

THE LAST FRONTIER... HERO? MAS-COOL-INITIES AND MASK-ULINITIES IN THE THIRD SEASON OF *TRUE DETECTIVE* AND *FALLOUT*

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ABSTRACT: The archetype of the cowboy as it was originally conceived in the late 19th century—unyielding, free-spirited, and courageous—may need an urgent revision in the new millennium. Far from destroying the American frontier hero par excellence, the third season of *True Detective* (2019) and *Fallout* (2024) offer a more nuanced, sensible, and sociable depiction of the cowboy that points towards the deconstruction of the archetype or, rather, to its updating within the context of the Trump era in corporatist America. In this essay, I analyze and describe how the cowboy myth is stripped of some of his traditional traits, particularly those associated with the relentless use of violence and a masculinity built upon a macho attitude.

RESUMEN: El arquetipo del cowboy tal y como fue originalmente concebido a finales del siglo XIX—un espíritu libre, obstinado y valiente—quizá precise una revisión urgente en el nuevo milenio. Lejos de destruir al héroe de la frontera americana por antonomasia, la tercera temporada de *True Detective* (2019) y *Fallout* (2024) brindan una representación del cowboy más sociable, sensata y matizada que apunta a una deconstrucción del arquetipo o incluso a su actualización en el marco de la era de Trump y el corporativismo estadounidense. En este ensayo, analizo y describo cómo el mito del vaquero es despojado de algunas de sus características típicas, especialmente aquellas asociadas al uso incesante de la violencia y a una masculinidad sustentada en una actitud varonil.

THE MANLINESS OF THE COWBOY IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The cowboy is, above all, a type used during the nationalist period arising after the Civil War to endorse the values of progress, industrialization and capitalism, while personifying the ideals of the Union for a strongly divided nation that needed a common figure with which to feel identified and through which to heal (Moskowitz n.p.). Though the pursuit of freedom, self-reliance and rectitude are perhaps the most obvious ones, concomitant to the need to praise the values embraced by the nation came a “*machification*” of the archetype.¹ In “The United States, Mexico, and *Machismo*,” Américo Paredes illustrates the ways in which the notion of macho developed during this post-war period, showing how the cowboy figure increasingly displayed this feature, particularly when the pistol was added as an essential part of his attire (Stoeltje 51).² It is not surprising, then, that when addressing the golden age of Westerns between the 1940s and 1950s, Arthur Holmberg (2012) states: “So why did Americans crave the cowboy? Similar to the anxiety about masculinity at the end of the nineteenth century, Americans again struggled with the meaning of manhood and turned to their national icon of masculinity to find answers” (60).

While the popularity of this archetype has had its ups and downs, in the last years, several cinematographic releases seem to point, once again, to a revival of the Western genre, with works such as *True Grit* (Coen Brothers, 2010), *Blackthorn* (Gil, 2011), *Dead Man’s Burden* (Moshe, 2014), *The Hateful Eight* (Tarantino, 2015), or *In a Valley of Violence* (West, 2016) to name a few. Yet, though the Western genre necessarily “served for the promotion of a mythical dominant masculinity” (Klein Martins 49) and this trait is still endorsed in several works, the way (white) North American manhood is addressed in some of these films differs substantially from traditional depictions of manliness as synonymous with dominance, individuality, and propensity for violence (Blanco-Herrero, Rodríguez-Contreras & Gutiérrez-San-Miguel 2; Klein Martins 50), problematizing the cowboy myth as the quintessential symbol for “independence from women and

¹ See, for instance, President Theodore Roosevelt’s 1901 essay titled “Manhood and Statehood,” in which he alluded to the “iron qualities that must go with true manhood” (213).

² In psychoanalysis, the gun has classically been interpreted as a symbolic extension of the phallus, so the fact that the weapon is always placed near the hips when shooting is revealing of this newly adopted virility.

domesticity” (Bordin 32) while highlighting how that inability to integrate in society may be more a predicament than an aspiration. Accordingly, connected to this resurgence of the cowboy macho’s popularity, in these past few decades several studies have put the focus on the ways conventional patterns of virility are constructed, fostered and contested within the Western universe, submitting them to exhaustive scrutiny.³

The ambiguity of the cowboy archetype explains why several of its features, which are far from monolithic, can coexist without threatening the core of the myth. Hence, it can be incarnated in a cautious rancher who despises violence for violence’s sake or in an impetuous sheriff quick on the trigger as well as in a shepherd who longs for stability and starting a family or a hefty, indomitable loner. As Russell Martin (1983) concludes: “The mythic cowboy can symbolize caution or recklessness, stability or galloping abandon—because his image is a very pliable kind of cultural clay” (359).

As it could “serve many often contradictory political initiatives” (Szymkowska-Bartyzel 341) the versatility provided by the cowboy myth allowed that its unadulterated manhood and its readiness for action could be appropriated by politicians. From Theodore Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, several presidents have relied on a cowboy narrative to endorse unpopular policies on the grounds of a sometimes poorly understood patriotic sentiment. Similarly, Westerns have often been used as platforms to sanction different—and sometimes clashing—perspectives. The release of *The Cowboys* (Rydell, 1972) close to the end of the Vietnam War may offer an enlightening example of this. As pointed out by Martin Holtz (2023), the movie features a hard but nonetheless caring aged rancher, Wil Andersen, who must hire schoolboys for a cattle drive when the middle generation, which stands for the counter-culture youth of the time, frantically leaves for the gold rush. Acting as a paternal figure, Andersen introduces the boys into a world where violence must be

³ Several examples include Anthony Easthope’s *What a man’s gotta do: The masculine myth in popular culture* (1992), Jane Tompkins’s *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (1992), Peter Verstraten’s *Screening Cowboys: Reading Masculinities in Westerns* (1999), Roderick McGillis’s *He Was Some Kind of a Man: Masculinities in the B Western* (2011), Elisa Bordin’s *Masculinity & Westerns: Regenerations at the Turn of the Millennium* (2014), Emma Hamilton’s *Masculinities in American Western Films: A Hyper-Linear History* (2016), Lydia R. Cooper’s *Masculinities in Literature of the American West* (2016), or Clint W. Jones’s edited volume *Contemporary Cowboys: Reimagining an American Archetype in Popular Culture* (2023).

exerted to protect one's interests, much like conservative politicians of the period encouraged soldiers to defend the nation against the red scare by impersonating their cowboy heroes overseas. But the cowboy myth has also been used to contest these very same policies. Only two years before *The Cowboys* for instance, the revisionist Western *Soldier Blue* became famous for its gruesome depiction of the Sand Creek massacre, which viewers at the time would easily link to the Vietnam conflict.

