

“ZOMBIES AND COWBOYS: HOW TO WIN THE APOCALYPSE”

Dr. Mark Cronlund Anderson

Professor of History Luther College, University of Regina, Canada

Abstract

“Zombies and Cowboys: How to Win the Apocalypse ”

Suddenly zombies are everywhere. From graphic novels to Hollywood, from academic treatises asking us to consider the real-world implications of a zombie invasion to prime time television series. The undead haunt us as never before.

The most common scholarly responses to the irruption of zombie popularity have noted the more than coincidental association with 9/11. Put simply, American popular culture has reacted to 9/11, for a variety of reasons identified by scholars, by churning out tales of a zombie apocalypse much as it had, though to a lesser extent, when the zombie film first emerged as a response and reaction to the cold war in the 1950s.

Taken literally, the zombie invasion of course threatens American (and the world’s) very survival. It becomes a game changer. It calls for entirely new rules, the emerging new roles of zombie interpretation suggest.

Or does it?

The phenomenon of the apparently unprecedented zombie onslaught in the wake of and as a response to 9/11, likely reflects something far more prosaic—in other words, a continuance more than a rupture. For example, AMC’s hugely popular dystopic zombie series, *The Walking Dead*, set in real time in the American south, relies on the deepest of American narrative tropes—the frontier cowboy, to carry its story of resistance and rebirth. In this way, while zombies may conjure up a fright symbolically akin to that rendered by 9/11 (or the martial response to 9/11), or may have been feasting on American trauma borne of 9/11 (or to the trauma of the ensuing wars), not to worry, the cowboy—that is, in the serie, Rick—can still best solve America’s (and thereby the world’s) problems. As such, *The Walking Dead* is really fairly banal, a classic example of adapting an age-old genre to fit contemporary events. This cuts two ways because, yes, it fits the classic zombie mold. But it runs deeper, too, because the frontier tale in fact is America’s birth story, as old as the settler nation itself. In other words, *The Walking Dead* serves the highly useful purpose of symbolic rebirth, American-style. Cowboy Rick plays the role of proto American messiah.

My paper explores how and why zombies ultimately stand no chance against Rick, *The Walking Dead*’s cowboy protagonist, Carl, Rick’s son and cowboy-in-the-making.

Keywords: Zombie apocalypse, frontier myth, Walking Dead

Paper:

Didn’t 9/11 change everything? Wasn’t the world born anew?

Arguably, yes, to both questions. Everything changed in the way that mythical rebirth always reboots things and then it all begins anew—all over again. That is, rebirth. In itself it is neither original nor unique to the United States. But what makes it here distinctly American is the back story that accompanies 9/11 and the ways in which American culture reacted more or less as it always has—the frontier genre conventions, best exemplified in the western that

tyed the myth loosely to American material history, and the regenerative violence, which spins imperial gambits into defensive, who-me? struggles for survival itself. The cultural response to 9/11, according to John Mead, has been “a sort of boldly definitive American experience for the dawning of a frightening new world. What we actually get is a series of well-drawn and entertaining clichés culled from the lexicon of American tough-guy iconography and adventure yarns: frontier and war stories, thrillers and westerns.”²⁹²

I.

9/11 has rippled through television. Shortly after the film Zombieland, starring Woody Harrelson, was released, on April 13, 2009, Relevant magazine reported that the actor “attacked a paparazzo in New York on Tuesday, and claims it was because he mistook the man for a zombie. Harrelson just finished shooting a zombie movie, and says he was still in character when he was startled by the cameraman.”²⁹³ Now the event may well have been tongue-in-cheek and designed to sell tickets, but it points to a deeper truth about 9/11 and trauma. Somehow Harrelson’s reaction oddly makes sense in a way that it would not have prior to 9/11. In part, the context in which Harrelson’s remarks might be best assessed derives from an idea Scott Poole presents nicely:

These creatures [zombies]...appeared as pop culture phenomenon at a historical moment when the body had become of central concern in American culture as the vehicle of pleasure, of theological meaning, or of personal happiness (or all three at once). Anxiety over threats to the body became a paramount concern as evidenced by the popularity of dieting and exercise regimens, public health campaigns, and the growing acceptance of plastic surgery.²⁹⁴

Right, and just think about the growth of the horror genre, especially the unparalleled spurt in zombie flicks and television programs, since 9/11.

