are not like what is seen in day-to-day life in Woodbury. As such, it may be comforting to be reminded that

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<sup>117</sup> Although westerns may address said flaws, it is not necessary for them to do so in order to ensure the survival of both the social order and the human race.

the things that exist “out there” are not the kinds of things that exist within the town’s fortified walls. Furthermore, the zombies are chained and cannot actually cause harm to the spectators. The arena event is a display of human control over the flesh-eating ghouls that threaten their existence. The chains around their necks offer an illusion of dominance that extends beyond the zombies themselves to the wasteland and the crisis that caused it. Woodbury’s entertainment is a display of humanity’s ability to tame a wild space and make it their own again.

The Governor quickly materializes as the villain of the show and the deep-seated corruption within Woodbury becomes apparent. Andrea desperately tries to maintain the integrity of Woodbury’s mission even as he becomes increasingly erratic. As things progress, her efforts begin to feel futile; not only does the Governor exert his mastery over the tamed wilderness that is Woodbury, but over its citizens as well. He becomes abrasive and dictatorial, forcing them to risk their lives in the fight against Rick and his settlement. When they cross him, they are killed or tortured. Thus, the barbarism is not just something that has been brought into the arena for entertainment. Barbarism is a part of the structure of Woodbury itself. Though the citizens may not realize it at first, it is the Governor’s cutthroat attitude and his propensity for violence that keeps Woodbury “safe” and “running smoothly.” The most exhausting part of life in Woodbury, however, goes far beyond the effort to maintain the illusion of control (an illusion that slips away as the season progresses). Woodbury is based upon a fundamental lie; the humans in charge are more barbaric than any of the horrors that exist in the wasteland. As Woodbury begins to fall apart, the barbarism at the center of the community is unveiled. Woodbury is not an escape. The true barbarism lies in the fact that humans are willing to use the horrors of the wasteland against other humans. The town is the space that makes this possible.

Woodbury is a place that blurs the line between civilization and wilderness. The contrasting impulses of belonging and longing force characters to straddle this line, and when this line is shown to be painfully arbitrary, it results in confusion, hopelessness, restlessness, and exhaustion. The line is somewhat blurry in western films as well, but societies on the frontier are societies in progress. They grow, develop, and change with their times. A blurring of lines, to some extent, is to be expected. The western depicts the birth of an expanded American social order. It is about a civilization in development. Those on the wasteland, however, are already well-developed by the time the Wanderer encounters them. The divisions between the civilized and the wild appear to be more concrete, but end up being more tenuous in comparison to the western (as demonstrated by Woodbury).

## ii. A Never-ending Cycle?

In contrast to Woodbury, *Land of the Dead*’s version of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania does not seem to be hiding very much—its dystopian elements exist on the surface. Like Woodbury, the city is fortified and protected by armed guards. Romero paints a picture of society that is similar to our own.<sup>118</sup> People live in squalid slums where they struggle to get by with limited resources. Towering over the squalor at the center of the city is Fiddler’s Green, the skyscraper that houses the rich. Fiddler’s Green contains extravagant apartments and numerous upscale amenities, much of the interior looks like a posh shopping mall. The people living in the city below are well aware of the social inequalities that the tower represents. The tower elevates its residents above the surface of the wasteland, creating the illusion of mastery over and separation from both the

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<sup>118</sup> Romero’s films are well known, especially by fans of zombie films, for using the zombie outbreak plot to explore contemporary societal issues.

horrors it contains as well as the people living in squalor below. This social structure recalls the one that drove many people to frontier life in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Slotkin writes, “By 1890 it was clear that the industrialization of the economy had produced a social order in which wealth and power would increasingly be concentrated in the hands of a relatively few men, and a few powerful (and even monopolistic) industrial and financial ‘trusts.’”<sup>119</sup> A similar situation seems to be at play in Romero’s film, as evidenced by Mr. Kaufman’s domination and exploitation of the masses from his tower.