To contribute to this topical subject, this article focuses on the analysis of two recent TV series to analyze the ways in which the figure of the cowboy is, if not disputed, at least problematized. Specifically, my analysis of the third season of *True Detective* (Pizzolatto, 2019) and the first season of *Fallout* (Wagner & Robertson-Dworet, 2024) pays attention to an apparent decrease in the macho attitude and a gradual remission of masculinity traits that, according to Anthony Easthope (1992), are classically sustained by the use of violence, such as quarrelsomeness, impulsivity, and imperviousness. Though not exactly fitting within the Western genre per se, these two examples could provide valuable insight while showcasing new renditions of the cowboy. On the one hand, Pizzolatto's series is a crime drama ascribed to the neo-noir tradition which does not deal with actual cowboys, but engages in some features that typify the Western genre as, in fact, the detective has come to embody "an updated cowboy to maintain a semblance of order" (Schweitzer 187), while his physical and emotional detachment constitutes "an integral component of his personality and another link to the cowboy archetype" (188). Although Nic Pizzolatto's depiction is neither an exception nor the most straightforward undermining of the cowboy's virility, *True Detective* is interesting because it makes the audience participant in the overall process of its deconstruction, which does not entail a complete destruction of the stereotype, but a reconciliation with its most problematic aspects. On the other hand, the post-apocalyptic future depicted in *Fallout* is not immersed in the Western realm either, but it introduces a cowboy that looks misplaced in the setting of the story.

The process of (de)construction of the cowboy myth follows opposite directions in both examples, with two rude, swashbuckling men becoming more vulnerable in *True Detective*, and a sturdy war and movie hero turning into a corrupted criminal in *Fallout*. Following Amy Greenberg's argument that in the frontier (whether in the western US or in Latin America) during the 19th century, where the cowboy archetype thrives, aggressivity was seen as a way of asserting

manhood (13-14), my analysis focuses on personal attachment and violence to determine if and how virility is deconstructed in the shows. I suggest that the deconstruction of the cowboy type seen in these examples does not involve the emasculation of the macho rancher but a balance. What these two shows attest, I contend, is that, though the American hero may lose some of its outdated traits, this does not necessarily entail the end of the myth, but its transformation into a character that better embodies the attitudes of the present century.

NO LONGER DEALING IN LEAD: A DIFFERENT STANCE TOWARDS VIOLENCE

The third season of *True Detective*⁴ stars two detectives working for the Arkansas State Police: Wayne Hays and Roland West, who will spend 35 years trying to solve a case regarding the disappearance of brothers Will and Julie Purcell in 1980. Though the boy is found dead soon after going missing, the whereabouts of his sister remain a mystery, and suspicions soon fall on neighbor Brent Woodard, a Native American who is sometimes seen talking to children. Thirsty for mob justice, a group of locals organize a posse and armed with guns, follow him to his house and attack him, only to find that he had previously set mines in the ground and placed rifles in different parts of the house. The attack turns into a battlefield resulting in several deaths, the wounding of West, and the death of Woodard, who commits suicide by cop. The case is closed but reopens ten years later, in 1990, when camera footage and some fingerprints in a pharmacy store prove that Julie is still alive. This time, the children's father, Tom Purcell, begins to investigate on his own and is murdered in the process. The police finds a false suicide note by his body, in which he confesses to being the person responsible for the girl's disappearance and the case is,

⁴ There are certainly substantial similarities between the first and the third season of *True Detective*, as both evaluate the toll that stereotypical enactments of heroic masculinity take on the individual. However, in its first season, this realization comes at the very end, prompted by an almost lethal confrontation with a serial killer, and no hints are given as to how the protagonist duo will put this epiphany into practice in their already disarrayed existence. The third season, which has received considerably less critical attention, offers what the first one seems to be missing: a portrayal of how deconstructed patterns of virility operate on the heroes, who often try to come to terms with an ideal image of manhood which can no longer be accommodated into their reality. Because of that, I deem it more appropriate for the analysis being conducted in this article.

once again, closed. Twenty-five years later, in 2015, an increasingly senile Hays now struggling with a failing memory will try to solve the case once and for all, reconnecting with West in the process, after their relationship had grown cold following some events occurred in 1990.

During the first episode, several characters mention the death of Steve McQueen, known for his participation in referential Westerns such as *The Magnificent Seven* (Sturges, 1960). As it coincides with the disappearance of the two children, this apparently trivial remark seems to suggest the metaphorical death of the Western genre in canonical terms, advancing that the quest at hand is not going to be heroic. In fact, West brings this topic up in his conversation with Hays during the first scene in which the two are seen together, just moments before Hays demonstrates –to his chagrin– that his dexterity as a gunman is clearly lacking. This incident happens at night, when they are on their own, sitting on a pair of deck chairs passing their time smoking, drinking beer, and shooting rats off a pile of junk standing before them. Hence, West mentions McQueen's passing while observing the rubble as if his beatific staring at the trash had reminded him of it. The contrast between the image shown and what is stated might point to the disposability of a type, that of the unshaken, manly ranger these two characters initially seem to embody, which may no longer conform to present-day sensitivities. Noticeably, amid their firing contest, Hays misses his target and the rat escapes, which reads as an anticipation of their imminent failure in the case they will soon be assigned,⁵ but also as a devaluation of the cowboy, whose aim has seen better days:

WEST. You'll get him next time.