Traditionally, the zombie phenom in visual culture has been understood as a reaction to the trauma of real-world events ranging from the cold war to the Vietnam war and now to 9/11.²⁹⁵ “Popular culture often provides a window into the subliminal or unstated fears of citizens, and zombies are no exception,” writes Daniel Drezner.²⁹⁶ “The horror genre experienced a dramatic resurgence over the last decade,” note the editors of Horror after 9/11, published in 2011.²⁹⁷ “We have come to expect that a monster is never just a monster, but rather a metaphor that translates real anxieties into more or less palatable form,” they add.²⁹⁸ At one level, and necessarily, argues Terrence McSweeney, “We see ourselves in the enemy.”²⁹⁹ Not surprisingly, then, Laura Frost suggests, we understand 9/11 as “a national

²⁹² John Mead, “9/11, Manhood, Mourning, and the American Romance, in Birkenstein, Froula, and Randell, eds.

²⁹³ “Natural Born Killer Zombie,” Relevant magazine (April 13, 2009).

²⁹⁴ Poole, 196.

²⁹⁵ Mathias Nilges, “The Aesthetics of Destruction: Contemporary US Cinema and TV Culture,” in Birkenstein, Froula, and Randell, 24; Anna Froula, “Prolepsis and the ‘War on Terror’: Zombie Pathology and the Culture of Fear in 28 Days Later...” in Birkenstein, Froula, and Randell, 195.

²⁹⁶ Daniel W. Drezner, Theories of International Politics and Zombies (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 4. Also see Shawn McIntosh and Marc Leverette, eds., Zombie Culture, Autopsies of the Living Dead (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press); Kevin J. Wetmore, Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema (New York: Continuum, 2012); Jeff Berkenstein, Anna Froula, and Karen Randell, eds., Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the “War on Terror.” (New York: Continuum, 2010).

²⁹⁷ Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller, eds., Horror After 9/11 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011),

²⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 4.

²⁹⁹ Terrence McSweeney, “The Land of the Dead and the Home of the Brave: Romero’s Vision of a Post-9/11 America,” in Birkenstein, Froula, and Randell, 115.

wound.”³⁰⁰ In a dazzling little book, Drezner makes the point with deep humour and insight as he chews over the international policy ramifications for the United States of an actual zombie outbreak.

Reminding us of the centrality of popular culture, writes David Altheide avers, “We learn about the world and how the world is run through the mass media and popular culture. Indeed, the state of a citizen’s worldview can be gleaned by its dominant news sources.”³⁰¹ Elsewhere, Henry Giroux has employed zombies to take aim at the contemporary state of American politics. He observes, “The zombie, the immoral, sub-Nitzschean, id-driven ‘other’ who is ‘hyper-dead’ but still alive as an avatar of death and cruelty—provides an apt metaphor for a new kind of authoritarianism that has a grip on contemporary politics in the United States.”³⁰² Stephen Asma echoes Giroux, in part, “An environment with too much wealth can also dehumanize. Americans appear zombie-like because their *raison d’être* appears to be the consumption of goods, making us seem more attached to plastic surgery, reality television, and giant SUVs than to family, honor, and integrity.”³⁰³ So it goes. The zombie phenom has become a well established genre, a vessel into and from which it becomes possible to draw upon a wide variety of meaning.