It is not surprising, then, that Riley wants to go north—to nowhere in particular. He just wants to be away from where he is now. After a brawl at a gambling ring, he and a prostitute named Slack are arrested. As they sit in their respective jail cells across from one another, Riley explains his desire to leave. Slack wants to leave, too, which hints that Pittsburgh is not a space to escape *to*, but to escape *from*. They have this conversation as they are locked up in jail cells, a setting reinforces their inability to leave. Their freedoms and desires are policed by a man in a tower far, far above them. The city itself is a kind of jail cell. People are not free to come and go as they please. Even Riley, who is allowed to leave so that he can gather supplies, does not have access to the resources that he would need in order to go north on his own. In addition to the armed guards, the fence that surrounds the city is an electric one. It is supposed to be for the safety of the people inside—it keeps the zombies out.

When the zombies find a way into the city, things get progressively worse. He tells Slack, “What was built to keep people safe is gonna trap them inside.”<sup>120</sup> The electric fence corners the residents fleeing Fiddler’s Green and they are eaten alive by the zombies. Riley and his team are eventually able to thwart the zombie invasion, freeing many of the commoners who live in the slums. Mulligan, a sort of leader for the commoners, sets off with the people to start a new and hopefully better society. Riley declines the offer to go with him. Outi J. Hakola explains: “At the end of the film, when civilization in its current form is destroyed, Riley’s responsibility for the city people ends. He refuses to join Mulligan, the resistance leader, in forming a new society, because for him the concept of society necessarily includes the possibility of the abuse of power.”<sup>121</sup> What Riley is resisting, and what Romero seems to be commenting on, is the perceived inevitability of reproducing the same society with the same problems over and over again. What happened in the 1890s, as described by Slotkin, drove people west. Romero argues that the same kind of social strife is happening in today’s society and, as I have previously examined, this perception is a factor that fuels peoples’ interest in the post-apocalyptic genre. Romero taps into the feelings of restlessness and creates a wasteland, yet another frontier, for people to escape into. His film warns viewers, as Hakola has pointed out, that any attempt to reestablish ourselves runs the risk of replicating the same social problems, or even making them worse. *Land of the Dead* has created the same kind of social order that the frontier was meant to provide people an escape from, painting a bleak picture of a vicious cycle. As Riley and his team go off on their own, into the sunset, we cannot help but wonder if they will have better luck.

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119 Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 31.

120 Baker, Simon, Asia Argento. *Land of the Dead*. 01:11:32

121 Hakola, Outi J. “Colliding Modalities and Receding Frontier in George A. Romero’s *Land of the Dead*.” In *Undead in the West: Vampires, Zombies, Mummies, and Ghosts on the Cinematic Frontier*, edited by Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper. Lanham, 146, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2012.

## iii. Looking to the Past

One common feature shared between dystopian societies in the wasteland is that they restrict one's ability to move freely. The ones I have discussed thus far make this quality explicit by having some sort of barrier that keeps people in. Woodbury and Pittsburgh are surrounded by fortifications. In the land of the apes, people are kept in cages and fear keeps the apes from crossing the scarecrow-marked boundary into the Forbidden Zone. Boundaries are especially apparent in L.Q. Jones' 1975 film *A Boy and His Dog*. The film follows Vic, a young man of questionable morals, and his best friend Blood, an eloquent telepathic dog. The year is 2024 and most of humanity has been wiped out by World War IV, which only lasted five days. Vic is different from the other Wanderer characters I have discussed in that the apocalyptic event did not throw life as he knew it out of order. With both of his parents dead, Vic was raised by the wasteland. He desires only two things—food and sex. Blood helps him find food, but in this iteration of the wasteland, women are in short supply.

Things change when they find Quilla June Holmes taking refuge in an abandoned building. He saves her from bandits and they have sex. When she sneaks away, Vic follows her in hopes of finding more women. Their pursuit leads them to a small concrete structure with a door. Inside there is only a hole with a ladder. Quilla's home is somewhere deep beneath the ground. Blood refuses to follow, so Vic descends by himself. He traverses hallways of pipes and metal grates. The walls are all stark white and immaculate, an abrupt transition from the windswept desert plain above the ground. Vic wanders the halls alone in his tattered, earthy clothes. It is clear that he is in a world that is defined by its artificiality.