HAYS. Fate spared his shitty rat life and it has no clue.

WEST. Another way of saying you're slow on the draw. (*True Detective* 1, 09:00–10)

Seen from a distance, the duo appears as a couple of rude, lonely, hyper-masculine men, who practice hunting as a sport and proudly assert their disposition to raise hell as a distraction: "Maybe we can find somebody to beat the shit out of" (1, 11:05–06). Yet, though everything in their pose, their dialogue and their attitude

⁵ They will fail to see there is a 'rat' in the force, Harris James, that will plant false evidence to incriminate Woodard after his demise. However, this metaphorical rat will be shot dead ten years later, in a violent altercation with Hays and West.

echoes traditional depictions of the lone wolf⁶ that the cowboy has come to epitomize, some details already hint at the gradual dismantling of the frontier myth. Their attitude towards violence constitutes one aspect in which this trait is perhaps more evident.

Some degree of brutality has always been concomitant to the working-class cowboy. As Moore explains, during the 19th century, violence was deemed necessary to preserve social order, defend one's honor, and control women and other racial minorities' behavior (29); and this feature persisted once the myth came into existence. With brave men taming the frontier, violence was a significant motor pushing the country forward. Savagery became a sign of status, with cowboys, whether outlaws or sheriffs, being roughly eager to display fits of it, particularly in contexts where law enforcement was inconsistent or inefficient. In that sense, it would be pertinent to point out that, in the first of the series' three timelines, neither Hays nor West hesitate to resort to violence when the situation supposedly requires it, even acting outside the law. At one point, they beat up an ex-convicted child sex offender in their search for any clue that may lead them to the missing girl. Rather than detectives, they behave more like vigilantes. Interestingly, though on this occasion they do not show remorse despite how unjustified their decision may have been, West's instances of aggressive behavior as the series progresses are replaced by the realization that such outbursts often bring damage to those around him. His increasingly sensible attitude contrasts with more traditional depictions of the fierce cowboy, for whom "the 'best' man in a community was often the best and most vicious fighter" (Moore 42). This wavering will have consequences when, in 1990, they attempt to question patrolman Harris James on his presumed involvement in Julie's disappearance. Refusing cooperation, James is taken to a barn, where he is beaten to force a confession out of him. The interrogation quickly escalates and, after releasing himself and trying to kill Hays, he is shot dead by a shaken West. However, whereas Hays reacts stoically to this turn of events, West is visibly traumatized and is seen crying in despair under a tree. Trauma will haunt him from this point onwards, as he will be unable to marry and

⁶ It might seem contradictory to describe the two protagonists as lone wolves, since not only do they partner up to solve the case, but they also get along from the very beginning of the series. Yet, even if counting on one another and trying to operate legally, there is a tendency —shared by most characters in all seasons of *True Detective*— to work outside the law and even to disobey orders from their superiors.

will develop a dependence on alcohol: "I'm fine. Alone out here, no woman, no kids, and no old friends. So that means I get to drink exactly as much as I want to! You don't judge me, motherfucker! I know you. I know what you did, what I did. You talk about my *drinkin'?*" (5, 50:29–51:06)⁷. The family he could have created is eventually substituted for an army of stray dogs he rescues from the streets. The stereotype of the cat lady is replaced by the dog gentleman, the man who never got to settle down after a distressing event derived from an uncontrolled use of violence left him maimed for love. Impotence is no longer a physical dysfunction but a mental incapacity to assimilate guilt.

Examples of previously vicious outlaws now turned into honorable men abound in the Western genre, with films such as *El Dorado* (Hawks, 1966) or *Unforgiven* (Eastwood, 1992) to illustrate this path of redemption. In all these instances, the protagonist aims to make up for a past filled with brutality and ruthlessness protecting those who are now threatened by the kind of people he used to be. In terms of character arc, the third season of *True Detective* may not add anything new to a motif that has long been seen before. The difference is that, traditionally, suffering is manifested by the undaunted hero with a squinty look to one side and a dead silence at best, as the cowboy must remain a macho above all. Instead, West is shattered. His breakdown is noisy, pitiful, and messy. He initially tries to appease his remorse by drunkenly provoking a stranger into a fistfight, which echoes conventional cowboys' strategies to soothe their conscience breaking glasses or slapping prostitutes. However, after his scheme fails miserably, the detective is seen sobbing like a child while hugging a dog. It is not a moment of virile repentance, but of woeful weakness.

The remorse experienced by West and his more considerate disposition clash with the depiction of the cowboy offered in the postapocalyptic series *Fallout* (2024), which is inspired by a saga of videogames starting as early as 1997. The series shifts between two timelines. The first one is set in 2077, albeit with a retrofuturistic approach that mirrors and somewhat parodies the 1950s. In it, war

⁷ There are similarities between West's and Rust Cohle's arc in season 1, as both become aloof alcoholics because of their inability to express grief in a healthier way. Yet, Cohle's guilt is explained with the tragic passing of his daughter, who is hit by a car at age two. West's remorse, on the other hand, is the direct consequence of his reliance on violence to solve problems, which makes him accountable for what happens. That is, in West there is a self-examination of his stereotypically masculine demeanour that seems inexistent in Cohle.

veteran and revered Hollywood star Cooper Howard puts his bright career in Western movies on hold to become a celebrity spokesman for Vault-Tec at the encouragement of his wife, a top company executive. Over time, this corporation prompts a nuclear exchange between China and the United States, known as the Great War, allowing some fortunate survivors to find shelter in bunkers—or Vaults—produced by Vault-Tec. Nevertheless, most of the population must endure the hazards of radioactive debris polluting the air, which leads to dreadful diseases and heavy mutations. The second timeline takes place in 2296, in a dystopian Los Angeles where the protagonist, a young girl called Lucy, must leave one of these Vaults where she has dwelled all her life to search for her kidnapped father. In her path, she will witness the horrendous consequences of radioactivity and human greed, realizing that the Vaults were a smokescreen concealing a eugenics program where execrable experiments were conducted. By then, Cooper Howard, still alive, has become a hideous ghoul in cowboy attire who makes a living out of bounty hunting.