Like Woody Harrelson, Americana maintains itself “still in character” or ever-ready to slip into character with respect to the frontier myth, America’s creation story,³⁰⁴ decades of scholarship have shown.³⁰⁵ What I am suggesting is that there exists a natural affinity between the frontier myth and the zombie genre. Both are triggered by and feed on trauma. War reflexively engenders a compulsive symbolic replaying of the myth in popular culture. And both fixate on rebirth, which makes zombies ideal vessels for frontier tales, not unlike the ways in which the western has so capably served “over many generations,” according to John Cawelti.³⁰⁶ In particular, once we have taken the zombie bait and accept that some kind of apocalypse has descended upon us, what then? “Narratives about the living dead use small communities or families as their unit of social analysis,” Drezner summarizes.³⁰⁷ Enter the frontier myth because, in effect, zombie stories boil down to survival stories, yes, but also they tend heavily therefore toward tales of regenerating the nation.

The survival of the human race in the face of a zombie holocaust depends, ultimately, upon the choices the survivors make. And who better to seize the reins at the rim of catastrophe, at the edge of the world, than the frontier cowboy? That is what he has always done. For example, during the 1950s and 1960s the frontier myth dominated American television in the form of the western. The western derives its semiotic power from its conflation of frontier symbology with a genre centered imaginatively in the post-bellum west. But wait, given its lust for and long track record in war, doesn’t the United States find itself more or less always in a post-bellum state? The answer is, emphatically yes. And the Walking Dead, the surprise zombie hit for AMC, based on the New York Times’ bestselling comic book series,³⁰⁸ makes this point with real emphasis. Interestingly, the show pays homage to

³⁰⁰ Laura Frost, “Black Screens, Lost Bodies, The Cinematic Apparatus of 9/11 Horror,” in Briefel and Miller, eds., 34.

³⁰¹ David Altheide, “Fear, Terrorism, and Popular Culture,” in Birkenstein, Froula, and Randell, 11.

³⁰² Henry A. Giroux, *Zombie Culture and Politics in the Age of Casino Capitalism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2111), 2.

³⁰³ Asma 241.

³⁰⁴ See Patricia Nelson Limerick

³⁰⁵ See Richard Slotkin

³⁰⁶ Cawelti, 9.

³⁰⁷ Drezner, 14.

³⁰⁸ Robert Kirkman, Charlie Adlard, Tony Moore, and Cliff Rathburn, *The Walking Dead, Compendium One* (Berkeley: Image Comics, 2013).

the myth by casting its two protagonists among the ensemble cast, as a frontiersman and the frontiersman's son in-training to be like dad. They are imaginary cowboys, in other words. But what does a cowboy look like? How well might he fit today with the Walking Dead. Fortunately, we can actually measure the results of such an inquiry.

In 2004, Erik Beard, an enterprising journalist at the Village Voice sought to assess George W. Bush's cowboy credentials (and found Bush wanting, as noted). As is well known, Bush endeavored to ingratiate himself in the press and with Americans as a kind of cowboy president, what with his ranch, his folksy oratory, his relocation to Texas, his penchant for wearing cowboy hats, cowboy boots, and photo ops that showed him driving around on his ranch in a pickup truck. To assess Bush, Beard employed Gene Autry's cowboy code, readily available on-line, which provides a wonderful sketch of the cowboy archetype. Autry had rocketed to fame as a singing cowboy in the 1930s, on radio, movies and later, television. He performed in nearly 100 films over several decades. He even wrote some hit Christmas tunes, including "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." Autry was beloved for the straight-arrow characters that he portrayed. Adjusted to fit the times, Dead's Rick, the central character and leader of a shifting band of survivors, including his immediate family, (in contradistinction to Bush, at least in Beard's eyes) does Autry proud. "Wherever we find monsters, there, too, we also find heroes."³⁰⁹