There are, in a sense, two boundaries between the wasteland and Quilla's home—the ground above them and the pipe-lined passageways that maintain whatever exists within this place that they call "downunder." As he enters through a panel in the wall, animal noises and a voice crack through a speaker. It says, "And with these terrifying sounds of primeval savagery, we close the committee's presentation of sound tours into the past."<sup>122</sup> The white noise and recorded jungle sounds confirm the sense of artificiality that permeates the passageways. As the voice is playing, the camera shifts. Viewer's perspectives are aligned with Vic's as they are shown a perfectly-mowed field of grass with a few trees and hundreds of grave stones—all of which look exactly the same and are neatly aligned. They are emphasized by the solid black sky behind them. The field rolls gently, not unlike the plains that the Westerner gazes across when he looks to the horizon. The darkness appears to go on forever, like a night sky with no moon or stars. Of course, it is not limitless. Having followed Vic into this world, viewers know that the darkness is the result of being concealed deep underground. Despite this fact, the area is incredibly well lit, suggesting an artificial light source. Vic has found a world that is painstakingly constructed, carefully maintained, and the field of graves warns us that the end result of remaining in this space is being put still deeper into the ground.

The citizens of this town, men and women both, have white-painted faces and blush on their cheeks. They are dressed as if they live in a world from long ago, though it is difficult to pin down an exact time period. The women wear something akin to elaborate calico dresses with frilly aprons. The men wear red plaid shirts and denim overalls. Some men wear collared shirts with cardigans and bowties. Others wear polo shirts tucked neatly into their pants. A lively tune plays through the radio static as Vic is kidnapped. Women line up, smiling and giggling at one

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<sup>122</sup> Johnson, Don, Susanne Benton, and Tim McIntire. *A Boy and His Dog*. DVD. Directed by L Q Jones. 1975. Slingshot, 2000. 00:59:08 – 00:59:31.

another. A marching band festively parades through the crowd of people. Although he does not know it yet, Vic has been lured here to artificially inseminate the female citizens, after which he will be sent to “the farm.”<sup>123</sup>

In contrast to the lively events “outside,” the committee members in the town hall are cold and emotionless. They sentence two citizens to death without any hesitation. Their voices are dull and their expressions are clearly ones of boredom. Oddly enough, the couple receiving the death sentence reacts the same way, quietly marching off stage, stiff-backed and silent. Their reaction insinuates that, even when facing death, it is better to comply with the wishes of the committee rather than running the risk of being condemned to something worse. The film refuses to give any answers to its viewers, leaving the committee’s operations shrouded in mystery. All that viewers know of the committee is that it is highly esoteric and enforces rigid social norms, steeped in tradition, with an iron fist.

The austere social order in *A Boy and His Dog* demonstrates that dystopian societies on the wasteland, like the western genre, look to the past. Their grip with the past is so strong, in fact, that they have an inability to interact with a contemporary world that is always in flux. Boundaries do more than help people maintain the illusion of control; they also help to isolate people from outside influence. Within these boundaries, patterns of thought can become rigid and self-reinforcing. Lifestyles can become so disconnected from reality that they rob people of the ability to survive in a world that is not of their own construction. The people in Jones’ film dress in a way that shows a careful and deliberate connection with the past. Any dissent with the current social order is not acceptable. Change is a risk. Woodbury, too, is steeped in the past. It is a reconstruction of the world as it was before the apocalypse. And the rich who live in Fiddler’s Green can go about their lives shopping and dining as if the zombie outbreak were a thing of fiction.