Though aesthetically drawing from the videogames on which it is based, the show's creators decided to expand the time and storyline by providing a new narrative for the series that includes some noteworthy additions, such as the inclusion of the Ghoul Cooper Howard as one of its main characters. The characterization of the Ghoul as a cowboy seems incongruous in the context of a postapocalyptic Los Angeles but is nonetheless reminiscent of the American myth par excellence: that of Manifest Destiny, which vindicated the conquest of the wild west or, in this case, post-nuclear America, where the vast lands have degenerated into a wasteland. Some of the attributes traditionally endorsed by the archetype of the cowboy—honorability, patriotism, righteousness—are however reverted in the figure of present-day Cooper, a now brutal, selfish, and cynical gunslinger. This corruptibility is equally shown in his decomposing appearance. With his cowboy aesthetics, Cooper looks completely outdated on the verge of ridicule in a post nuclear scenario. His nickname 'Ghoul'—a necrophagous demon—reveals his unsuitability. His skin has rotted, and parts of his body, such as the nose, have fallen off, to signify his obsolescence in a place where nuclear bombs have reshaped the meaning of frontiers. Though clearly a still charismatic figure, the idealization of masculinity and self-sufficiency embodied in his rancher clothes is as ragged and outworn as his coat.

Cooper is half dead and half alive, and his cowpoke's outfit discloses a crucial feature of the cowboy: survival at all costs in a wasteland alien to any sign of civilization. This subsistence is in part made possible thanks to the liminality (both physical and moral) rendered by the border and the unknown. In this setting, the Ghoul's taste for violence and sadistic nature, rather than romanticized, are presented as the only way to survive in this ruinous surrounding. He has lost track of his wife and daughter and has spent more than 200 years enduring the harsh conditions of a highly contaminated landscape, which suggests that the loneliness to which he is subjected has turned the once renowned Cooper into an unscrupulous felon.

It is nonetheless striking that both sides of the cowboy—the decent at heart and yet irredeemable loner, and its shadow, the contentious, iniquitous outlaw—are perfectly juxtaposed and find expression in the same individual.⁸ Indeed, Cooper's personality in 2296 diametrically opposes the respectable, family man he was in the 2070s, whose degeneration is equally mirrored in his own relationship with the cowboy hero he plays in films. In 2077, his involvement in Vault-Tec turns him into an outcast for the movie industry, which stops offering him new roles. And after he grows estranged from his wife and breaks ties with the company, he is compelled to work as an entertainer at children's birthday parties, where his cowboy attire is used as a fancy-dress, stripped of all poise. When the nuclear attack occurs, Cooper is wearing this very costume, which degrades over the years. The same way that his flesh is corrupted by radiation, the costumed cowboy archetype also becomes contaminated, as the hero slowly is debauched into a villain. Yet, though it seems that this fusion between the ex-actor and his beloved role only happens after the nuclear disaster, several hints spread over flashbacks point towards

⁸ This may seem shocking because two utterly contradictory sides converge in the same individual but, once again, the answer is to be found in the archetype itself, which can both personify the attitudes of a hellbent law-abiding gunman and those of a tough, crooked bandit. As discussed above, the cowboy is permeable and can sustain different, even conflicting traits. This is in part due to the evolution of the cowboy as depicted in fiction as opposed to real cowherds. Real 19th-century cowboys were seen as second-class citizens, linked with criminals, pilferers and drunkards (Bordin 50). By mid-20th century, in part thanks to portrayals such as John Wayne's in all the Westerns he starred in, the cowboy has become the embodiment of value, respectability, and fairness, even if only according to his own self-established sense of justice. Justification could always be found for those more unheroic traits as, for example, "the effects of loneliness and solitude upon the cowboy," which "explained his lawlessness" (Fishwick 82).

the idea that his Hollywood persona began to take over part of his private life before the cataclysm. In other words: the cowboy he impersonated for years in movies such as *A Man and his Dog* eventually becomes a role model to continue emulating after the curtain has gone down. For instance, during the wrap party organized by his wife Barb at their home to celebrate the Vault 4 advertisement campaign, Cooper is seen in his bedroom, preparing for a round of casual talk with arrogant executives, with his dog Roosevelt as his only companion. At that moment, he turns a complicit gaze on his partner in both films and real life and exclaims: "I'm heading into enemy territory" (6, 06:15), as if he were in one of his movies getting ready for combat.

The Western genre, so popular from the 1910s till the 1950s, seemed to decline in the following decades.⁹ As previously mentioned, this pattern changed during the Vietnam War, when Western films experienced a revival and were utilized by politicians to present the conflict as yet another epic of the frontier, one in which Vietnam was the new "Indian Country," and combatants aspired to emulate what war veteran Ron Kovic came to call "the glory John Wayne war" (158; qtd. in Le Coney & Trodd 2006, 3). As Slotkin states: "Tropes and symbols derived from Western movies had become one of the more important interpretive grids through which Americans tried to understand and control their unprecedented and dismaying experiences in Vietnam" (546). Soldiers sent to fight in the late 1960s embraced the prototypical ideals comprised in the lonesome ranger, trying to mimic his deeds in enemy territory, but the massacre experienced only served to turn the glorious John Wayne war into the "John Wayne Syndrome," with soldiers afflicted with PTSD and appalling nightmares: "I gave my dead dick for John Wayne and Howdy Doody" (Kovic 98; qtd. in Le Coney & Trodd 2006, 3).