Gene Autrey's rule number one: "The Cowboy must never shoot first, hit a smaller man, or take unfair advantage." Given that Rick and his cohort face the constant threat of un-dead death from zombies as well as from other humans who may not be trustworthy (lots of those in the series), following a catastrophe that is neither explained nor discussed, you might expect Rick and the others to be a tad trigger happy. But not Rick, though he suffers and he questions the nature of his suffering, his moral compass remains true on this point: he doesn't engage in pre-emptive violence against his kind (the undead are, well, undead and therefore don't count).³¹⁰ You might quibble and say that the undead are merely symbols for the dehumanizing effects of the trauma of 9/11; but my point is simply that, with respect to other non-undead people, Rick scores well on this count. Even when, early on, Rick learns that his best friend Shane has had sex with his wife Lori (they all believed for a time that Rick was dead...you know, the series is richly melodramatic too) and when Shane later appeared set to kill Rick in order to have Lori for himself (yes, the gender stereotyping is blatant), Rick couldn't shoot first... until there is no doubt that Shane will fire. Now Rick acts like Bush and moves preemptively. He sidles up close and stabs Shane to death. First death. Rick would still have died, though, if not for his son Carl, budding frontiersman, yet not quite made at this point, who then shoots un-dead/zombie Shane in the head.

Rule number two: "He must never go back on his word, or a trust confided in him." This is pure Rick. He is honest and completely trustworthy. For example, in season three Rick faces the Governor, a sort of classic incarnation of the corrupted east we are meant to understand first by his pompous self-applied title. He is a suave, two-faced killer. Rick, though wary, keeps to his word in all their dealings. The message is clear: government cannot be trusted but the deeper cultural resonance upon which government was fashioned in the United States, the frontiersman and his story, remain true to the ideal upon which the nation invented itself. Rick willingly imperils the group to remain straight and true.

Rule number three: "He must always tell the truth." Rick is no liar. Sometimes, it costs him popularity but never respect. He lives a truthful life also in the sense that he stays loyal to his frontiersman typecasting. Crucially, and this figures in so many westerns, in keeping with his one true path, he nurtures Carl and mentors him the ways of the all-

³⁰⁹ Asma, 23.

³¹⁰ If you interpret the zombies as so many Indian stand-ins, then Rick's violence may be seen as adhering to the Bush Doctrine, that is, pre-emptive

American boy. We get this visually as Rick's Stetson become Carl's Stetson, as Carl picks up the gun, as Carl, despite his tender years employs the gun, as Rick inadvertently and unintentionally teaches Carl, as Lori puts it, to become detached, turn "cold" to the world. But hey, a boy's got to learn how to do what a man's got to do.

The government is the liar in this horror show. It made promises it couldn't keep and Rick is doing something about it. "The very real sociophobia in the wake of 9/11," Kevin Wetmore argues, "is a fear of ongoing war on terror in which 'America,' by which we mean the government, the military and all authority figures, is unable to protect or solve the problems."³¹¹ So cowboy Rick steps up

Rule number four: "He must be gentle with children, the elderly, and animals." Rick is a good dad to Carl. He constantly puts himself in danger—and, from Lori's perspective, too often abandons them—for the greater good of the group. This is both lamentable and excusable, for Rick wears the burden of a messiah, too. He carries the weight of it and, so that we fully understand his suffering on the group's behalf, it shows,; and yet he manages it after all is said and done and he doesn't not complain. As a father, Rick endeavors first and foremost, to protect, teach, and love Carl. He hurts when Carl hurts (especially when Carl takes a bullet). And he is physically demonstrative toward his son, at least some of the time. After all, his loyalties are decided because he must also play father to the group.

In the television series, the character of Hershel, who owns a farm where the survivors stay for a time, is an old man. Rick walks a fine line here. His first allegiance is to safeguarding and nurturing America, I mean, the survivors. Yet the TV program (not the comic book) casts Hershel as an older and wiser man (though at first he is obstinate, another common enough casting—the old coot archetype). Thus, he and Rick get on well; yet, Hershel also defers to Rick, as you might expect of an older man who sees in Rick the youth and vigor needed to regain the world.

Animals do much figure in the *Walking Dead*. Nonetheless, firmly establishing his cowboy cojones, early on in the comic series Rick is delighted to find a horse to ride for a time. The image is classic western. He's got the horse, the pistol, and the cowboy hat. And like any good hero, he is on a mission to save the world. But this is horror after all, a kind of weird inverted homage to 9/11, so things tend to die graphically and noisily, except frontiersmen.