Vic is tied down, connected to a strange apparatus, and women in wedding dresses stand in line next to him preparing to be artificially inseminated. Under the watchful eye of a priest, they take their vows. A voice in the background offers a nugget of committee-endorsed wisdom through a speaker, “A man should never be ashamed to own he has been in the wrong which is but saying that he is wiser today than he was yesterday. Another helpful hint for living from the committee’s almanac.”<sup>124</sup> This “helpful hint” about learning from past mistakes seems to be a wise one, but its implementation in this social order is distressing. Though perhaps unintentional on the part of the committee, the hint gestures towards the wrongs at the beginning of the film which are summarized by a sequence of mushroom clouds. Human wrongs have created the wasteland and it is ironic that this line should be spoken in such a place. Rather than owning the wrongs of humanity and learning from them, the committee creates a life for its citizens that is stuck in the past, stuck in a time before the bombs were ever dropped. The people who live “downunder” are no wiser today than they were yesterday. They continue to look back, holding onto strict customs that root them into an oppressive way of life. This world is not one that a person can live in naturally. It is not a space where one can be human, especially given that mistakes are punished so harshly. It is clearly artificial, forced, and controlled; the social order has reached a point where even the propagation of the next generation depends on these qualities.

With help from Quilla, Vic escapes to the surface and is reunited with Blood. His escape allows him to break through the boundaries that keep the social order below “safe.” Like the

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123 Though it is never explicitly stated what “the farm” is, the reactions of certain characters when they are sentenced to it in the town hall suggest that it is the worst possible punishment that can be given.

124 *A Boy and His Dog*. 01:13:08 – 01:13:24.

electric fence that surrounds Pittsburgh, the fortifications that surround Woodbury, and the scarecrows that mark the edge of the Forbidden Zone, the boundaries between the wilderness and the social order in Jones' film stand in for the limits—both ideological and physical—that humans place on themselves. The protagonist breaks these boundaries down both figuratively and literally upon his escape. The space he escapes into is also threatening, with any number of horrors awaiting those who wander the wastes. Dystopian human social orders are often destroyed in post-apocalyptic films, but “downunder” is an exception. When Vic and Quilla leave and close the door behind them, the society below remains relatively untouched. Vic finds Blood dying in the dirt outside, sick and starving. Vic has a choice to make and it is an easy one. The next scene shows Vic and Blood walking side by side into the sunrise with high spirits and full stomachs. Quilla is nowhere to be seen, having been killed and eaten off screen. Though their crime is egregious, they set off into the wasteland once more. No matter the horrors and the hardships, the film makes it perfectly clear that life in the wastes is better than life “downunder.” It reminds us that there may not always be a Riley Denbo, a John Wayne, or a George Taylor to save society from its problems. *A Boy and His Dog* gives viewers Vic, and he could not care less about the small dystopian pocket desperately clinging to life beneath the surface. He shuts the door and walks away, leaving them to craft their own doom as they inevitably will.

## VI. Looking Back, Looking Forward

At the end of Romero's *Land of the Dead*, Riley prepares to leave with his crew after saving the city from the shambling undead that breached its walls. Before they part ways, Mulligan tries to convince Riley into joining him and the rest of the survivors in their effort to build a new society. He says, “Why don't you stick around? We could turn this place into what we always wanted it to be.”<sup>125</sup> Mulligan's proposition is the crux of the post-apocalyptic genre. What would happen if humans were given a blank slate? Perhaps we could remold the world into something better. The frontier myth tells us that we had this chance once before. The post-apocalyptic genre tells us that this chance was squandered. Riley responds to Mulligan's offer, “Maybe. Then what will we turn into?”<sup>126</sup> Riley reminds us that we cannot rebuild our world unless we are willing to rebuild ourselves, lest we repeat the same cycles again and again.

The post-apocalyptic film is, in many ways, a modern day refiguration of the classic western. When Frederick Jackson Turner presented his frontier thesis in 1893, he mourned the settlement of the frontier and celebrated the American institutions that had been built upon it.<sup>127</sup> To some extent, the post-apocalyptic genre continues Turner's mourning. The irony of the mythic frontier is that it inevitably undoes itself. What makes the space “the frontier” is not just that it is free and open, but that it is available for human development. The frontier can only be the frontier if it is in the process of being filled in. The frontier fades away, but the desire for free and open space does not.