The romanticizing of the cowboy in warlike contexts is also implicitly addressed in *Fallout*. Before becoming an actor, Cooper is said to have served in the United States Marine Corps to defend the American Dream during the Sino-American War that broke out in 2066. It is only when his service is over that he embarks on a successful acting career as a famous Western actor in high-budget productions. But, unlike Vietnam War veterans in real life, the problem for Cooper is not that a previous John Wayne's wannabe

⁹ During these four decades, 25% of all Hollywood productions were Westerns. By 1972 this percentage had decreased to 12% (Le Coney and Trodd 2009, 167).

attitude has collided with the later unsettling reality of combat. Instead, the heroism he achieved in battle serves him to increase the popularity of his celluloid identity by transmuting the gruesome experience of war into cinematic gallantry. All this, of course, changes when after the Great War starts in 2077, he is engulfed by the character and degenerates into the grotesque monstrosity of the Ghoul.

Conversely, grotesque and repulsive as the Ghoul may be, he still shows the charm of the lonesome, pugnacious survivor in an untamable (waste) land. In a way, his allure might signal a longing for this kind of figure in contemporary America. According to Daniel Warner, President Donald Trump currently embodies “the 21st century version of the Marlboro Man, the rugged individual on the border of civilization” as his “lack of civility [...] matches the primitiveness of those who venture into the unknown unburdened by the trappings of the past” (n.p.). The twice-elected president has built upon this image of the individualistic, self-sufficient Marlboro Man to create a narrative of heroism that might serve to mask unruliness and negligence, and this embraced ruggedness is thus presented as a necessary step in the renovation of the nation: “The reputation of ‘the tough’ had been made into a core feature of Trump’s character before he disclosed his presidential ambitions; his book published in 2011 was titled ‘Time to Get Tough: Making America #1 Again,’ and it was a trait, he claimed, passed down to him” (Leipnik 1).¹⁰ The series’ depiction of the borderland hero as a crumbling, putrefying criminal could be read as a statement of the senselessness of the rowdy cowboy in this post ‘Great America’ (be it the real or the fictional one).

Still, despite epitomizing some of the ideals embodied by the protagonists of the Western genre, such as those of integrity and boldness, Cooper’s personification of the frontier man during the 2070s is also impregnated with a sensitivity which differs from the norm. While finishing *The Man from Deadhorse*, he hesitates about a particular part of the script that specifies his hero must shoot the villain at point-blank range at a moment in which he is begging for his life instead of the obviously more civilized alternative of putting him in jail. His repulse for what he considers unjustified violence clashes with the idea of a cowboy wreaking havoc when he is not on duty, as richly

¹⁰ In her book *Donald Trump in the Frontier Mythology*, author Olena Leipnik further investigates the ways in which Trump has contributed to the development of the frontier myth via the figure of the cowboy hero.

portrayed in fiction.¹¹ This exhibition of unmerciful violence, which could be excused in the past by the ways the loneliness of the wild can drive a man insane, is no longer acceptable for a man who was a soldier before becoming an actor, and who has seen some of his comrades die at war; and is certainly not acceptable, either, for a man who enjoys the pleasures of a quiet, domestic life. Cooper eventually cedes to his character showing no pity against a vanquished adversary, but he does so reluctantly. A cowboy displaying vindictiveness as a value makes the actor uncomfortable with the role, but in turn makes the movie become a huge box-office success. Similarly, the fact that Cooper eventually complies and plays the part as he is requested by the director despite his complaints may also be seen as him lacking “the guts to stand his ground,” as the war veteran/cowboy actor is subdued by the Hollywood industry, for “admirers thought violence was one of the western's noblest attributes” (West 76).

Cooper's tendency to avoid hostility in the 2070s could not be more dissimilar from Hays and West's rowdy temperament, but the influence that war may have had on the development of these three characters' psyche is, at least, one element that links them together. As discussed above, the canonical cowboy is a solitary figure who “prefers the loneliness of the open prairie to living in settled communities, association with women, or following laws” (Christensen & Marx Ferree 292). He never lets his fragility pour out, nor is he ever seen in a situation of vulnerability or intimate confidence. In *True Detective* 3, however, the war no longer creates strong, imperturbable men. Using his ability as pathfinder acquired during his service as LRRP in the Vietnam conflict, it is Hays who finds the corpse of Julie's brother. But when that happens, he does not adopt a forced posture with arms akimbo and forward-brought hips: he sits alone and silently cries in what is, perhaps, one of the few moments in which this character's vulnerability is so plainly manifested. The Great War in *Fallout*, by contrast, together with his loss of faith in humanity and institutions, makes Cooper evolve into the most sardonic, vicious, and sadistic version of the cowboy archetype. Thus, though not avoided, violence is depicted in these shows as distressing for the characters, but whereas the archetype of the cowboy represented by Hays, West

¹¹ Some examples in film would include Rooster Cogburn in *True Grit* (Hathaway, 1969) William Munny in *Unforgiven* (1992), Wyatt Earp in *Tombstone* (Cosmatos, 1993), and Charley Waite in *Open Range* (Costner, 2003).

and pre-Great War Cooper can bear a limited dose of brute force without losing its essence, once this ferocity exceeds certain limits, it runs the risk of turning the nation's hero into a stale, putrid creature, as epitomized by the Ghoul. This deconstruction of what I deem outdated patterns of virility associated to aggressivity and low levels of anger management is further illustrated by the characters' familial and filial bonds in both series.

“THIS MACHO THING IS OVERRATED”: A DIFFERENT STANCE TOWARDS MANLINESS

John Ford's 1956 *The Searchers* closes with a memorable scene in which Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) suddenly realizes he cannot cross the pathway and step into the threshold of the family home, as he has been living in the wild for too long. Distraught but resolved, the ultimate frontier hero turns his back and fades into the arid harshness of the desert. In the film, the epitome of virility is irrevocably connected to lonesomeness, maladjustment, and incomprehension: as the embodiment of the frontier, the hero must necessarily remain close and yet distant; yearning for but always at odds in civilized settings.