Rule number five: "He must not advocate or possess racially or religiously intolerant ideas." The world has changed a lot since Autry's days. We see it in *Dead* where people of colour play important roles. For example, Glenn, who is little more than a kid, saves Rick early on, finds love in the arms of Hershel's daughter Maggie (let's "fuck," she presses him several times in the comic series). Glenn is Korean-American. And while he plays an important role he also willingly subordinates himself to Rick's white leadership. So do the various, short-lived black cast members (with the exception of the lethal, sword-wielding Michonne).

Rule number six: "He must help people in distress." At times, it seems, that this is all that Rick does. He leads a group of survivors, after all. The examples are simply too numerous. One case. On AMC Rick and Glenn risk themselves by going to town to a long deserted bar to rescue Hershel from himself (you know the cliché, former alcoholic doubts himself etc etc). Suddenly two unknown survivors approach them. Ultimately one goes for his weapon and Rick, qua gunslinger, shoots and kills them both. Before they can return to Hershel's farm, however, others from the unknown group arrive and pepper the bar with fire. Eventually, Rick, Hershel, and Glenn escape but not before Rick risks them all in order to free one of the aggressors whose leg is impaled on a fence post. And then he takes the kid

³¹¹ Wetmore, 163.

in—but blindfolded so as not to endanger his own clan even as he seeks to aid someone who might otherwise have killed him (creating, btw, another sore point with Shane, as their relationship continues to deteriorate). Before Shane eventually kills the kid by breaking his neck, the boy is shackled, black hood pulled over his head, shuttled around in vehicle trunks, held in solitary, and tortured. Pure Guantanamo Bay.

Rule number seven: “He must be a good worker.” Again, it is all work and little play in the Walking Dead. Organizing, gathering supplies, killing zombies, burning zombie bodies, securing more ammo, fighting other survivors who are not friendly, and so on. The program is both frequently diverting, often boring, and entirely humourless.

Rule number eight: “He must keep himself clean in thought, speech, action, and personal habits.” Rick struggles with this because, especially as leader, he faces unpalatable choices. For example, by the time TV Hershel is bitten in the leg by a zombie it is clear that he will not “turn” quickly, but he will turn eventually. To that point, the choices that presented themselves in the series were to abandon Hershel to his fate or to shoot him in the head and thereby pre-emptively destroy a future zombie before it could menace the group. But Rick, like any good frontiersman, is clever and has the ability to think outside the box. So he cuts Hershel’s leg off well above the bite in order to save his life. It is a calculated gamble that pays off. It also further softens Hershel’s character. One result is that where Rick may not exactly be clean shaven, we cut him slack. I mean, come on, it is the apocalypse.

Rule number nine: “He must respect women, parents, and his nation’s laws.” Whether intentional or not, Atruy uses the term “nation” rather than “country.” The frontiersman represents the heart of the American nation. Rick is a true and faithful nationalist.

He does respect parents. He is a parent and embraces the duty and sacrifice that such a role requires. And he respects women, even if the series unevenly deals with gender stereotypes. For example, Lori is feminine in a pained and lame kind of way. She is pretty, a devoted mom, but given to slightly hysterical behaviour. Her behaviour also borders on treasonous to the family unit as she falls prey to despair. Ever the pragmatist, Rick will push on ahead without her, too, if need be, we learn. Yet other females are slightly more complicated. Andrea, as close to a sexy-kitten as the series offers (and it is not very close), also discovers a predilection for marksmanship. She is good at shooting zombies in the head and enjoys doing it. Then there is Michonne, the black loner female whose weapon of choice is a sword, good for lopping zombie noggins. She saves Andrea. Rick treats them all with respect. But, as Rick shouts at Lori, let there be no doubt, “I’m in charge.” The burden weighs on him, too. “These people look to me to keep them safe. I owe it to them to do everything in my power.”

