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## Religion and Violence in Jesse James Films, 1972–2010

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# Religion and Violence in Jesse James Films, 1972–2010

## **Abstract**

This essay analyzes recent depictions of Jesse James in cinema, examining filmic portrayals of the figure between the years of 1972 and 2010. Working from the intersection of the anthropology of film and religious studies approaches to popular culture, the essay fills significant gaps in the study of James folklore. As no substantial examinations of the religious aspects of the James myths exist, I hone in on the legend's religiosity as contested in filmic form. Films, including revisionist Westerns, are not unlike oral-history statements recorded and analyzed by anthropologists, folklorists, and ethnographers. Jesse James movies, in other words, have much to do with the construction of American identity. Employing theorist Roland Barthes's textual codes implicit within narrative accounts, I argue that these Revisionist Western films use religion as an intentional trope in their negotiated deconstructions and re-appropriations of the American legend. James is an enigma and the films' depictions of religion and violence serve as narrative strategies to establish the identity and meaning of the controversial outlaw. In the corpus of eight films that serve as data for this study, the themes of violence, fanaticism, the Bible, sinfulness and atonement, and other frequent religious imageries and icons occur frequently in the intertextual filmic attempts to situate the enigma of Jesse James as either hero or terrorist.

## **Keywords**

anthropology of film, revisionist westerns, religion, violence, Jesse James, myths, film studies

## **Author Notes**

Travis Cooper is a PhD candidate in anthropology and religious studies at Indiana University, Bloomington. His research interests include method and theory in the study of religion, film studies, discourse analysis, new media, critical ethnography, and social theory. He is currently conducting fieldwork for his dissertation project among emerging evangelical communities in the North American Midwest. The author would like to thank Dr. Josh Paddison for the input on the project in its earlier stages and for reading and commenting on an early version of this article. Thanks also to Andrew Monteith for conversing about the project and the "Religion and the American West" class (Indiana University, Spring 2013) for helpful feedback after presenting a version of this article.

*Both Frank and Jesse were schooled deeply in the old-fashioned religion. Every Sunday the family drove to church and took part in the worship. . . . Jesse James remained thoroughly orthodox in his religious beliefs as long as he lived. This, perhaps, is a hard nut for you to crack; but, being a simple statement of fact, it goes down upon the record. . . . Jesse James believed in a personal God and in a personal Devil—probably in a considerable number of the latter! . . . He expected to go to Heaven when he died, for he believed that he had lived the best life he possibly could live under all the circumstances, and that, therefore, he was entitled to salvation.*

– Robertus Love, *The Rise and Fall of Jesse James*

*Jesse James! The magical words are pregnant with romance.*

– R. F. Dibble, “Jesse James”

*One may easily speak of a mythic West, but not, with any precision, of a single, rigidly defined “Western myth.” The longing for a hero benefiting society through righteous violence brings forth lawmen-civilizers such as Bill Hickok and Wyatt Earp—and glorifies outlaws such as the James brothers.*

– Wayne Michael Sarf, *God Bless You, Buffalo Bill*

*“This is the West, sir. When legend becomes fact, print the legend.” The . . . comment, long debated by film scholars, has several possible meanings. It could mean that at some point legend and fact become so intermingled they are indistinguishable. The lives and legends of western personalities such as Jesse James, Wyatt Earp and Billy the Kid fit that interpretation. It could also mean that after a time it is better to perpetuate the legend, even at the cost of truth.*

– R. Philip Loy, *Westerns in a Changing America*

## **Introduction: The Historical Jesse**

Who was Jesse Woodson James? Was he the brilliant inventor of the bank robbery and perfecter of the train robbery?<sup>1</sup> Was he a social bandit, a mythic Robin Hood?<sup>2</sup> A heroic criminal?<sup>3</sup> The quintessential *American Bandit*?<sup>4</sup> A *Bourgeois Bandit*?<sup>5</sup> A chivalrous and well-mannered gentleman?<sup>6</sup> Or was he an empty myth, an exaggerated production of the “profane folk-imagination”?<sup>7</sup> Writers in both popular and scholarly senses have devoted thousands of pages of text to elucidate this mysterious figure. Dime novelists, comic book artists, screenwriters, filmmakers, directors, folklorists, cultural critics, biographers, and historians have all tried their hand at the task. From the disparate narratives, a convoluted image emerges whose ambiguity may reflect Jesse James’s identity more accurately than one might first imagine. If popular cultural

depictions get one thing wrong, it is the portrayal of Jesse James as a static character. The historical Jesse was anything but flat. From the fragmented historical records rise a conflicted, introspective Jesse James, a Jesse James given to self-crisis, deliberation, and internal negotiation. The so-called *real* Jesse—the Jesse who lived and died on the American frontier we now call the Midwest—was an exceedingly complex and multifaceted figure. After all, “the outlaw hero,” writes Richard Meyer, “is good-natured, kind-hearted, and frequently pious.”<sup>8</sup> Part of the complexity arises because of the figure’s dual identity as both a violent outlaw and morally emulative person.

On the subject of Jesse’s religiosity, few solid facts exist. Yet from the tantalizing glimpses of Jesse’s character a partial picture of his identity emerges. He was born into an ecstatically religious family, in a literal sense. Jesse’s father was an ordained Baptist minister of the Second Great Awakening sort, famous for his passionate evangelistic rhetoric and successful revivalist endeavors. His preacher father was a proud slaveholder who saw the issue of slavery as nothing less than a religious issue. He held slaves because he submitted to God’s just and righteous order, and it was in such a religio-political milieu Jesse grew up.<sup>9</sup> A youthful Jesse fought at the end of the Civil War for the cause of the South, but his warmongering carried over the temporal boundaries set by history books into full-fledged terrorist activity in the troubled Missouri borderland that he considered home.<sup>10</sup> How “religious” Jesse’s cause was is less than clear. Jesse requested in 1869 that his home congregation in Kearney, Missouri, Mount Olive Baptist Church, remove his name from the membership records. That he “believed himself unworthy” to have a place in the church roster is a testament to his internal turmoil.<sup>11</sup> In terms of religiosity and moral standards, Jesse was a conflicted person forged in the heat of frontier revivalism and hardened in the fervor of the Civil War. He was a Southern Baptist boy trained in the arts of military violence under some of the most accomplished of Dixie generals.

This article sets aside the “historical Jesse” to examine the narrative myth or symbol of Jesse James in some of its most recent popular cultural developments.<sup>12</sup> As historian R. Philip Loy writes, “it is not the cowboy of history that left his mark on the American imagination; it is the mythic cowboy of popular culture.”<sup>13</sup> I take Loy’s statement seriously and adopt his claim that “legends are durable things and are not without their value as part of the folklore of a people.”<sup>14</sup> As a constituent part of a sociocultural group’s material and symbolic life, myth and legend, in a folkloric sense, develop around its heralded figures. Mythic characters often rise to large-than-life status in narrative and discursive forms, taking on meaning and significance inflated far beyond that demonstrated by the historical record.

Historians have typically derided such mythical embellishments for their fictionalized exaggerations.<sup>15</sup> Wayne Michael Sarf, for instance, chides filmmakers for trying to make the Jesse James legend into something more noble and inspiring than the record allows for.<sup>16</sup> Those of the border outlawry, James Wellman adds, underwent “curious deification” in popular accounts.<sup>17</sup> Romanticization or idealization might especially be the case for heroes with whom the very historical accounts are ambiguous to begin with. “To a great extent the career of Jesse James remains a mystery, as much as myth as fact,” and even during his own lifetime authorities charged the James gang with crimes it didn’t commit.<sup>18</sup> Popular mythmaking is explanatory as it works to fill in the fragmentary gaps in the historical record and to account for the instances where historians are silent due to lack of data.

Another more anthropological or folkloric perspective of academic inquiry, however, conceives of popular narrational and visual depictions in and of themselves as performances of the values and ideals of a culture.<sup>19</sup> Because myths are discursive acts “through which actors evoke the sentiments out of which society is actively constructed,”<sup>20</sup> the study of myth construction in

films is crucial. In this article, I focus on one form of representation, Jesse James in cinema, examining filmic portrayals of the figure between 1972 and 2010. Working from two young perspectives on the study of film—religious studies and anthropology—this essay seeks to fill significant gaps in the study of Jesse James and contemporary mythmaking.<sup>21</sup> No substantial examinations of Jesse James’s religious identity exist, let alone studies of religiosity as contested in filmic form. Although I draw on film theory, the anthropological approach corrects serious oversights within broader film studies itself, including a perpetuating resistance to the consideration of movies as temporally- and spatially-contingent cultural artifacts.<sup>22</sup> Narrative or feature films, especially those utilizing voice-over narration—as many Jesse James movies employ—are not unlike oral-history statements of a sort, documents that anthropologists, folklorists, sociologists, and ethnographers commonly record.<sup>23</sup> Conceding the anthropological claim that films are “culturally significant and symbolic stories” as well as “symbolic constructs, systems of symbols that help people think, feel, and act,” this article sees cinema as one of the most important popular forms of both collective performance and representation.<sup>24</sup> Films “have become so deeply woven into the cultural fabric,” write anthropologists Peter Wogan and David Sutton, that lines from the movies “have been incorporated into our everyday language.” As producers of both visual and aural culture, films are “tantamount to the myths and sacred narratives that anthropologists routinely study in other parts of the world.”<sup>25</sup> Movies are perhaps one of the most powerful mediums due to their productions of images and sounds in the service of the public imagination.<sup>26</sup> In this article I focus primarily on visual content through a textual or narrative approach to the study of film—that is, I see films as potent, discreet texts<sup>27</sup>—but I also recognize that movies operate both within intertextual relationships to other films and exist as cultural negotiations or contestations between the people who produce the movies (writers, producers,

directors, actors) and the multiple audiences who consume them.<sup>28</sup> To rephrase the matter, a movie fits within a broader artistic body of work but an audience chooses, interprets, and constructs meaning from movies in undetermined and sometimes unpredictable ways.<sup>29</sup> “Cultural knowledge,” writes one film historian, “extends to understanding the way in which films *make* meaning.”<sup>30</sup> Audiences put the concept of *genre* to work in terms of choosing movie texts to view, understanding and enjoying that text, and subsequently talking and communicating about it.<sup>31</sup> Yet, the polysemous aspects of film interpretation do not undermine the fact that movies simultaneously normalize, reproduce, and even challenge cultural patterns and symbols.