Richard Sparks contends that one crucial ambivalence concerning Western cinema, and present in *The Searchers*, is that which leads to either the possible yet quite often implausible reintegration of the hero into the social order by means of marriage or to his exclusion from it via withdrawal and retreat. He concludes: “In many cases the Western hero is simply unassimilable. He is too primordial; he lives too much by violence and is too fundamentally alone to find a place in any scheme of social convention” (352). Already in the classical Hollywood period, though, some films challenged this portrayal of the frontier man as alien to family life, as is the case with *Big Country* (Willer, 1958) or the series *Bonanza* (Dortort, 1959-1973); a trend which has gained momentum in the last decades with other examples like *Open Range* (Costner, 2003) or the more recent *The Power of the Dog* (Campion, 2021). Still, even if at times contested, this alienation from the confines of a domestic, quiet life, as well as this self-condemnation to segregation is certainly glamorized and unavoidably linked to notions of masculinity.

As previously stated, the detective duo in the third season of *True Detective* is first seen together chatting. During their conversation, West displays a more disinhibited attitude and suggests

going to “Miss Minnie’s” brothel to combat boredom. After some reflection regarding how expensive it is to maintain a woman, he asks his partner whether he sees himself getting married, to which Hays responds with a negative, stating that it would only destroy a woman’s and their potential children’s lives. The Madonna-Whore dichotomy through which they view women showcases the way “cowboys were uncomfortable around ‘good’ women, whereas they easily formed relationships with women on the margins of society” (Moore 46), with West nonchalantly declaring: “They want to sell me a piece of ass, they got the right” (*Detective* 1, 09:54). What seem two different attitudes towards the opposite sex answer to the same pattern: both, like the cowboy, represent “the epitome of American individualism” (Scofield 328) while domesticity poses an unfathomable threat to their independence: “The hero does not marry and rejects the pleas of the virtuous woman who urges him to give up the gun and stop killing” (Munden 128).

Against all odds, Hays will end up tying the knot with schoolteacher Amelia Reardon, whom he meets while investigating the children’s disappearance. The fact that neither Hays nor Amelia wants to get married may be one of the few things they have in common, besides their perseverance and commitment to trying to solve the case. But their resolve comes at a low point, in a moment of personal and professional uncertainty.¹² More than a considered decision, Hays’s sudden proposition looks like a desperate attempt to rewrite his personal story of failure, yet, incidentally, it also rewrites the myth that states that the lonesome ranger is not entitled to a family life, for he “shields women but he does not marry them” (Munden 115).

Hays’s conjugal life, however, will not be devoid of inner conflict. By 1990, already married and with two kids, his apparent happy marriage is strained by the couple’s inability to understand each other and their mutual competition, which makes Hays see himself as emasculated. In the third episode, the now ex-detective reveals to his wife that Julie Purcell is not dead, which prompts Amelia to investigate undercover with the excuse that she needs information for the book she is writing on the case. Thus, while she pretends to be a journalist and elicits some valuable information from an

¹² The case is closed after Woodard, now dead, is false incriminated. Amelia writes an article in the newspaper criticizing the Police Department’s decision and, when Hays refuses to follow his superiors’ orders to retract from the statement, he is demoted.

investigator, a currently demoted Hays is seen doing the shopping with his children. The discovery of his wife's enterprise makes him feel humiliated, jealous at her success in contrast to his relegation to administrative tasks and house chores, and this resentment takes the shape of a bitter argument between the couple. In the middle of their quarrel, she remarks: "you're this person who things just happen to: your job, your marriage, your family, your feelings! Everything is just happening to you. Just *a grown man with no agency* of his own" (4, 08:31–40, my italics). Feeling threatened by her observation, Hays complains about how he could have cheated on her as most of his colleagues do with their wives, as if his manhood had been called into question by this presumed helplessness. Yet, Hays's spiteful comment, aimed at protecting his virility, is ultimately abandoned for a more sincere disposition when he asserts: "Stop talking shit about me [...] Or I'm *gonna* start crying" (4, 10:03-10). The fragility discernible in this remark proves he is not the insensitive brute the cowboy normally typifies, for he is able to recognize his weakness and express it out loud.

True Detective's contestation of heroism, particularly when linked to idealizations of manhood and virility, is further—though more subtly—elaborated in its third season, where other parameters, this time linked to war, memory, race,¹³ and homosexuality are added. The latter is in fact very present throughout the whole season, especially in the figure of one of its side characters: Tom Purcell. Tom Purcell is initially presented as an irresponsible father and even a pervert. He is inattentive to his children's whereabouts, hides pornographic magazines under the mattress, and has apparently pierced a peephole in a closet that leads to his daughter's room. Eventually the cavity is proved to have been carved by the children themselves to exchange notes, but this hole in the cabinet functions as a visual metaphor for Purcell's closeted homosexuality, which is ultimately evidenced when his now friend West—and, by extension, the spectator—peeps into one of his kitchen drawers and finds a brochure on how to pray homosexuality away. Far from that first impression, Purcell later demonstrates to be a caring father—even to

¹³ Race is an important aspect to the series, as not only do Hays and West form an interracial bond: Hays frequently complains how the department does not take him seriously and that he is not listened to because he is black, whereas he often has altercations with the black community as well, who see him as a sellout. Unfortunately, this element, though relevant, is beyond the scope of this article.

Julie, despite knowing she is probably not his real daughter–, who would give his life to find his little girl. Remarkably, it is West’s proximity to Purcell, a man with whom he openly sympathizes, what allows him to see more than meets the eye and take him for the committed parent that he is, and subsequently sense that Purcell’s purported suicide has been staged. West behaves as a caring figure to Purcell or, at least, as a confidant, without this proximity affecting his masculinity, in contrast to “contemporary cop-buddy movies [which] emphatically heterosexualize their homosocial protagonists” (Fuchs 196). Not only was West the one who got Purcell out of trouble on several occasions, but also the one who convinced him to go to rehab and who checked on him regularly to follow his progress.