Rule number ten: “The cowboy is a patriot.” If a patriot loves one’s country, then the series throws Rick a curveball because the country is gone. Civilization has been decimated and the survivors are compelled to invent it all over again. Rick holds true, however, to a pre-apocalyptic model of behaviour, adjusted to fit the horror, but never abandoned or compromised. He doesn’t budge from it, however much Lori or Carl or Shane might want him to. In short, insofar as the nation prefaces the country, yes, Rick is more than a mere flag-waving patriot; he embodies, he lives and breathes the nation. He gives it life.

Thus, while the Dead proposes a scary new world, it is, in fact, much like the world the United States has imaginatively inhabited off and on since the coming of the Puritans. In this way, the series, despite the use of salty language (in the comics) and free and easy sexuality (in the comics) and a lot of gore, relates a deeply conservative and ultimately comforting tale not merely of survival, but of growth (Lori even gives birth! ...then dies and Carl is forced to shoot her in the head before she turns) in the face of the monstrous other.

The series is also clever about its use of cultural markers. For example, Shane serves a narrative purpose not unlike his namesake in the 1953 classic film Shane, starring Alan Ladd

(as Shane) and Jack Palance (as the sensual and sinewy black hat). In that film, Shane appears as if magically, thrust into the film's (and nation's eternal mythical) conflict that is also both a historical struggle and figures prominently in Turner, that is, farmer-settler versus rancher.³¹² Ranchers, as the film has it, tamed the west in order to make it safe for families. But the ranchers won't go quietly and the farmers are ill equipped to fight back. So Shane does it for them even as he and the key rancher, Ryker, agree that they both have outlived their historical moment.

Movie Shane's first imperative is to protect movie mother and son, Marion and little Joe. Once that is accomplished and once his regenerative killing work is done, Shane is disappeared. And this is also how Dead's Shane's story plays out. Shane protects Lori and Carl, even gets Lori pregnant and aims to be a good father to Carl. In the movie, though Shane and Marion spark and Marion's husband Joe acknowledges the mutual attraction as normal, it was released to a general audience and the year was 1953—iow, no sex. But again, once Dead Shane has served his purpose in the series, he is disappeared.

But more than that, the Dead also conjures up the stages of development at work in the film Shane. It works like this. Initially, Rick and Shane are small-town cops, fighting to protect regular Americans. Then Rick gets shot and ends up in the hospital. In the meantime, the apocalypse descends. Rick wakes up at the hospital and everything has changed and everyone, apart from zombies, is gone. Shane, assuming the worst, has left and set out to find Lori and Carl so he can protect them in this new wild-west like universe, where everyone is apparently on their own. In time Rick finds them.

Rick and Shane at first are fine. But problems emerge because it turns out that Shane is more linear in his thinking. In a kill or be kill world, he lays aside the comfortable cloak or morality that civilization may afford one. For example, a girl about Carl's age, Sophia, goes missing. Rick is willing to endanger the whole group in order to find her whereas Shane argues that the group must prevail at all costs, even if it means leaving Sophie behind to die (it turns out she has turned and Rick shoots her in the head).

Shane's end comes as he slowly goes mad. But is he crazy or simply at odds with Rick's cowboy morality? Either way, by this time they find their group living on Hershel's farm. But in the new world, as in the very oldest of American worlds, this is not sustainable. Stages of development beckon and they have got to move on. Shane cannot last; the farm cannot last. But before they go it is here, as in the film, that Shane meets his end because he has outlived his usefulness. The series, as noted, frames him loosely as increasingly unstable but seems to suggest that he isn't really crazy but, rather, implies a postmodern observation that morality functions to reflect changing material conditions. Really, it is not unlike E.P. Thompson's Marxist argument that morality serves as function of the prevailing economic base, what he termed a "moral economy."³¹³ "The conviction and moral courage of Ronald Reagan"