The primary argument of this article is that in visual negotiations of the Jesse James myth, religion plays a determinative role. Drawing loosely on theorist Roland Barthes’s outline of five narrative or textual codes implicit within narrative accounts,<sup>32</sup> I argue in the following that contemporary Westerns, or “Revisionist Jesse” films, as filmographer Johnny Boggs describes the genre, use religion as an intentional trope in their negotiated deconstructions and re-appropriations of the American legend of Jesse James.<sup>33</sup> Along the way, I also show that countercultural westerns produced after the 1960s began to play a role of cultural critique, ultimately overshadowing more traditional depictions of the west. The result of such reconfigurations includes moral ambiguity and blurred standards of order. With transitions of this sort in mind, Loy offers a helpful guide to the study of Jesse James in film:

Four variables help to understand the ideological orientation of each [Jesse James] film. First, what is the context of the film? Do Jesse and Frank James and the Youngers become outlaws as a result of the Civil War legacy, or because of the railroads as a symbol of the newly emerging industrial order? Or are there other reasons? Second, what is the image of Jesse James? Is he a good man victimized by railroad and Yankee abuse, a restless young man bored with peace, or a cold-blooded killer and thief? Third, is there progression in the film? Does Jesse go from being bad to being good, or is he generally unchangingly restless and bad overall? Fourth and finally, who are the villains? Are they railroad personnel, Union soldiers, Missouri neighbors or the Pinkerton Detective Agency?<sup>34</sup>

Interpretive possibilities abound. As we will see in the following, Jesse James gets remade over and over in film based on the dually operative ideological agendas of filmmakers and viewers for the respective films. Before turning to the contents of religion and violence, and in order to contextualize the movies before moving to analysis, I offer brief plot summaries of the films.

### **Introducing the Films**

***The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid (1972)***. Directed by Philip Kaufman, this story has been called “the quirkiest” of Jesse James film to date. The narrative follows the James and Younger gangs as they travel to Minnesota, scope out the bank, and carry out the ill-fated events that culminate in the death of Clell Miller and incarceration of several gang members. Robert Duvall plays the erratic Jesse and went on to star in a number of Westerns including *Tender Mercies* (1983), *Lonesome Dove* (1989), *Broken Trail* (2006) and *Open Range* (2003). As noted below, Duvall also gave Jesse James an “evangelistic touch” that he would echo with his role in *The Apostle* (1997) as writer, executive producer, and leading man, a movie in which he plays an errant revivalist preacher hiding from the law.<sup>35</sup> Jesse’s psychological health is questionable in this film and his enemies are multiple.<sup>36</sup>

***The Long Riders (1980)***. In director Walter Hill’s version, considered by some to be one of the favorite portrayals of the story because of wide popular reception, the relationships between the outlaws, their family members, and their friends and neighbors play a role front and center. Rather than focusing on one particular event, as did *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid*, this film shows a number of shorter crime “vignettes” interspersed with portrayals of the gang members’ personal lives. Love and romance, for instance, play important roles. In the end, a cocky, self-secure Bob Ford shoots Jesse in his living room while flashing a brave smile. The story comes



to an end with Frank attending Jesse's funeral.<sup>37</sup> As a point of interest, real-life brothers played the historical brothers in this film. A quiet, brooding James Keach plays the role of Jesse. Gang members frequently challenge Jesse's authority in Hill's film. Unlike other filmic interpretations, the outlaw's charisma and power is absent.

*The Last Days of Frank and Jesse James (1986)*. Director William A. Graham's rendition opens in an absurdist fashion. The film begins at the end, so to say, at Jesse's house just after the assassination. Absurdity comes to the fore after the Fords exit the house and proclaim Jesse's death and the townspeople begin, sheepishly at first, to take off with items in Jesse's yard, including items from his front porch and lawn. They strip the house of its window shutters and even the door off the front gate. In the strange scene, Graham illustrates Jesse's celebrity status, his early deification into popular history. The body of the film picks up with a restless Jesse and docile Frank (Johnny Cash) as the brothers endeavor to become law abiding citizens and family men. Played by Kris Kristofferson, Jesse is suave, masculine, and dresses in an urban style that contrasts with previous depictions of the outlaws in their iconic and dusty western wear. Jesse is a womanizer and the domestic restraints of home life are difficult for him. The film contrasts two sides of Jesse's life—his desire for action and gunslinging and his dedication to his son and wife—a theme bested in detail only by Dominik's elegiac film to follow in 2007. The categories of kinship and familial virtues are at clear odds with the excitement of violence. The tensions come together during the assassination at the hands of Bob Ford, but this is no self-certain and smirking Bob like that of the 1980 version. In the 1986 movie, Bob the Younger is nervous and fidgety. The film concludes with the Missouri government granting Frank amnesty. In a vein of clear cinematic creativity and artistic license that ignores the historical record, Frank commits a revenge killing of Bob Ford.

***Frank and Jesse (1994)***. Director Robert Borris's film is the first of this timeframe to make the attempt to explain the origins of Jesse's outlawry. The setting is the Missouri countryside four years after the Civil War. Union troops and railroad entrepreneurs saturate the region, impinging on the lives of the region's white settlers. In terms of setting and context, *Frank and Jesse* is one of the most historically aware films in its examination of the ideological, political, and economic influences on the James Gang's exploits. The film begins with an awkward but anticipatory Jesse, played by an energetic Rob Lowe. Country music artist Randy Travis plays Frank, the cautious but skilled sharp-shooter. Jesse is psychologically scarred from the violence he endured in the Civil War and seeks to avenge his family and neighbors from the injustices brought about by the invasions of railroad men. The film effectively depicts the hardships of the Reconstruction era on an overwhelmingly Dixie, pro-slavery region in Missouri. Jesse comes of age in this milieu. Borris's version correlates Jesse's exploits to his identity as a Southerner by way of thick "Dixie imagery," including multiple visualizations of the Old Dixie flag. Building on the assassination scenes of *The Long Riders* and *The Last Days*, the 1994 version portrays Jesse as reluctantly but intentionally resigning himself into the hands of Bob and Charlie Ford, but only after he physically confronts them, clobbering Charlie in the head with a candlestick and assaulting Bob with a knife. Borris's assassination scene contrasts with the pious and sacrificial rendition of films to follow.

***Purgatory (1999)***. *Purgatory* is a mystically-inflected Western action flick directed by Uli Edel. The setting is Refuge (i.e., Purgatory). The plot follows a handful of iconic heroes of the American West—Wild Bill Hickok, Doc Holliday, Billy the Kid, and Jesse James—as they live in peace and quiet in atonement for their violent, bloody pasts. The stability of the town is upset, however, when a new outlaw gang, led by an ornery "Blackjack," enters the quasi-afterlife after being shot down in a fight. J. D. Souther plays Jesse, a character with minor, but significant

screen time. In *Refuge*, Jesse runs the general store, and in a vein of meta-reflexivity pokes fun of the Dime Novels' portrayals of himself.

*American Outlaws (2001)*. The first of the twenty-first century portrayals of the legend, Les Mayfield directed this film. It is a lighthearted account of the events following the defeat of the South in the Civil War and the subsequent return of Dixie regiments to their homes in Missouri. Colin Farrell plays the young and adventure-seeking Jesse. "Crime is pretty much fun and games for the boys," Boggs notes. The plot of the film pits the newly returned rebels against the ever-expanding railroad. Antagonists include railroad man Rollin H. Parker, who works for the railroad mogul, Thaddeus Rains. Rains also hires the infamous Allan Pinkerton to put down the rebels. The movie ends with Jesse and his new bride making peace with Pinkerton and escaping to Tennessee.<sup>38</sup>

*The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford (2007)*. Director and screenplay-writer Andrew Dominik's film is an ambitious exploration of the last years leading up to Jesse's assassination at the hands of the Ford brothers. The fun and jovial characterization of Jesse in Colin Farrell's 2001 portrayal is eerily absent. In Farrell's place is Hollywood leading man Brad Pitt, who commands the viewer's attention and embodies an affecting Jesse who in his moodiness gives off paranoia and suspicion toward everyone around him. The film's main events surround Jesse's attempts to put together a gang after Frank retires. This film is a deeply psychological accounting of the relationship between the young Bob Ford and Jesse, his simultaneous nemesis and idol. With its emotive musical score and sweeping, wide-angle scenes of isolation, and expansive, natural beauty, Boggs describes it as "more art film than Western." Others movie critics have called Dominik's rendition a "haunting, lyrical elegy."<sup>39</sup>

***American Bandits: Frank and Jesse James (2010)***. George Stults stars in the most recent interpretation of Jesse James. Fred Olen Ray directed the film. The setting and plot of the film is intentionally vague, but it follows Jesse and Frank in the aftermath of a robbery as they hide out from the authorities. A Protestant reverend and southern sympathizer takes Jesse in, delirious from a gunshot wound, and the minister's granddaughter nurses him to health. The film focuses on a romantic relationship between Jesse and the granddaughter, Mary, and the action of the narrative is primarily that of discourse through conversation. This 2010 film takes a highly introspective tack as the outlaws reflect on the ethics of their actions, ponder their moral standings, and question their futures.<sup>40</sup> Moral deliberation comes to the fore. Similar to *Purgatory*, *American Bandits* struggles to rationalize and historicize violent actions.