Conversely, the Western hero personified in Cooper is also the ideal husband in *Fallout*. Despite following an aesthetic reminiscent of the 1950s, a period known for its conservatism and traditional views on gender roles, his wife, Barbara, is the breadwinner and the provider of security, but her career never seems to be emasculating for her devoted spouse, who will do anything to let his wife thrive in her job, as he not only respects but admires her success. Simultaneously, he is a peaceful family man who does not mind staying at home and taking care of their daughter Janey, features hardly ever portrayed in classical Westerns. Yet, this seemingly ideal setting will deteriorate once, at the insistence of his wife, who is an executive of Vault-Tec, Cooper agrees to participate in a campaign promoting the vaults, a series of underground shelters aimed at protecting the few selected Americans who can afford them against a potential nuclear blast. The tagline ‘feo, fuerte y formal’¹⁴ that has popularized his Hollywood persona is thus harnessed by Barb as she turns him into an ambassador of Vault-Tec. She knows that Cooper is noble and respectable, qualities that will convey the trust needed for the campaign. Unfortunately, Cooper’s attempts to please his wife and enhance her career will lead to the gradual degradation of both the cowboy’s nature and lifestyle he aspires to emulate. The problem arises when he begins to lose roles because of his involvement with the corporation. When Barb tries to brush off her husband’s discouragement by listing the benefits that his publicity work is bringing to the family, he responds by asking his wife to quit her job instead, so they can start from scratch. The actor shares his fantasy

¹⁴ Mexican expression that John Wayne felt identified with, which translates as “ugly, strong, and dignified.”

of living in a ranch—for he used to dwell in one during his youth—and becoming “a real cowboy again,” but Barb reproves of what she interprets as a sign of disengagement from the real, antebellum world: “Every day I go into work and I think about how humanity can survive a nuclear event that will wipe out 90% of life on earth, and I come home, and you’re talking to me about hiding out at a ranch up in Bakersfield” (6, 25:52–58). This marital fight evidences the clash between an ideal—represented by the myth of the cowboy and his self-sufficient life—and what seems to be a more sensible approach to reality, but nothing further from the truth. Soon after this argument, suspecting the company is hiding something, Cooper eavesdrops on a secret meeting between chairman Bud Askins and other executives, and overhears how Barb suggests starting the war themselves to make their investment profitable and eliminate all possible competition. The illusion of Cooper’s at first joyful matrimony vanishes when the disclosure of the shady intentions of Vault-Tec dissolves the immaculate vision he had of his wife, and the cowboy ideal that his wife had rebuffed as an evasion becomes a bastion against a heartless capitalist project.

In a world controlled and shaped by the Hollywood industry and macro corporations, the law-abiding citizen and faithful patriot embodied in Cooper Howard, as well as the emblematic icon he incarnates in films are twisted and (mis)used to serve lucrative purposes. It seems as if the goals of capitalist corporations demanded a conformity that is incompatible with the cowboy’s nature. This incompatibility becomes apparent when, to secure a shelter for himself and his family, Cooper discovers that he must get rid of Roosevelt, his dog.¹⁵ Cooper perceives this restriction as one out of several other harsh rules that undermine his individual liberty and, annoyed by such perspective, he grumbles: “I didn’t go to war defending that freedom so that I could live in a cellar under the boot heel of Chairman Bud Askins” (6, 25:28–34). For both the cowboy and Cooper, freedom is a must that should not be put down the interests of macro corporations, but these highly profitable companies seem to be particularly keen on taking advantage of the icon he represents.

As previously mentioned, the archetype of the cowboy arose initially to help promote capitalist ideals such as progress and industrialization to a skeptical crowd: “the country needed a unifying,

¹⁵ His name hints at one of the figures who most strongly contributed to the development of the frontier myth.

nationalist icon to move it beyond the ravages of the Civil War and the Englishness of Southern agrarian society into industrialism and capitalism” (Moskowitz n.p.). In *Fallout*, this idea has been previously foreshadowed when Cooper complains about a twist in his character’s script and the director replies that they are recording “a new kind of Western” for “the new America” (3, 03:20–26), for which the classic kind of cowboy, insensitive and callous, is demanded. Similarly, the new America that Vault-Tec is creating seeks compliant subjects who will surely follow instructions if these are endorsed by a popular celluloid ranger raising his thumb and winking his eye. Just as the cowboy became a mascot for propaganda purposes during the Vietnam War, Cooper turns into a pet for both the cinema and the technology industries of his time, but this compliance is paradoxically met with rejection and alienation: the moment he yields to the corporatism that Vault-Tec typifies, he is shunned by fellow actors and producers, who react to his plutocratic move with the same animosity they had previously shown towards communist ideas. Although not much in this regard is disclosed, his eventual detachment from Vault-Tec will entail the end of his career as a movie star, forcing him to work as a cowboy clown at birthday parties. In Cooper’s case, ostracism rather than loneliness, and disdain rather than admiration are the outcomes of acting according to his principles.

In the aftermath of the nuclear disaster, the person behind the mask has been entirely devoured by the character, turning into the dark side of the archetype: violent, ruthless, individualistic, and cynical. As happens with the cowboy icon, initially Cooper may have been the embodiment of self-determination and individuality, but when the values that the epitome of Americanness represents are distorted to comply with dubious objectives, he is reduced to a plain malefactor. The respectable ranger has now become a bounty hunter in the same way that the New America that the nuclear conflict and a corrupted society have created has only led to the sheer degradation of humanity. Cooper the Ghoul eventually epitomizes the consequences of a national symbol perverted to meet neoliberalist goals.