Among others, Frederick Pike has argued that the closing of the frontier, which was a misnomer because the country was hardly fully settled (it is not today), propelled "the desire for imperialist expansion."³¹⁴ Turner argued in 1893 that America had been conditioned to expand at all costs exactly because of the conditioning effects of having done so for nearly three centuries, as the country grew inexorably westward and therefore wouldn't and couldn't stop the frontier impetus. Instead, it embraced the frontier impetus, made it an ethos, and wrapped it in mythological, religious drapings. And of course the expansionism has never really abated. American politicians debate, sometimes heatedly, how to go about it, but

³¹² It is not a one-way street. Other films, demonstrating the wide-ranging ideological utility of the frontier myth, such as Kevin Costner's 2003 *Open Range*, reverse this equation.

³¹³ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966).

³¹⁴ Pike, 157.

nobody in Washington seriously challenges the value of and need for expansion. And why should they? After all, America's wars, in particular those conflicts that occurred in the western hemisphere, have been regenerative frontier wars in much the same way, as were the early and protracted struggles against Indians on the continental frontier.

But what about all the talk about expanding freedom and democracy? Stephanson puts it this way: "To be free was precisely to understand this destiny and conform to the direction of divine will."³¹⁵ Divine will, as expressed and embedded in the frontier myth, meant never having to say you are sorry; and it never meant for those subjected to American hegemony the kind of freedom and democracy in the way that Americans have experienced and understood them. Forget any ideas about winning hearts and minds. The United States has walked away from every one of its frontier wars without so much as throwing a scrap away. The key has always been expansion, growth. "Growth is key to individual liberty and progress. The substance of growth is empire. Thus empire is benevolent. Hence the policemen who guarantees the law and order that is necessary to progress is undeniably benevolent."³¹⁶ Such observations abound. In the post-9/11 world the point is simply that Bush had a plan, he stuck to it, and it worked until reasonably well into his second term when Americans just grew sick of war, sick of lies, and then got hammered by a serious economic downturn. Americans also grew weary of Reagan's lies and the clandestine war he waged in Central America. The difference between these presidents derives from the fact that Reagan, first, got lucky with the economy, whereas Bush's popularity paid the price (i.e., the Great Recession of 2008) for the deregulatory economic policies that Reagan initiated. Second, Reagan stuck rigorously to his mythical frontier cant whereas Bush employed it successfully but intermittently, West and Carey show. If words mean anything, Reagan's greater popularity derives, at least in part, from his more relentless commitment to frontier mythopoesis.

America's frontier wars parallel how a creationist explains the world and you can see this clearly by exploring the faith as it has been preached in popular culture. Now to do so, you might say, is pointless because creationists are silly, the world is more complicated, causation is more complex. But I would disagree. The signs and wonders are all around us if only we open our eyes to see them, soaked through to the bone in newspapers, erupting from movie screens, starring on television, and sermonized in presidential rhetoric. Too big to ignore, too important to dismiss, so all-encompassing that it becomes mostly invisible (or pleasantly suffocating?), in other words. But to dismiss creationism is to ignore the world as it exists, knowing full well that tens of millions of Americans organize their lives to fit its perceived demands—and that in itself makes creationism, or the frontier myth, which clearly has a much broader audience, worthy of study. And, unlike creationism, which is parochial and posits a kind of anti- or shadow culture, the frontier myth is mainstream all the way, from Hollywood to the White House.

Conclusion:

Since the time of the Puritans *the* central American cultural vision has portrayed the frontier as a special, enchanted place, a veritable cauldron of primal Americanization—in this way the historical frontier begets the mythical frontier. "Ideology is not simply imposed on ourselves," observes Žižek. "Ideology is our spontaneous relationship to our social world."³¹⁷ In this vein, the frontier myth provides the rosier reflection of Americana. This is where America peers into the mirror and is delighted to find some guy like John Wayne or Gary Cooper or the Walking Dead's Rick grinning back, aw shucks.

³¹⁵Stephanson, 8.

³¹⁶Williams, *Empire*, 109.

³¹⁷Žižek, *Pervert's Guide to Ideology*.

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