### **Content and Narrative: Religious Violence**

In this section, after considering the ability of film to convey religious sentiments and serve as constructions and performances of public values, I examine the religious content<sup>41</sup> of the above corpus, especially in its correlation to Jesse's violent behaviors. Film, in general, and cinema, in particular, are instruments of "public" and "collective" memory.<sup>42</sup> Movies permeate culture and have the ability as an artistic medium to *move* people emotively.<sup>43</sup> Such reasons alone justify film as of anthropological interest. The role of religious imagery in films, in addition, cannot be overstated. Indeed, "Religious ideas, rituals and communities are represented or alluded to in a dizzying number of films," and renaissance American westerns and Revisionist Jesse James films are no exceptions.<sup>44</sup> Religious beliefs, along with other factors, shape the ways audiences receive and interpret film content and narrative events.<sup>45</sup> To study religious content in films is to study directly "the processes at work in mythopoesis and meaning-making."<sup>46</sup>

In the following, I do not attempt full plot analyses but instead draw on key scenes, moving between analysis and interpretation, to elucidate the themes of interest to this essay.<sup>47</sup> Each one of the eight films that I deal with answers, however partially, a series of implied questions: Who was Jesse James, really, and what were the reasons for his violent acts? Were Jesse and those around him Christians? If so, how, as a religious person, how did he justify his actions?<sup>48</sup> Loy anticipated such ambiguity with his guide to the study of Jesse James films, above. But one might go as far as describing the questions of Jesse's identity, morality, and religiosity as constitutive of Barthes's first code: *the enigma*.<sup>49</sup> The very identity of Jesse James, contingent on his ethical-moral status, is an enigma, a mysterious question. Each of the films concern Jesse's subject identities and depict him in a slightly different fashion. In an unsettling postmodern sense, for some of the films the enigma is never solved in a satisfying sense. The viewer is left to interpret matters on his or her own. Some films portray Jesse similarly; in others, the differences could not be more defined. Each of the films, however, problematizes the mythological Jesse as noble outlaw—as an American Robin Hood—as they simultaneously reify their own re-descriptions of the myth. Although a number of important themes are relevant, I hone in on the categories of (1) righteous violence, (2) fanaticism, (3) the Bible, (4) sinfulness and atonement, (5) eclecticism and conflict, (6) and other intertextual religious imageries. The six themes or topics do not exhaust the interpretive possibilities of the films in terms of religious content, but do speak the most clearly on the filmmakers' positing of a collusion between religion and violence.

**Righteous Butchery.**<sup>50</sup> “One may easily speak of a mythic West, but not, with any precision, of a single, rigidly defined ‘Western myth,’” writes Sarf. “The longing for a hero benefiting society through righteous violence brings forth lawmen-civilizers such as Bill Hickok and Wyatt Earp—and glorifies outlaws such as the James brothers.”<sup>51</sup> Sarf, however, only has the

equation partly correct. Not all popular renditions of the James myth condone his violent acts by describing them as “righteous.” In fact, none of the eight films considered in this essay seek to downplay Jesse’s violent disposition. Instead, they conflict with one another on how to explain such violence and vacillate between justification and demonization. Several films, as we will see, fit the film theory description of *postmodern*, especially due to threads of pastiche and eclectic playfulness (i.e., *bricolage*). Most importantly, they undermine the meta-narrative of Western religion.<sup>52</sup> In many of the films, violence and aggression serve not as foils to religion, but as derivatives, constituent aspects, or products of the latter.

*The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* (1972) depicts Jesse as a connoisseur of violence, as a man who flippantly takes pleasure in using force to see his will accomplished. As part of the gang rides northward from Missouri, they encounter a group of murdered Union soldiers which they determine was Jesse’s doing (riding in the group ahead of them). “Why would Jesse want to kill a half a dozen soldiers like that for?” Clell asks. Cole responds soberly: “Guns. You know about Jesse. He’s got a thing about guns. He never has quite enough to satisfy him.” Colt revolvers, rifles, cowboy hats and boots: are all *semic codes*, or objects or props which characterize or define the film according to its genre or stylistic grouping, the Western.<sup>53</sup> As they ride into Northfield, Jesse quips:

Here she is, Frank. A city of the plains. Yankee Gomorrah, built on the spoils of war. Reminds me of the time we rode into Laurence, Kansas during the war with old Charley Quantrell, flying the black flag. Lord, we done ourselves proud. Greatest guerilla raid of all time. Must have killed a thousand jayhawkers that day. Later on, they tried to say we killed some women and children to try to make us look bad. I didn’t see no damn women and children. You, Frank?

Frank responds in a vein of chilling racism: “I didn’t see any. None that was white, anyway.” Frank and Jesse’s collected calm is unnerving.

The 1994 film, *Frank and Jesse*, is the first, but by no means the last, to build on the character set by the frenetic 1972 version. In terms of plot structure, character development, and other basic filmic forms, *Frank and Jesse* does not offer much in terms of creative novelty. But in relation to Jesse's identity, Rob Lowe nearly matches the precedent of Robert Duvall in 1972.<sup>54</sup> From the beginning of the film, Jesse is pent up with angst and anger. He lashes out violently, even at his brother Frank. At first he is awkward and fumbles with his revolver in ill-planned attempts for revenge. He can't shoot well; his actions are hasty and haphazardly executed. In an early scene, he chases down a railroad man who has wounded his mother and killed his father and brother and tries to apprehend him. Actions such as these—physical attacks against the James family—constitute *action (or proairetic) codes*, in Barthesian language. The violent acts predict violence. The viewer anticipates the plot of the film to follow and is motivated to see how the narrative unravels and concludes.<sup>55</sup> Jesse is unsuccessful; his rashness and inexperience costs him a severe gunshot wound. The film follows Jesse as he wizens, sharpening his skills as a bandit. The core of the film, without question, is Jesse's incessantly unapologetic violence. In one scene, Jesse and Frank heatedly argue. "Besides, I like living with a gun in my hand," Jesse explains. "That's how I want to die: on my feet, with lead flying and a round of buckshot coming straight at my nose." Frank tries to talk Jesse down. "I seen my share of killing and blood," he counters. Jesse responds, "don't give me that. I watched you in those raids. We blew guys' brains out and laughed about it! Don't tell me you've changed." Violence is at the foundation of the Jesse James myth.

In their first bank robbery scene, Jesse shoots the banker twice in the face. The scene is gruesome and startling. Blood splatter saturates the wall directly behind the banker's desk. The red, viscous fluid runs out of the man's facial orifices before he slumps over. What is startling is not the violence, per se, but the man's docility as opposed to Jesse's intention. Jesse kills him and

visibly enjoys the murder. Later, he chuckles to himself about the look on the banker's face when he pulled his gun on him. Frank overhears and is surprised: "God—Jesus—Jess. You've got a stone cold heart." Jesse: "Right, and you're St. Francis of Assisi. I'm just settling old scores." Jesse defers responsibility, but it is clear that he takes pleasure in his crimes.

*Frank and Jesse* also identifies the source of Jesse's violence. As Frank's lament to his wife in one scene attests, the film calls into question Jesse's mental stability. Frank speaks of the Civil War raids of which he and Jesse were a part. "It's all my fault. I seen his eyes, and didn't do anything," Frank regrets. "He shouldn't have been there. He was only fifteen. He was my little brother." He describes the massacre in detail. "Jesse was standing nearby. I remember my ears were ringing, and I started to vomit. I dropped my gun. Jesse picked it up and kept on firing. I saw his eyes; his eyes were like black coals. And it looked like he was smiling. Something came over him that day. . . . He shouldn't of been there. None of us shoulda' been there." Such a narrative locates and determines the origins of Jesse's life of violence. In *Frank and Jesse*, the latter was a victim of war. After seeing what he did, there was no turning back.

One important characteristic of these films, in terms of the Barthesian typology, is that of the *symbolic code*, in which depictions of conflicts between good and evil and heroes and villains are open to polysemous interpretation. Lines between good and evil scramble, especially when one considers the films as a corpus of intertextually related narratives.<sup>56</sup> Loy argues that a number of characteristics were central to the traditional Western: "All of these – law books versus guns, homesteaders versus cattlemen, and organized territory versus unorganized territory ruled by force – are distinctive attributes of traditional Westerns. Good triumphs over evil, law replaces violence, and the homesteaders (as carriers of progress) defeat the cattlemen."<sup>57</sup> In application of Barthes's symbolic code, however, the question of good versus evil is no longer black and white or one-



directional. Who exactly is the hero and who is the villain becomes difficult to decipher. Such inquiries also play with a previous code—the *enigma*—in that they pose these very questions to Jesse’s identity. In some films, Jesse is an anti-hero; in others, he retains the charismatic persona and mythological charm (e.g., *American Outlaws*). As a corpus, however, the films obscure easy ethical-moral binaries and work overtime to demonstrate the complexity of the James legend.

**Religious Fanaticism and Revivalist Roots.** As we have seen, several films explicitly depict Jesse as a violent fanatic in questionable psychological health. Jesse’s problems, the narratives suggest, are a result of the tragedies of the Civil War. Notably, the depictions of Jesse’s psychological instability often come to light in terms of his religiosity. Religious language and behaviors in the filmic narratives complicate Jesse’s identity and nuance his fanaticism. Several of the films are highly critical of religion. *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* is most representative of this criticism. After Pinkerton agents wound Cole Younger, he lays delirious on a make-shift bed, hidden away in a Missouri cave. Jesse laments Cole’s injury in an ecstatic, telling pseudo-vision, in his father’s revivalist tradition. But Jesse laces his exhortations with violence:

Come down here and they blowed off my mother’s arm. And they killed John Younger. And now Cole Younger. They call this peace. Well, we’re gonna’ share that peace with them. [Another of the outlaws echoes “Amen,” and Jesse continues.] I had me a vision. I seen a Yankee city, far to the north, with the biggest bank I ever seen. And I seen us all dressed up in cattle dusters come riding fine Kentucky blue-bloods, riding into this smug, Yankee city, this city of the plains, built on the spoils of war. And we’re guerillas again, behind enemy lines. And we make that Yankee town weep! That Yankee town weep! I seen a place called North. A place called North. A place called North. A place called—Northfield. Give me an “Amen,” boys.

Jesse’s prophetic soliloquy—clearly a *cultural (referential) code* in Barthesian theorization, in that it draws on an audience’s existing knowledge(s) of oral revivalist fervor—is staccato and alarming.<sup>58</sup> He moves while he speaks, and his deep eyes seem to be looking elsewhere, looking beyond. His voice follows the pattern of Pentecostal rhetoric. Jesse imitates a southern preacher’s

drawl, overemphasizing the last syllable of his sentences to underscore the urgency of his pronouncement. His “prophecy” ends ecstatically, with the gang whelping and shouting, not unlike a revival service. The outlaws mount their horses and rush northwards.