The post-apocalyptic genre returns the frontier to viewers by undoing everything that the frontier made possible: homes, economies, and entire nations. It critiques the mythical basis of American culture by unveiling a supposedly more honest view of humanity. The genre posits a

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<sup>125</sup> *Land of the Dead*. 01:30:05 – 01:30:28.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Turner, Frederick J. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1893. 2. Web. 5 Nov. 2013.

more cynical look at human capability and ponders the frontier as a part of the trajectory towards collapse. It does not stop at doubting our abilities to rebuild. It invites viewers to ponder whether or not we even should even try. The wasteland is, in some sense, more a realization of freedom than the frontier ever was. Social order on the wasteland is not meant to last. It is not progressive like the frontier; it is regressive. Any forward momentum is lost. If life on the wasteland is the purest form of freedom that we can ever reach—if it is as close as we can truly get to nature—then perhaps some freedoms are worth sacrificing. The post-apocalyptic genre warns us that human societies will always undo themselves. New societies built upon the ruins of the old inevitably inherit the same flaws that lead to their destruction if they fail to look back. Western scholars such as Slotkin have taught us to look back with caution. One's vision of the past may not reflect reality. As the voice in *A Boy and His Dog* reminds viewers over the speaker, people can only learn from their mistakes if they are willing to be honest about them.

The post-apocalyptic genre provides viewers with a fictional canvas on which they can work through these kinds of problems. It is worth noting, however, that the apocalyptic scenario is not relegated to the realm of fiction. Wars, the plague, the atomic bomb; widespread catastrophe is no stranger to humans. A study released in 2014 by Safa Motesharrei of the University of Maryland examines the collapses of previous civilizations and compares the causal patterns to our current state of affairs. He writes:

It may seem reasonable to believe that modern civilization, armed with its greater technological capacity, scientific knowledge, and energy resources, will be able to survive and endure whatever crises historical societies succumbed to. But the brief overview of collapses demonstrates not only the ubiquity of the phenomenon, but also the extent to which advanced, complex, and powerful societies are susceptible to collapse. The fall of the Roman Empire, and the equally (if not more) advanced Han, Mauryan, and Gupta Empires, as well as so many advanced Mesopotamian Empires, are all testimony to the fact that advanced, sophisticated, complex, and creative civilizations can be both fragile and impermanent.<sup>128</sup>

Motesharrei warns that, while societal collapse is not yet inevitable, structural reform would be difficult. Though the situation appears to be grim, there may be little that can be done. Our current social order, with its deeply entrenched social inequalities, is unsustainable. Coupled with a looming environmental crisis and a number of other factors, it may only be a matter of time before things begin to crumble. The journalism surrounding the study may be hyperbolic and sensationalistic, but the point remains: it is not a matter of “if,” but “when.” It is trite, but it is true—nothing lasts forever.

My purpose here is not to be melodramatic, but to point out a very real overarching social commentary within the post-apocalyptic genre. Its aesthetic and thematic borrowing from the western implies some sort of cycle, though perhaps a confused one, of triumph, failure, limitation, desire, and escape. Is the lesson here just that history repeats itself? Or that our imagination of history repeats itself? Regardless, it is worth remembering that the lessons that the genre offers its viewers do not just apply to the world of fiction. The way that American culture imagines and mythologizes its history affects the way that it imagines its future. Is this a self-fulfilling

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<sup>128</sup> Motesharrei, Safa. “Human and nature dynamics (HANDY): Modeling inequality and use of resources in the collapse or sustainability of society.” *Ecological Economics* 101 (2014): 90-102. Web. 13 May 2014. <<http://www.journals.elsevier.com/ecological-economics/>>.

prophecy, or can a cycle be broken? Perhaps these are the wrong questions to be asking. It may be wise to take the advice of the post-apocalyptic genre and embrace that which is out of human control. If we had the chance to start over, could we do things differently? And more importantly, is it worth trying?

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