

Generic Subversion and Political Critique in Lucan, Vergil, and American Westerns

This paper examines two narrative genres, the ancient epic and the modern American Western, in association with particular cultural mythologies. The comparison of these two genres—specifically in the social dynamics of the mythologies they preserve—aims to show that, in both instances, subversion of these narrative modes opens a space not only for literary creativity, but also for political reflection and critique. Contrasting aspects of the modern “anti-Western” film genre and the “anti-*Aeneid*” Roman epic, Lucan’s *Bellum Civile*, this paper considers how subversion of each genre’s conventional tropes, symbolism, and value system can serve as a vehicle for deconstructing traditional national ideologies.

The Old West has long been recognized as a “mythical” space in contemporary America, replete with character types, iconography, and ideological messages that constitute a founding mythology for the nation (e.g. Slotkin 1992). Emerging as an age of archetypal heroes, a symbolic struggle between order and chaos in the untamed wilderness, and the divinely-guided realization of Americans’ “manifest destiny,” the mythology of the frontier took root in late 19th/early 20th-century popular culture as well as the famous “frontier thesis,” promulgated by historian Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893, that viewed American identity as uniquely shaped by the experience of westward migration. In tandem with the influence of the frontier as a national founding myth, the genre of the Western, especially in film, has been studied as a medium for reflection on American identity (e.g. Carter 2014). Owing to this notional link between the mythology of the frontier and the American self, the Western genre has evolved in correspondence with changing attitudes in national discourse. A key step in this evolution is the divergence between the early “classical” Western—which represents an optimistic outlook,

clear-cut morality, and a putative triumph of order over savagery—and the later “anti-” or “revisionist” Western: a subversive spin on the genre that emphasizes a pessimistic view of civilization and ambiguous morality, and foregrounds the violence and injustice inflicted by the alleged champions of order. The advent of the anti-Western in the 1960s and the subgenre’s continued vitality today reflects the efficacy of the Western genre—and the national mythology underpinning it—as a medium for engaging questions of national self-definition, particularly amid the re-evaluation of traditional norms and narratives.

The importance of foundation myths in communal life is well evidenced among ancient Mediterranean communities, where heroic founders were memorialized for their exemplary qualities, and stories or symbolism from the community’s past were mobilized in diverse forms of political communication. The epic genre held pride of place as the narrative mode for recounting foundation myths and other tales of collective significance; the association in antiquity between epic and political myth is well illustrated by Vergil’s *Aeneid*, the retelling of a national origin story deeply invested in themes of Roman identity and imperial ideology in the transitional age of the early principate. Lucan’s Neronian epic *Bellum Civile*, on the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, is notable for its pervasive allusions to the *Aeneid*, and widely regarded as an “anti-*Aeneid*” for the darker vision of Roman imperial mythology those allusions suggest (Casali 2011, Cowan 2021). Whether Lucan is subverting Vergil’s “national epic” or bringing to the surface the subversive themes already present in his predecessor’s work, the *Bellum Civile* is engaging the narrative genre of epic (Vergilian epic, specifically) to critique a program of national identity and political ideology which the target genre is seen to represent—much as the anti-Western does by undermining the American frontier mythology and the conventions of the classical Westerns that promoted it.

Through exemplary scenes from these ancient and modern works, the paper explores three tactics by which Lucan's anti-Vergilian epic and select anti-Western films each deconstruct their generic model, and thus critique its associated mythos and value system: stripping violence of its heroic character, instead underscoring its brutality and injustice; highlighting processes of political mythmaking within the story, as a metaliterary commentary on ideological readings of history; and problematizing the conventional scheme of "order" triumphing over "chaos" by stressing the ubiquity of lawlessness, and the inability of the protagonists to overcome it—or their collusion in propagating it.

Bibliography

Carter, M. 2014. *Myth of the Western: New Perspectives on Hollywood's Frontier Narrative*.

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Casali, S. 2011. "The *Bellum Civile* as an Anti-*Aeneid*," in P. Asso (ed.) *Brill's Companion to*

Lucan, 81-109. Leiden/Boston: Brill.

Cowan, R. 2021. "Charging the Canon: Lucan and Vergil," in P. Roche (ed.) *Reading Lucan's*

Civil War: A Critical Guide, 192-210. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Slotkin, R. 1992. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*.

Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.