Another great example of a negative caricaturing of religion as fanaticized occurs in *American Outlaws* (2001). Jesse jokes with his mother, Zerelda, for feeding their “Indian friend” and sidekick (too) well.<sup>59</sup> Zerelda justifies herself: “He’s a good Christian and he killed Yankees. And Jesus told me that made him an alright boy.” “Well, she’s still talkin’ to Jesus,” Frank jokes to Jesse. Jesse grins: “What worries me is that Jesus is talkin’ back.” The brothers laugh about their mother’s intensity. Soon the infamous Allan Pinkerton accompanies a railroad contractor to buy Zerelda’s land from her. The land is not for sale; Zerelda’s adamant. But the contractor implores: “Ma’am, I think that you should search your heart, here, and try to do the right thing.” Frank levels a loaded shotgun at the man’s line of sight. “Let me ask the Lord,” Zerelda replies. There’s a long, awkward pause, while she folds her hands and closes her eyes, head bowed. The men are nervous and impatient, but Pinkerton, as he studies Zerelda’s prayerful face, is visibly alarmed. Zerelda, still penitential, nods her head, mumbling, and chuckles to herself. She leans toward Frank and Jesse, beside her. “The Lord says we can bury ’em out back in the orchard. Nobody will ever find ’em.” Frank, with gun still rigid, comments that “somebody’s in a vengeful mood today. Let ’em go for today, Ma. We’ll bury ’em out back next time.” The shooting and burying does not take place—at least not in the present scene—but the implications are clear. Religion and violence work hand in hand. In these instances, religion serves as violence’s justification, even if in a comical sense. Notable, however, is the way that *American Outlaws* defers or projects this complexity to Frank and Jesse’s mother. The brothers themselves are not the crazy ones. In this film, Frank and Jesse are likable American boys. They are attractive, muscular, and

admirable; the handsome Colin Farrell plays Jesse. Farrell's Jesse contrasts with the volatile version of *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* and the quiet, brooding, reserved Jesse of *Long Riders*.

Many examples of caricatured, vaguely Protestant religion exist in this body of films, but one more important example will suffice. In *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007), these impulses come together in perhaps the most complex, nuanced depiction of the entire corpus. Brad Pitt's Jesse is simultaneously admired and feared by his comrades. The film apotheosizes Jesse-as-hero, Jesse-as-American-myth. Pitt's Jesse has sad, deep eyes, and vacillates between extreme moods. He is friendly and congenial in one scene but in only brief moments later tends to revert to a darker persona. The film succeeds in portraying Jesse's conflicted personality and identity, perhaps more so than any other. As much of an artistic rendering as it is, however, does not detract from its cultural-historical relevance. The historical records, too, demonstrate an internally divided, conflicted Jesse, a person who went to great lengths to provide justification for his violent behaviors while he lived, and who cast himself as a valiant, good-hearted outlaw and protector of the people.<sup>60</sup>

One particular scene of *The Assassination* encapsulates these tensions. The film is chalk-full of panoramas of noble isolation, scenes which reify Jesse's troubled charisma. Jesse stands in a golden field, the grasses blowing around his legs. He stares off, eyes nearly blank. He's lost, phenomenologically, both inside of himself and in the mystical expanses of the frontier plains. In another scene, Jesse sits with a smoldering cigar in the garden, lost in his internalized deliberations. In still another, Jesse sits on his horse, silhouetted by the hillside. In all of these frames, stirring, mournful, melancholic music captures Jesse's somber mood and reifies his troubled greatness in the minds of the viewers. In the garden scene, Jesse carries snakes, handling them like an

Appalachian Pentecostal. The event is no coincidence. Such a depiction associates Jesse with his revivalist upbringing and portrays his religiosity in an unsettling, disturbing way. Like Jesse's pseudo-vision scene in *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid*, this scene relates him to his revivalist upbringing. "I give them [snakes] names of enemies," he tells Bob Younger, sneering. If one doubts the intentional ambivalence—the binding of religious fanaticism to Jesse's troubled identity—in the background a woman sings *Amazing Grace*. The sound of her voice through the iconic hymn, itself a reference to conservative religion, gets louder, culminating as Jesse decapitates both of the serpents on the table in one fell motion. The headless bodies swirl and constrict around his wrists and Jesse appears pleased by his work. This deconstructed snake-handling scene substantiates *The Assassination* as the postmodern filmic expression that it is. The image of snake handling has no historical link to Jesse James. He was a troubled Baptist, not an Appalachian tongues-speaking Pentecostal. But the depiction speaks volumes in its juxtaposing of a controversial religious practice that ends in the bloodied twist of snake decapitation. The scene is a visually uncanny symbolic maneuver to conjoin religiosity and violence.<sup>61</sup>

**The Bible.** The Bible is, in a way, one of the most important symbols of Protestantism, both as the primary Christian sacred book and as an object in itself.<sup>62</sup> In films, the symbolism behind the Bible escalates because of its explicit role in iconic visualization. A Bible, shown in cinema, communicates something, but what, exactly does it say? In James films, the Bible is a recurring, intertextual symbol and object. Its presence in various scenes and situations is not arbitrary, but, in fact, means something. While it is important not to read too much into visual signs or theatrical props<sup>63</sup>—especially due to the fact that symbolic meaning is negotiated, contested, and polysemous in its reception—one cannot overstate the presence of iconic Bibles in this body of films.<sup>64</sup>

The Bible is a common visual object, yet its role in these films is hardly predictable. In some films, an introverted Frank James totes it along on his horse and reads it occasionally. In *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid*, the narrating voice<sup>65</sup> describes the outlaw gang at the film's outset: "In all the world, they were the greatest outlaws. They were the greatest revolver fighters. The greatest train, stagecoach, and bank robbers that ever lived. Frank James was there, armed with his Navy Colt and Bible." The tension is evident. Frank carries both his revolver (a sign of his powerful aggression) and his Bible (a sign of his religiosity). This film, as one might recall, does not attempt to cast either the Jameses or their religion in a positive light; its portrayals of Frank's Bible evidence this. In an opening scene, Frank and Jesse sit together in an outhouse, trousers around their ankles. Flies buzz about while they converse with one another casually in this exceedingly uncomfortable visual frame. Shortly later, Jesse bursts out of the outhouse. Behind him, a surprised Frank still sits on the toilet; in his hands, he holds his Bible. But this mixing of sacred objects with profane spaces does not end there. Later, the gang visits the public baths in Northfield. Frank reads his Bible while the men roughhouse around and splash water. They near Frank, and to his chagrin, water cascades over his shoulder, down his front, and all over his open Bible. During the robbery scene, while Jesse and others try to open the vault on the inside, Frank sits in a rocker on the porch and reads the Bible. Frank is oblivious, and his religiosity, objectified by the perpetually-manifesting Bible, is a matter of jest. The Bible is a joke, a caricature.

In *Long Riders*, it is not Frank but a serious and somber Jesse who totes the Bible. He reads it on the train as they travel to Northfield. Aside from operating as a visual object or iconic prop, the films also quote the Bible. In the same film, one of the gang sits in the bath next to a naked woman. He wears only his hat, and quotes, poetically: "I will bring the blind by a way they know

not / I will lead them in the paths they have not known / I will make darkness light before them / and I'll make crooked things straight. Isaiah forty-two, sixteen.” This citation serves as an antithesis to Puritanical sexual propriety. This biblical citation is also a satirical one, or scripture re-appropriated into a phallic allusion. Jesse's own gang members reject his Protestant, Bible reading, family-man ethic. In *Long Riders*, Jesse is not respected and feared as he is in other films and part of this derision has to do with his meek religiosity. The meek and pious Jesse also at times brims with anger and violence.

The Bible plays a role as a household object, illustrating Jesse's inundation in a Protestant, Baptist worldview. In one scene of *The Last Days of Frank and Jesse James*, Jesse sits with his small son on a sofa in front of the fireplace. He pages through the oversized family Bible, showing the child the ornate pictures. The camera focuses on the open Bible. “Look at that there. . . . That's the baby Moses.” It is an illustrated Bible, with exquisite text font and large black and white pictures. Jesse turns to the Proverbs of Solomon. *The Last Days* underscores the contrasts in Frank and Jesse's divergent personalities. Jesse is wild and untamable. He finds violence irresistible, even as he's torn by his identity as a family man. Religion, for Jesse, appears to serve as not much more than a cover. When Jesse's friend, Dick Liddle, appears on the farm, Jesse and he converse secretly in the barn. “I heard you were a landed gentry, speculatin' in wheat and corn,” Dick laughs. Jesse sarcastically finishes the sentence: “And the righteous path of the Lord, mister.” Jesse orders that they will not plan a robbery within 300 miles of the house. Dick responds: “Well I understand that, Mr. Howard.” They both smile. Religion, like Jesse's pseudonym, is farcical. Is religion anything more than an inauthentic cover? Unlike Jesse, Frank embraces religion as he settles into his quiet life. He reads a Bible and reclines in a rocking chair on the porch while his wife cleans a bowl of chicken bones. Together they sing “The Old Rugged Cross,” another iconic Protestant

hymn. Frank's domesticity is inseparable from his religiosity, and Jesse's volatile personality is his foil.

In *Frank and Jesse's* violent, capricious characterization of Jesse, Jesse's use of the Bible serves only to make ironic his bouts of violence and the pleasure he takes in those acts. In one train robbery scene, Frank and Jesse have the luck of apprehending Pinkerton himself. Jesse sneers at him, his dark eyes unpredictable and frightening. He quotes the Bible: "He that leadeth into captivity shall be led into captivity." In *The Assassination*, and during an analogous train robbery scene, *Frank* quotes the Bible: "And for this sin, there is no remedy; it is so grounded inward in my heart." The scene offers no lighthearted or comedic account; Frank's citation acknowledges the darkness of his sin. In this dark and foreboding instance Frank's biblical memory demonstrates the ambiguity of his faith. Frank knows the weight of his violence and sinfulness and realizes that he has transgressed certain moral-ethical boundaries of his Protestant worldview.