For the Ghoul, marriage is incompatible with the archetypal hero he embodies. The idealization of primordial and aggressive manhood the Ghoul displays opposes the tenderness of the caring father and fervent husband Cooper once was, and yet the former is the consequence of the latter. By 2296, after two centuries drifting and operating as a criminal, this familial side is missing as the ghoul

devotedly embraces the estrangement of the lonesome ranger. Yet, with his ragged outfit and his dusty Stetson, he looks absolutely outmoded, showing that present-day manliness cannot thrive when based on outmoded clichés that deny this more gregarious side to the cowboy. Contrary to “the mythical cowboy [who] still rides as the personification of the American dream of self-reliance, individualism, and freedom” (Lambert 61), Hays and pre-Great War Cooper strive to find a balance that allows them to consolidate their steadfast ideals without renouncing to their more sociable side.

CONCLUSIONS

The cowboy archetype seems to reemerge in times of need to either present political issues in a more positive light or, conversely, to challenge them. This trend, patent during the Vietnam pro-war campaign in the 1960s and Reagan’s administration in the 1980s (Le Coney & Trodd 2009, 164), seems to have experienced another of its recurrent revivals in this decade, during the Trump era. Nonetheless, the two examples analyzed in this article reveal that the typical masculine features associated with the frontier myth have experienced a process of demystification that points towards the fusion between the ruthless cowboy and the everyday guy providing a necessary update that makes the rancher perhaps a little less iconic but also, and arguably, more sympathetic. Understandably, this blending is not free from internal contradictions, which are inherent aspects of the process of deconstruction the archetype is undergoing.

This softer representation of the manly cowboy archetype follows a trend which may have begun with *Red River* (Hawks, 1948), and continued during the 1960s with movies such as *Midnight Cowboy* (Schlesinger, 1969) or *Lonesome Cowboys* (Warhol, 1969).¹⁶ More recently, *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2005), *Dallas Buyers Club* (Vallée, 2013), or even *Extraña forma de vida* (Almodóvar, 2023) come to mind. Deconstructing the macho cowboy, however, should not necessarily imply a queer (sub)text, as more subtle approaches can also be sound enough. Kelly Reichardt’s depiction of the frontier man in *First Cow* (2019), for instance, shows two men carrying out traditionally feminine roles, such as mending socks, sweeping the house or baking

¹⁶ See Christopher Le Coney and Zoe Trodd’s 2006 essay “John Wayne and the Queer Frontier: Deconstructions of the Classic Cowboy Narrative during the Vietnam War.”

sweets. Instead of hunting buffalos, freeing the city from its corrupted marshal at gunpoint, or grazing, they take care of their household, sharing chores equally. Though outwardly a more realistic account of what life in the nineteenth-century American Far West must have looked like, Reichardt's intention does not seem to be to deconstruct the epitome of American heroism but, simply, to offer a more historically accurate rendition that inevitably disengages from the ideal notions linked to the paradigmatic cowboy figure.

Hence, following the conventions of the neo-noir film from which *True Detective* draws, already the first season of *True Detective* can be read as "not about some constructed, hypermasculine image of heroism, but about the long, strenuous, but relentlessly necessary fight for the good" (Méndez García 174), which "eventually contests that virility, by showing them [the protagonists] at their most un-heroic, after having heroism be the main trait of their performative masculinity during the show" (173). However, during the third season of this acclaimed series, the heroic pattern of the lonesome manly hero is further problematized, showing an unsettled masculinity estranged from the romanticized mal(e)adjustment that pours out from the protagonists of the first season. The third season reveals a stark account of vulnerable male characters, imperfect and troubled, torn between masculine pride and a fractured masculinity, where patterns of virility are destabilized. Over the course of his marriage, Hays must deal with professional disappointment and personal resentment at his wife's accomplishments there where he has failed. His lack of success as a cop and as a breadwinner is sensed as castrating for a man for whom, like the cowboy, masculinity is based on running solo and a "hyperbolic and self-protective attitude" (Blanco-Herrero, Rodríguez-Contreras & Gutiérrez-San-Miguel 4). Still, Hays's more prototypical Marlboro Man qualities are met with an open sensitivity that allows his marriage to succeed despite it all. Likewise, West cannot lead the quiet, simple existence with a wife and kids he had envisioned, as life in the borderland has made him pay a price too high for that, turning him into an alcoholic loner instead. West exemplifies the consequences of incarnating the cowboy macho for too long, as working outside the law is what gets a man killed. However, his ability to show mercy, empathy and understanding without compromising his masculinity challenges what society considers virile. Both characters possess a degree of sensibility that is contrary to the cowboy of traditional Westerns, adding an extra layer of complexity to already flawed individuals.

Similarly, the figure of the cowboy in *Fallout* is twice deconstructed: first by portraying the lonesome ranger as a male version of the angel in the house and, secondly, by also showing its shadow, the other side of the coin which corroborates that the fearless hero can become an unscrupulous villain. The series warns about the dangers of politicians and big corporations playing with the cowboy like a mascot to sell their products to the masses, since it stops being an American icon and becomes a monster. Cooper embraces at first some of the most positive aspects associated with the cowboy figure, but fails to conduct those traits into positive, heroic deeds, becoming instead a tool for both the Hollywood industry and the Vault-Tec company. The same way that the outdatedness of the cowboy is suggested in *True Detective* when West and Hays mention the death of Steve McQueen in front of a pile of junk, by 2296, the cowboy in *Fallout* has turned into a rotten figure, charismatic but out of place in a post nuclear Los Angeles. It is a ghoul, a dream of the past that alerts the reader not to trust it anymore. In any case, it is evident that the cowboy myth continues undergoing maintenance work which, in the end, may require new *man-agement*. What both *Fallout* and the third season of *True Detective* eventually illustrate is the visible inappropriacy of a type, that of the rough, grim cowboy, that is at odds with present-day values despite its raising popularity. In this light and considering the current climate of diplomatic uncertainty and unfathomable geopolitical relations, analyzing the possible meanings that the demystification of the cowboy type conveys seems not only appropriate, but timely.

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