At the apex of *The Assassination*—Jesse's emotional murder—religious household symbolism plays an important role. After Bob Ford shoots Jesse in the back of the head, Jesse collapses to the floor. Zee hears the noise and rushes in. To her left, in her and Jesse's bedroom, a dark Christian cross contrasts against the whitewashed wall. Jesse bleeds out on the floor; above him, a large family Bible rests visibly in display. The scene, although brief, showcases the family Bible that Jesse read to his son, as he did in *The Last Days*. The apotheosized Jesse dies, handing himself over willingly to his Judas, Bob Ford. He perishes under the cross and Bible. The Christ/Judas binary is not far-fetched. In fact, the biblical narrative subtly and suggestively drives the emotive plot of *The Assassination*. The viewer knows Jesse dies; the viewer knows Bob betrays him. The biblical allusions only intensify one possible interpretive meaning of the film. Only days before his death, Jesse, as a quasi-Christ figure, predicts it. He and Bob are alone in one of the

rooms. Jesse gives Bob a birthday gift: a Colt revolver. The tension is high. Bob plans to assassinate Jesse, but fears Jesse is on to his scheme. He *knows* Jesse knows, in other words. Jesse stares at Bob, sadly—admirably. “You’re gonna’ break a lot a hearts,” he tells him, at once complimenting Bob’s youthful attractiveness and foretelling his own death. What is most fascinating about *The Assassination* is the way that it apotheosizes Jesse into the American mythic pantheon, via biblical allusion, but simultaneously depicts his dark side. If Jesse is a Christ figure, as the film suggests, his is a dark incarnation. Even as the execution propels him to a form of sacralized celebrity, Pitt’s Jesse has bloodied hands.

**Atonement and Recompense.** A common theme in these Revisionist Jesse or Western Renaissance films, as we’ve seen, is Jesse’s portrayal as a troubled (anti-)hero. Only one film, *American Outlaws*, makes light of Jesse’s violent identity and casts him as an entirely good-hearted, well-intentioned, gentlemen robber. Yet the film also decidedly joins violence with religion. Other films depict Jesse as internally twisted, contested, and unstable. He wrestles with the competing tensions in varying ways. In the film corpus, *The Assassination* marks Jesse as both mythic hero and guilt-ridden sufferer. As Jesse laments to Bob in one scene, “I look at my red hands and my mean face, and I wonder about that man that’s gone so wrong.” Or in *American Bandits*, Jesse guiltily self-psychoanalyzes: “I just don’t know if I can change who I am. Who they [the Yankees] made me. Can people really change? Can we really ever put aside all the bad things we’ve done? Can we ever outrun our past, or are we just destined to be who we are?” The discussion is with Mary, Jesse’s romantic interest in the film. “We can try,” Mary sadly replies. “But you can’t keep killin’ everyone who gets in your way.” Jesse is emotionally worked up at this point. “You think I want to?” he demands. “Every time I kill a man, a little piece of me is torn away. I don’t think I can ever get back whole again.” The message is clear. Jesse is a good man.



He has a good heart. But horrible circumstances have demanded terrible actions of him. He has bloodied his hands. Jesse may be inherently good, and his cause might be just, but violence is not excusable.

The tensions of violence, justice, and atonement climax with *Purgatory* (1999). Out of the corpus of films examined in this essay, *Purgatory* is a wildcard as Jesse is only a marginal character in its wildly creative plot. But several characteristics of the movie deserve noting. The title gives the setting of the film away; it is set in a small western town called Refuge. After a shootout, a rough riding gang of outlaws ends up stranded in the town. But things are not as they seem. The plot gradually reveals to the viewer what one expected from the beginning. Refuge, in fact, is Purgatory, from Roman Catholic theology, where inhabitants have a chance to make amends for their violent lives on earth. In a way, *Purgatory* is the rational culmination of cultural re-descriptions of Jesse James mythology which began with the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Dime Novels and carried on in fiction books, comics, and most importantly, film, up to the present. In the town of Refuge lives not only Jesse but Wild Bill Hickok, Doc Holliday, and Billy the Kid, or at least the vestiges of these myths. In Refuge, they live clean, simple lives. Jesse runs the general store. He and his retired outlaw comrades live peacefully and introspectively as they seek to make amends for the violent acts they committed in their physical lives. Ultimately, the aggressive men clean off the dross of their violence and are allowed to enter paradise through one last ironic act of righteous violence, but this time in protection of the innocent. The film, in a way, attempts to solve the conundrum of the western outlaws. Although good-hearted, well-intentioned American western heroes, the gunslingers must pay for their actions. In a religiously bricolaged, theologically eclectic way, the narrative seeks to purify the complicated American mythos of the noble outlaw.

Jesse James must atone for his sins of violent rampage, and after doing so, he enters the mythological pantheon of American folklore.

**Religious Eclecticism and Conflict.** The plot of *Purgatory*, as I've mentioned, is religiously and theologically eclectic. A Native American Indian serves as a mythological Cerberus, of sorts, as he guards the gates to the fog covered mountain, which viewers recognize as Hell or Hades. As expected, the significance of this Indigenous Cerberus is ambiguous. On one hand, he is a redundant embodiment of (non-Native) caricatured impressions of Native traditions. From another perspective, however, the visual strategy might be a subversive one. The narrative is clearly concerned with the ethics of violence and bloodshed. Perhaps the viewer witnesses an act of visual solidarity on behalf of the systematic persecutions of indigenous peoples throughout U.S. history. Might the Indian's role as guard of the underworld be a form of cinematically expressed remorse? Is the scene a visual apology? At any rate, the presence of Native Americans adds to the religious eclecticism of the overall film. The film is filled with vaguely Protestant imagery and discourse. But the concept of Purgatory, itself—the very basis of the film—is a Catholic idea, one that has been stringently opposed by North American Protestants. The film is a postmodern combination of religious imageries and ideas.

Contrasting the metaphysical *combinativity* of the last film—to employ a term coined by historian of religion Catherine Albanese—*The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* takes care to pit religious systems against one another, rather than synthesize them.<sup>66</sup> One sub-narrative within the film is a constant tension between Frank's evangelicalism and Charley Pitt's backwoods Ozark magic. The narrator, at the beginning, introduces him as “Charley Pitts, the Ozarks Medicine Man.” Directly before Jesse's ecstatic vision of Northfield, Cole Younger lies feverish in a cave after the Pinkerton ambush. An Ozarks medicine woman hovers over Cole. The contention

between Frank and the medicine woman is strong. “One little Indian, two little Indians! One named East; one named West,” she chants. “Son and the Father, and the Holy Ghost. In goes frost, and out comes fire!” Her incantation blends Christian elements with home remedies, reflective of practices historically documented by folklorists of the region.<sup>67</sup> She and Charlie draw a silk scarf through the bullet holes while Frank stands by, visibly worried. “That superstitious palaver ain’t going to do any good, Charley Pitts,” he complains. “You got something better, Frank James?” Charlie retorts. Charley’s answer is predictable: “From the look of him, I’d say a prayer would be better.” He holds his Bible with two hands. Charley contends, “I got the Granny Woman working on it. She’s the best yarb lady in these here hills. If she . . . can’t do it, then maybe your prayer might come in handy.” Then the yarb lady exclaims: “In my own blood, live! Yea, I say unto thee, live!” Before the outlaws depart for Northfield, Charley asks Granny for some supplies. “I’ll put some bugs inside there, and dried cat’s blood, and mole pee in your assifidity bag,” Granny replies. She puts an amulet around his neck. “Charley Pitts, you put this silver ring in your ear. A silver ring to ward off the fear.” Cole, feeling better, addresses her: “You got anything for me, Granny?” She stares at him sharply, intently, and then offers a chilling prophesy. “Winter wind is gonna blow. Child’s cry across the slough. *Don’t go*,” she warns.

Predictably, and against the woman’s wishes, the gang heads north. Toward the end of the film the outlaw gang holes up in a house as lawmen and local vigilantes advance on them. It’s a strange scene, in which Cole, in a delirious state, drifts in and out of normal consciousness. He foresees his future capture. In a horrific mood, a toy doll falls off a shelf and makes an artificial, hollow cry. Charlie starts, jumping up. “What was that?” he yells. In the panic, the voice of the yarb lady superimposes above the action: “Child’s cry across the slough.” Then the first gunshot tears through a window and into Cole. He collapses. Heavy arms fire riddles the house with holes

and fills the men with bullets. The gunfire tears household items to pieces, knocking pictures off the walls.

The strain between Christianity and the Granny's eclectic practices comes to a crisis after the failed attempt to rob the Northfield bank. The gang has escaped to the woods, and Charlie is worried that they are about to get wet. He explains that when wood fries and snaps a certain way, it foretells a heavy rain. Frank responds: "Oh, that's just superstition. That don't mean anything." "It's the truth. It don't have to mean anything," Charley shouts. Frank's indictment is telling. "You're more in need of religion and less in need of superstitious babble," Moments later, a heavy downpour soaks them all to the skin. Frank's Protestant piety is no match for Ozarks magic. Charley's remedies work. The not-so-subtle conclusion is that Frank's Protestantism is inefficacious.

**Religious Imagery, Intertextualism, and Discourse.** Lastly, other forms of religious imagery permeate the films in varying degrees. Symbolic objects, besides the Bible, play important roles in amplifying, contrasting, or underscoring the violent activities of the gang. Churches, for instance, are common backdrops in many of the movies. In *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid*, the gang enters the town on horseback and saunters past a majestic white church of the plains, complete with a jutting steeple or bell tower. As they pass, a choir vocalizes, and the sun glints off the surface of the stained glass windows. "Ain't that a wonderment!" declares Cole Younger. Funerals are a common part of several of the films, and these most times take place in or outside of characteristically Protestant churches (e.g., *The Long Riders*). In *Frank and Jesse*, the latter, after singing "Rock of Ages," exhorts a little congregation from the pulpit: "And God made two great lights, the greatest to rule the day, the lesser to rule the night. And he made the stars, also. And God placed them in the firmament of heaven, to cast a holy light on the earth."

White prairie churches materialize in *American Outlaws* and in *Purgatory* the inhabitants of Refuge frequent the town's one church building. In *American Bandits*, Frank and Jesse take refuge in a white chapel that has been scorched with fire, a sign of the Yankee North's cruel treatment of the South, including Missouri preachers. The disheveled minister of the church explains the terrible events to Frank as they sit in the darkened, candle-lit church. The preacher admires Frank's gun while his granddaughter, Mary, in a back room, removes a bullet from the wounded Jesse. The minister explains that Mary's brother was shot to death by the Unionists and her dad murdered while trying to give Jimmy a proper burial. "They wouldn't even let me say my peace over their bodies," he recounts. "Them Yanks said I wasn't a preacher no more. Imagine that. Forty years of spreadin' God's word, and I'm not a preacher no more." Frank knows his suffering. "The problem is," Frank admits, "we're on the losin' side."

Stark, white-walled, plains churches, silhouetted by oceanic Mid-Western skies, play the biggest role in *The Assassination*. One night, an increasingly-suspicious Jesse and the Ford brothers bed in an abandoned church. Two candle sconces parallel a cross visible on the wall. The candles throw warm, flickering light against the wall; the rest of the room, save the fireplace, is black. Jesse's outline is clearly visible and the cross is near him. In the next scene, Charlie and Bob sit amongst blowing grasses on the hillside. At the top of the hill is the church; its steeple, filling up the sky, commands the frame. Bob and Charlie talk, but then Jesse approaches. He's infuriated and shouts at them angrily.<sup>68</sup> He is an imposing figure as he stands atop the hill, the steeple's cross and prairie church the backdrop over his shoulder. James films seem incomplete without at least one fleeting shot of a white church building with a cross. Crosses and churches abound.

Also notable is the fact that many, if not most of the films, are replete with religious, and especially Protestant, language. Protestantism serves as the hegemonic backdrop to the body of films. In *American Bandits*, Mary urges Jesse to leave his life of violence, settle down, buy a house, and have children. The domestic life that she pictures can save him, she tries to express: “It will be your savin’ grace.” In *The Assassination*, Jesse’s comrades are constantly on edge, constantly trying to remain in Jesse’s good graces. In an argument with his cousins, Wood Hite says, “You seem to misremember, that Jesse loves me like the Good Book.” The narrator describes Jesse’s escalating worries: “On the morning of the 11<sup>th</sup>, he [Jesse, distraught, and seeing Pinkerton operatives everywhere he looked] would wake his wife with the Scripture pertaining to the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt. Overnight, the Thomas Howard clan [Jesse’s pseudonym] vanished from Kansas City.” In another scene, the governor of Missouri bemoans Jesse for the thorn in his flesh that he was: “I’m saying his sins will soon find him out. I’m saying his cup of iniquity is full. I’m saying Jesse James is a desperate case and may require a desperate remedy.” Shortly thereafter the lawmen bribe Bob Ford to assassinate Jesse. In this way, even antagonists levy religious language in opposition to or against the quasi-hero. In *Frank and Jesse*, a railroad operative kills their father and brother, wounds Zerelda, and threatens to return with more violence if they do not sell their land. He calls the brothers “white southern trash” and exclaims that “I am the vengeance of the Lord Jehovah himself. Sent by the Rock Central Railroad of Chicago, Illinois, to purify this land.” “Get off this land, mister,” Jesse begs. The railroad man’s reply is icy: “I will, but first this land must be cleansed.” Even the frequent instances of foul language, slang idioms, and curse words—the characters are outlaws, after all—are survivals of Protestant socio-cultural and linguistic predominance.

## **Religion, Westerns, and the West: Bringing It All Together**

In summary, the James film corpus produced after 1972 conjoins violence and religiosity. Focusing especially on Christianity as a religious tradition, the films wrestle with the tradition's violent presence in frontier America by visually depicting fanaticism and the desire for atonement in light of other objects, imageries, and discourses central to Christianity. Sometimes the connection made between Christianity and violence is intentionally disturbing and provocative. At other times, the relationship is lighthearted and comical. Uniting the films as intertextual artifacts, nonetheless, runs a consistent thread of uneasiness and ambiguity. But how exactly do the James films fit in with other Westerns in terms of portrayals of religiosity?

As historian of Western films, Scott Simmon, writes, “westerns have always felt free to express their belief in America and have been permitted to speak about religion and politics in ways generally forbidden Hollywood genres set in the contemporary world.”<sup>69</sup> James films support Simmon's contention. Pre-1950s era Westerns mostly rejected Christianity for rugged individualism but also, theologically, melded together the two traditions of Christianity, that is, a soft/deist/transcendentalist side with a harder/puritanical/Edwardsian form.<sup>70</sup> Post-mid-century Westerns films, especially in terms of the Bible, also reiterate these two binaries, roughly equated to “fundamentalist” and “liberal” understandings of Christianity.<sup>71</sup> Revisionist James films, as we've seen, extend such themes but also develop them in novel ways. Some films inundate the viewer with religious imagery and discourse. Religion is not rejected, out of hand, but serves to fill in the temporal and social context for the films. In other films, religion links directly to violence and serves as its explanation, origin, and source. Films such as *The Northfield Minnesota Raid* resist the Protestant milieu. But the film does not reject religiosity out of hand. In the competitive

religious market portrayed in the film, Christianity loses out to combinative alternative practices.

The outlaw's biographer, J. T. Stiles, writes that Jesse's story "is, at bottom, a story of how Americans have hated Americans, how Americans have killed Americans, how both winners and losers refused to forget and forgive."<sup>72</sup> While Stiles offers an effective description, one might also emphasize that the James narrative is also a story of how socio-political allegiances suppressed religious ones, how Protestants and Catholics joined arms, quite literally, and slaughtered other Protestants and Catholics both on the Civil War battlefield and beyond it. In terms of American history, the direction of violent conflict is usually Protestant against Catholic or Christian against Indigenous American peoples. A peculiar thing takes place, however, with the narrative of Jesse James. The secessionist general, William Clarke Quantrill, was a dedicated Catholic. The Baptist James brothers happily joined with his ranks—and wore their service under the general as a badge of honor—in order to wreak havoc on the Unionists and preserve their southern way of life.<sup>73</sup> In such situations, we have so-called *religious* (or at least Christian denominational) boundaries submerging, for the time being, and *political* ones coming to the fore. Categories such as *Protestant* and *Catholic* held less symbolic weight and political or regional identities (e.g., *Yankee* versus *Dixie*; *Northern* versus *Southern*) escalated in importance. In Renaissance Western films, however, religion serves as a strategic and explanatory method to account for Jesse's violence and aggression.

We've seen how historians have criticized fictional Westerns for their perceived failure to stick to the historical facts, so to say. But as Simmon makes clear, films do actually engage in a form of "historical interpretation" as they actively "offer up arguments through narrative about America and its history."<sup>74</sup> "The West" is also an important cultural trope endemic to American identity, and Western films are one important representational form of this trope.<sup>75</sup> This article has



considered a body of Western films made after the golden age of the Hollywood Western, in the 1930s to the 1950s.<sup>76</sup> Many of these later films took on increasingly nuanced form in a psychological sense. Qualifying as “revisionist” much like the academic work of the “New Western historians,” the films reacted to the social ruptures of the 1960s to depict the imagined West “as a land of complexity, ambiguity, conquest, multiethnicity and environmental tragedy.”<sup>77</sup> The films are revisionist in the sense that as a body, they problematize and make complex the themes, images, and ideologies lying at the heart of Western fictional film. The corpus additionally offers different perceptions of the West-qua-frontier than twentieth-century Westerns. “Slowly the image of the frontier began to change,” one commentator narrates, as “towns communicated not a new Eden, but the new harshness and struggle for survival, as well as the impermanence that characterized the real West. . . . Westerns of the last two or three decades of the twentieth century offered viewers a different visual West, a bleaker, harsher, starker West . . . a less optimistic place than the West of the pre-1955 Westerns.”<sup>78</sup> Such differences, one might add, are in no small part due to the revisionist perspectives of the New Western historians diffusing into pop culture and folk discussion. The revisionist Jesse James films demonstrate how the methods of an academic school of thought can popularize and carry over into film as an art form.

Subsequently, the films might also be classified as “a minor renaissance” to the genre,<sup>79</sup> and their ongoing production problematizes predictions that the Western cowboy, as a “good mythic figure,” one “woven into the national identity,” “must fade.” Some commentators have gone as far as pronouncing “the secret agent” of espionage or spy films as the urbanite, cosmopolitan replacement of the Western cowboy, but this essay complicates such an easy reading.<sup>80</sup> It may be that in 1985 “Westerns were assumed to be passé”<sup>81</sup>—and spy movies perhaps do outnumber Westerns in production—but films about the West are still of interest to the viewing

public. Through both the Western film genre and films about Jesse James, the mythic West lives on.

## Conclusions

There are no empty signs in cinema. There are ambiguous signs, arbitrary signs, and polysemous signs, signs that may be interpreted differently across various temporal and receptive contexts. But no empty signs, in the sense of being neutral or disinterested, exist. In this essay, I've identified and given one explanation for a certain set of signs and symbols. I limited the study to the analysis of the films' visual and narrative contents, but also realize that production context is as important as content.<sup>82</sup> Context, in fact—in terms of screenwriting, filmmakers' religious, social, and political agendas, filming development and production, casting of actors, budget issues, set locations, director vision, and even film critic reviews—is the next logical step to take in terms of research of this sort.

In summary, this article has submitted several arguments. First, the details of the historical Jesse's religious background, especially in relation to his aggressive, law breaking lifestyle, were ambiguous at best. Second, I've highlighted the role of religious images, discourses, icons, and objects in eight films and argued that religiosity is one of the most telling factors in a film's construction of Jesse's identity. I've argued that the films, in a steady and pervasive uneasiness, link religion with violence. Religion, in some situations, even *explains* violence as the prior is largely fanaticized or cast as violent. Religion acts as violence's origin or source. Third, I've implied that although as a body the films problematize, deconstruct, and make complex the myth of Jesse James, they also perform his quasi-hallowed or special status. The movies work to account for and explain wrongdoing even as they perpetuate the myth of Jesse James. Fourth, some of the

films' explanatory agendas also work to excuse or atone for Jesse James' wrongdoing. Fifth, I've suggested that the religious market visible in the films, to put it in economic terms, is one dominated by Protestantism (and criticisms of it). The revisionist films also open up room for other spiritual and religious systems with some of its eclectic imageries, plots, discourses, and scenes. Finally—and methodologically—it has been my intent to demonstrate the importance of anthropological approaches to the study of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century films, especially because of the inseparability of religion and ethics to visual and aural mythmaking, filmic storytelling, visual memory construction, and negotiation or re-description of national legends via cinema. My hope is that more anthropologists of religion will take fictional film seriously as a source of data and study.

As Lacey compellingly and ambivalently writes, “such is the power of certain films that they can even unify a whole generation in a (sort of) collective memory.”<sup>83</sup> But films also have the opposite effect in that they can anachronistically deconstruct or re-describe aspects of collective memory. In one sense, films operate in a post-structuralist fashion in that they work to dismantle or deconstruct myths.<sup>84</sup> Who is Jesse James? I asked in the introduction. As the films show, he's an ambiguous hero, both feared and loved in cultural memories. His cultural significance, although questioned, negotiated, and criticized, endures. Jesse James is himself an ambiguous, ever evolving sign. Jesse James is continually made and re-made. In other words, the jury is still out. It remains to be seen how future versions of the myth will construe him.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul I. Wellman, *A Dynasty of Western Outlaws* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 69.

<sup>2</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1965); Kent L. Steckmesser, “Robin Hood and the American Outlaw: A Note on History and Folklore,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 79:312 (1966): 384-355.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Kooistra, “Criminals as Heroes: Linking Symbol to Structure,” *Symbolic Interaction* 13.2 (1990): 217-239.

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- <sup>4</sup> Richard E. Meyer, "The Outlaw: A Distinctive American Folktype," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 17:2-3 (1980): 94-124, esp. 95.
- <sup>5</sup> Christopher Anderson, "Jesse James, the Bourgeois Bandit: The Transformation of a Popular Hero," *Cinema Journal* 26:1 (1986): 43-64.
- <sup>6</sup> Haldeen Braddy, "Jesse James's Chivalry," *The Journal of American Folklore* 69.271 (1956): 62; Horace Bryan, "Tales About Jesse James," *Prairie Schooner* 16.1 (1942): 60-65.
- <sup>7</sup> R. F. Dibble, "Jesse James," *The American Journal of Police Science* 2:3 (1931): 220-240.
- <sup>8</sup> Meyer, "The Outlaw," 105.
- <sup>9</sup> J. T. Stiles, *Jesse James: The Last Rebel of the Civil War* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 16-25.
- <sup>10</sup> See Stiles, *Jesse James*.
- <sup>11</sup> Stiles, *Jesse James*, 203.
- <sup>12</sup> I prefer the non-specific definition of "popular culture" as "all those things that 'the people' do or have done. This is close to an 'anthropological' definition of the term: the culture, mores, customs and folkways of 'the people'. What defines their 'distinctive way of life,'" as iterated by Stuart Hall. His revised Marxist definition, I concede, is also helpful. Popular culture, in any particular era, includes "those forms and activities which have their roots in the social and material conditions of particular classes; which have been embodied in popular traditions and practices." In other words, popular culture is constantly changing. Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular,'" in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, Raphael Samuel, ed. (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 234-235. Film studies have had an important "democratizing" hand in that they eschew bourgeois notions of "high art," "low art," or "kitsch" in their attempt to use so-called "popular culture" as worthy arena of focused study. The notion of *genre* as mode of classification solidifies the fact that all films are equally deserving of scholarly analysis. Nick Lacey, *Introduction to Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 46. Due to arguments posed by Alexandre Astruc's "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: Le Camera-Stylo" and Francois Truffaut's *Cahiers du Cinema* (1948 and 1954, respectively), academics eschew high and low designations in scholarly work and see all Hollywood productions as "artistic" to some degree. Lacey, *Introduction to Film*, 155-156. One implication of Truffaut's *auteur theory*, then, is that discrimination between low and high budget films is largely unproductive.
- <sup>13</sup> R. Philip Loy, *Westerns in a Changing America, 1955-2000* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004), 183.
- <sup>14</sup> Wellman, *A Dynasty of Western Outlaws*, 15.
- <sup>15</sup> According to historian Scott Simmon, while one tendency has been for books "to scold films for their evident failure to reproduce history with any accuracy" one must realize that Western films "include historical interpretation" and do, ultimately, "offer up argument though narrative about American and its history." Scott Simmon, *The Invention of the Western Film* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xiii. "Legends are durable things," Paul Wellman writes, "and are not without their value as part of the folklore of a people. Nevertheless, I have endeavored to separate legend from truth and present fact rather than fable in this book. On the other hand, I do not subscribe to the school of professional so-called 'debunkers.' The truth, yes. But what is the truth? It is as easy to twist the significance of the facts one way as the other, and if the purpose of the writer is to display his own cleverness by such methods, the uses of truth are by no means always served." Wellman, *A Dynasty of Western Outlaws*, 15. See also William Guynn, *Writing History in Film* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 165. J. E. Smyth problematizes this tendency of historians to see all filmic representation of history (and especially documentary-type "historical films" as fictive: "But American historical films' most basic connection with documentary cinema lay in a shared sense of authenticity. In simplest terms, the cinema's illusion of movement and researchers' and screenwriters' painstaking efforts at detailed verisimilitude made American history 'live' again. Nevertheless, despite their historical content and similar iconography (text, voice-overs, document inserts, and the

like), all historical films, since they are ‘reenactments,’ have been classified as ‘fiction.’ Written history is itself an exercise in analytical reenactment, but few historians would countenance being labeled fiction writers.” J. E. Smyth, *Reconstructing American Historical Cinema: From Cimarron to Citizen Kane* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 11.

<sup>16</sup> Wayne Michael Sarf bases his critique on a quotation by a director of a 1938 Jesse James film in which the director explicitly describes trying to make the legend persist by intentionally dramatizing it. His critiques are scathingly harsh, at times: “Filmmakers are devoted to legend—one might say slavishly so. . . . It would be more refreshing if we could find a director as dedicated to basic historical fact as the mass of them seem to be to ‘legends’ conceived by drunken lunatics and perpetuated by the mass media.” Sarf also points out specific times when directors have knowingly altered “historical fact” in order to shape the narrative or emotive arc of the storyline. *God Bless You, Buffalo Bill: A Layman’s Guide to History and the Western Film* (East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses and Cornwall Books, 1983), 102, 107.

<sup>17</sup> Wellman, *A Dynasty of Western Outlaws*, 22.

<sup>18</sup> Loy, *Westerns in a Changing America, 1955-2000*, 203.

<sup>19</sup> Sarf describes the significance of the “Old West” on American mythos: “The Old West’s value for those seeking entertainment and refuge from the day-to-day world has never been limited to Americans; its appeal is universal. Yet with its violence, incredible achievements, anarchic individualism, and endurance in the face of adversity, this part of our history has given Americans more than simply an adventurous dream world or dramatic backdrop. It has also provided what has been termed our national epic, a substitute for an *Iliad* or *Aenid* that serves as a young nation’s heroic age and a reflection of that nation’s values. ‘We need it,’ says historian C. L. Sonnichsen, and we probably do.” Sarf, *God Bless You, Buffalo Bill*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 25.

<sup>21</sup> On this lack of systematic studies of religion and film, see Melanie J. Wright, *Religion and Film: An Introduction* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 5; on the lack of substantial anthropological studies of the cinema, see Louise Krasniewicz, “Round up the Usual Suspects: Anthropology Goes to the Movies,” *Expedition* 48:1 (2006): 8-14; Gordon Gray, *Cinema: A Visual Anthropology* (New York: Berg, 2010), xii. For a dated, but significant exception, see Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood the Dream Factory: An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers* Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1950).

<sup>22</sup> Krasniewicz, “Round up the Usual Suspects,” 9.

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Kozloff writes that “‘voice-over narration’ can be formally defined as ‘oral statements, conveying any portion of a narrative, spoken by an unseen speaker situated in a space and time other than that simultaneously being presented by the images on the screen.’” *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 5-6.

<sup>24</sup> Krasniewicz, “Round up the Usual Suspects,” 9-10. I am also in agreement with anthropologist Gordon Gray that “the study of cinema can provide us with significant insight into areas of a society of a different time or place that might otherwise be difficult, or even impossible, to access.” Further, he writes, cinema is of interest to anthropologists because it “can also act as a guide to cultural constructions of everyday life, to symbolic and metaphoric communication, and to political and economic forces. Fiction film can also give us insight into popular reactions to the issues and events of a particular time and place.” Gray, *Cinema*, x, xi.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Wogan and David E. Sutton, *Hollywood Blockbusters: The Anthropology of Popular Movies* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2009), 1.

<sup>26</sup> One must also keep in mind that to view films as pure or straightforward forms of “social remembrance” might also not be productive. Nostalgia, ideology, and self-interest might also guide interpretation of filmic narrative. See Guynn, *Writing History in Film*, 165, 173.

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<sup>27</sup> Lacey, *Introduction to Film*, 1.

<sup>28</sup> More specifically, movies are, as Lacey puts it compellingly, “a narrative medium.” *Introduction to Film*, 77. On the narrative study of film, see *Ibid.*, 77-84. The narrative approach taken in this essay is also anthropological. As Krasniewicz writes, “an anthropological study of movies would start with the stories themselves as narratives created by a particular culture at a particular time. All narratives used to analyze cultural narratives—discursive, structural, symbolic, mythological, contextual, and linguistic—could come into play.” “Round up the Usual Suspects,” 9. Stefan Sharff juxtaposes film with narrative language: “Cinema thus can claim to be, alongside language, the only other form of communication which exists on a syntactic continuum: a sequence of signs that ‘make sense’ when arranged grammatically and convey meaning on both a literal and an emotional language.” Further, he writes, “cinema is a storytelling medium . . . characteristically, any succession of images on a screen will provoke some notion of story.” *The Elements of Cinema: Toward a Theory of Cinesthetic Impact* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 8.

In terms of *intertextuality*, Stuart Hall writes convincingly that “there’s always something decentered about the medium of culture, about language, textuality, and signification, which always escapes and evades the attempt to link it, directly and immediately, with other structures. And yet, at the same time, the shadow, the imprint, the trace, of those other formations, of the intertextuality of texts in their institutional positions, of texts as sources of power, of textuality as a site of representation and resistance, all those questions can never be erased from cultural studies.” Hall, “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies,” in *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 277-294. Quotation from p. 284.

Intertextuality is also a key theme of film historian Mark Cousins’s work. He writes that “whatever their ways of dreaming up ideas, filmmakers seldom do so in isolation. They watch each other’s work and learn how to tackle scenes from what has gone before, and from their collaborators, as the images on this page show.” *The Story of Film* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004), 10. Cousins prefers the term “filmic influence” and discusses the ways directors and filmmakers don’t directly copy each other’s work, *per se*, but borrow and build upon with variation. “Schema plus variation,” he calls it. See esp. pp. 12-13.

<sup>29</sup> According to Sharff, “Cinema rejects the rationale of literalness . . . The viewer is required constantly to negotiate between message and meaning, seen and unseen, hint and fact, engaging both the intelligence and the emotions.” This negotiation, I would add, demonstrates the negotiated nature of film interpretation. *The Elements of Cinema*, 173.

<sup>30</sup> Lacey, *Introduction to Film*, 90. Scholars also describe and categorize the various ways viewers “read” films differently. *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>31</sup> Lacey, *Introduction to Film*, 76.

<sup>32</sup> Codes include *the enigma* (hermeneutic), *action* (proairetic), *semic*, *symbolic*, and *cultural* (referential) forms. See Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), esp. 18, and Lacey, *Introduction to Film*, 88-90. I apply these codes to various parts of the Jesse James film corpus below.

<sup>33</sup> Genre itself is a tri-directional negotiation between producers, audiences, and the films themselves. Lacey, *Introduction to Film*, 46-47. There are seven main types of Westerns, including “Union Pacific/Pony Express fighting the elements to build a business; homesteader versus cattlemen; dedicated lawmen; ranch empire built and then destroyed by second generation; outlaw as good guy; revenge; cavalry versus Indian.” *Ibid.*, 52. This corpus of Jesse James films fit between the “outlaw as good guy” and “revenge” categories.

<sup>34</sup> Loy, *Westerns in a Changing America, 1955-2000*, 199. Loy, I might note, offers one of the best examinations of Jesse James films to date, and effectively places the post-mid-century films within their broader twentieth-century context. See *Ibid.*, 193-205.

<sup>35</sup> Johnny D. Boggs, *Jesse James and the Movies* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006), 195-202.

<sup>36</sup> Loy, *Westerns in a Changing America, 1955-2000*, 201.

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<sup>37</sup> Boggs, *Jesse James and the Movies*, 202-209.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-216.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 217-223, 226.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 223-226.

<sup>41</sup> By “religious content” or “religious imagery,” I don’t intend here to advance a particular definition of religion. I use the *religion* or *religious* terms, rather, as a classificatory paradigm with which to organize certain types of data or behavior. In other words, I’m particularly interested in this article in the expressions filmmakers make about the beliefs, objects, practices, rituals, and materials of influential American traditions such as Christianity.

<sup>42</sup> Guynn, *Writing History in Film*, 165, 173.

<sup>43</sup> William L. Blizек, *Continuum Companion to Religion and Film* (London: GBR, 2009), 1; Grey, *Cinema*, x.

<sup>44</sup> Wright, *Religion and Film*, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Lacey, *Introduction to Film*, 183, 187.

<sup>46</sup> Wright, *Religion and Film*, 5.

<sup>47</sup> Lacey describes *analysis* as “the ‘objective’ reading based upon what we observe in a film” while *interpretation* has to do with the “ideas we bring to how we (chose to) read a film.” This simple distinction is nonetheless significant: “So while two people may agree on what happens in a film (the analysis) they may also have diametrically opposed interpretations.” *Introduction to Film*, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Of course, the films ask myriad questions and negotiate with one another in an intertextual dialogue over the answers to those questions. In this essay, however, I must limit myself to these stated above.

<sup>49</sup> Barthes, *S/Z*; Lacey, *Introduction to Film*, 88.

<sup>50</sup> Styles, *Jesse James*, 387. The phrase, “righteous butchery,” comes from Jesse’s obituary: “Would to God he were alive today to make a righteous butchery of a few more of them,” wrote sympathetic journalist Jonathan Edwards.

<sup>51</sup> Sarf, *God Bless You, Buffalo Bill*, 9. Sarf made his opinion clear concerning Jesse’s violence: “Such was the need for a killer-hero to worship, a need apparently existing to this day, when Missouri communities hold celebrations to commemorate their Jesse’s bestial crimes and youngsters proudly flaunt their Jesse James T shirts” (100).

<sup>52</sup> Lacey, *Introduction to Film*, 93-98. See esp. p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> Barthes, *S/Z*; Lacey, *Introduction to Film*, 89.

<sup>54</sup> According to some theorists, film stars, like movies themselves, might be analyzed by texts. Stars, with memorialized, celebrity faces and bodies, bring with them intertextual baggage from their existing body of work. Lacey, *Introduction to Film*, 41-45. Duvall, for instance, plays multiple anti-revivalist roles. Kris Kristofferson also played in Westerns besides *The Last Days*, as did many other actors and supporting actors in these films. Stars also possess a *charisma* that translates well to film. *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>55</sup> Barthes, *S/Z*; Lacey, *Introduction to Film*, 88-89.

<sup>56</sup> Barthes, *S/Z*; Lacey, *Introduction to Film*, 89.

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<sup>57</sup> Loy, *Westerns in a Changing America, 1955-2000*, 82.

<sup>58</sup> Barthes, *S/Z*; Lacey, *Introduction to Film*, 89.

<sup>59</sup> Native American Indians have only play minor roles in one or two of these films. In earlier Western films, however, they play a more significant role. See especially Simmon, *The Invention of the Western Film, Part One: "My Friend, the Indian": Landscape and the Extermination of the Native American in the Silent Western*, 3-97. Historian David A. Cook notes a shift in filmic portrayals of Natives in the 1960s: "One important index of this change [in Western film philosophy] was a complete reversal of the genre towards Indians. The hostile savages of the thirties, forties, and most of the fifties were suddenly presented as a race of gentle, intelligent people upon whom the U.S. military establishment had committed genocide." *A History of Narrative Film*, second ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), 513. Loy also notes the significance of New Western History on Western accounts of Native Americans and the frontier: "Rick Worland and Edward Countryman suggest that two qualities are central to New Western History. The first rejects the notion that there ever was free empty virgin land to be settled. They contend, 'If that land seemed "free" it was because white Americans did not have to pay the price of its purchase. That price was borne by Indians and by conquered South-western Hispanics' . . . The second quality understands that Indians and Latinos had occupied the land for centuries. *Westerns in a Changing America, 1955-2000*, 137.

<sup>60</sup> See especially Styles, *Jesse James*, ch. 12: "The Chivalry of Crime," in which Jesse, accompanied by newsman Major John Newman Edwards, begins a newspaper letter writing campaign in which he attempts to depict himself as a Robin Hood figure pressed by injustices.

<sup>61</sup> For a fascinating journalistic-ethnographic study of snake handling, see Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 1995).

<sup>62</sup> See Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, *The Bible in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) and Timothy Beal, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book* (Boston, MS: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).

<sup>63</sup> Jurij Lotman describes the basic feature of the *sign* as "its ability to realize the function of substitution. The word stands for the thing, object, concept; money stands for value, for socially necessary labor; a map [*sic*] stands for a region; military insignia stand for the rank with corresponds to them. They are all signs." I see Frank's Bible as representative of his Protestant faith. This conclusion, however, falls in the realm of *semantics*, the relationship of the sign to the object it represents, and is thus debatable. Frank's Bible, more specifically, is a pictorial sign. *Semiotics of Cinema*, trans. Mark E. Suino (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1976), 1-4.

<sup>64</sup> Some Westerns in the 1960s and 70s, for instance, associated the Bible with "harshly judgmental individuals," that is, with "moral absolutism" and "biblical judgmentalism" in an unflattering sense, while others conjoined Bible-quotation with characters "less harsh, more reflective of the human condition, more understanding of human sin." Loy, *Westerns in a Changing America, 1955-2000*, 111.

<sup>65</sup> See Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*.

<sup>66</sup> Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>67</sup> See, for instance, Vance Randolph, *Ozark Magic and Folklore* (formerly titled *Ozarks Superstitions*) (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1964).

<sup>68</sup> Bob Ford's testimony accounts for the fact that the three did stay in a church not too long before Jesse's assassination. Wellman, *A Dynasty of Western Outlaws*, 122-123.

<sup>69</sup> Simmon, *The Invention of the Western Film*, xiv.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-125.



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- <sup>71</sup> Loy, *Westerns in a Changing America, 1955-2000*, 111. See pp. 110-113.
- <sup>72</sup> Stiles, *Jesse James*, 6.
- <sup>73</sup> See Wellman, *A Dynasty of Western Outlaws*, 62.
- <sup>74</sup> Simmon, *The Invention of the Western Film*, xiv.
- <sup>75</sup> “‘Vision’ represents a powerful motif in a twenty-first-century West shaped by electronic signs, billboard posters, computer monitors and Hollywood celluloid. It relates to the seen, the visual and the aesthetic. Sometimes the West literally challenges the way in which people see the world.” Nick Jones, Karen R. Jones, and John Wills, *American West: Competing Visions* (Edinburgh, Great Britain: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 3.
- <sup>76</sup> Jones, Jones, and Wills, *American West*, 4.
- <sup>77</sup> Jones, Jones, and Wills note of the New Western histories: “Progress read conquest, and the frontier became the ‘f-word’ in revisionist vocabulary.” *Ibid.*, 5. For more on the relationship between post-mid-century Western films and New Western History, see Loy, *Westerns in a Changing America, 1955-2000*, 131-132. Loy applies historian Patricia Limerick’s “four-word summary” of the field (continuity, convergence, complexity, and conquest) to the Western scene. *Ibid.*, 131. Psychological nuance and a growing complexity, however, began with the “adult Westerns” of the 1950s, writes film historian David Cook. See his *A History of Narrative Film*, 511-513. According to Loy, “Westerns after 1955 began to underscore that predicament and searching, as they included more controversial themes such as racial prejudice, marital infidelity, rape, cowardly citizens, emotionally deranged characters and graphic violence. Those elements had never been entirely absent from Westerns prior to 1955, but after that year the implicit and the suggested became more explicit.” *Westerns in a Changing America, 1955-2000*, 35, 201.
- <sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.
- <sup>80</sup> Larry McMurty, “Cowboys, Movies, Myths, and Cadillacs: Realism in the Western,” in *Man and the Movies*, ed. W. R. Robinson (Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 49. As McMurty writes, “There will be a very poignant story to be told about the cowboy, should Hollywood care to tell it: the story of his gradual metamorphosis into a suburbanite” (51).
- <sup>81</sup> Loy, *Westerns in a Changing America, 1955-2000*, 139.
- <sup>82</sup> Gray, *Cinema*, xiv-xv.
- <sup>83</sup> Lacey, *Introduction to Film*, 306. For a compelling study of the ways filmic, moving images constitute memory-making and blur into first-person narrated biographical accounts, see Annette Kuhn, *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (New York University Press, 2002), 11-12.
- <sup>84</sup> On “post-structuralism” and films, see Lacey, *Introduction to Film*, 294.

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